

Sermon November 22, 2020

First Lutheran Church

“That's the Power of Christ the King's Love”

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Good morning and welcome to Christ the King Sunday as First Lutheran shares this service here at Luther Memorial. It's good to be here with you this morning to hear the good news of God's love for us in Christ Jesus our Lord!

Christ the King Sunday is an opportunity for Christians to remember the Lordship of Jesus and what it means to be citizens of Christ's kingdom and participants the reign of God.

It marks the last Sunday of the church year, before Advent. It is intentionally a time when we recognize the world and the political shepherds of the people and compare them to the leadership and the values God tells us to focus on. We think about how our politics and kingship is often about division and separation, but God's kingdom is about invitation and inclusion.

If you remember back to the Old Testament, God never wants Israel to have a king. The people of Israel desire a king because other nations around them have kings. Not having a king makes them feel weak, vulnerable, and different. In a way, they give into peer pressure.

The prophet Samuel warns the people of Israel that kings will only cause them pain when compared to the shepherding leadership of God for his people.

¹⁰So Samuel said, “These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; ¹²and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. ¹³He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. ¹⁴He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers.

It's kind of a cynical look at government, isn't it? But our text from Ezekiel is a follow-up to this assessment and as a response to it. It is written after the destruction of Jerusalem, an event that challenged political and religious understanding and would have been terrifying for those that experienced it. Ezekiel makes clear that God does not desert his people, but once again claims leadership and Lordship over God's people. And the words that are used help us understand what this idea of a reign of God or kingdom of God looks like today and throughout time.

Ezekiel brings words of promise from a God who does not leave the people of Israel or those scattered among the nations to fend for themselves as Samuel seems to describe human leaders, but God takes pity on his flock who has been injured and born the brunt of the mistakes of their kings. Ezekiel condemns these leaders as poor shepherds “²¹ Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, ²² I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged”. God shows that he doesn't disregard the people's cries but comes to them with healing and care. And gives us a picture of what it is like when this Lordship or reign is experienced on a personal level. It is clear that the sheep are not being punished but saved. This shepherd pursues the lost.

¹¹ For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. ¹² As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue

them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. 13 I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. 14 I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. 15 I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. 16 I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.

These words are intended to be promises that free us from our fears not cast anxiety on the love God has for us. Paul's letter to Ephesians is one of the best texts in the Bible for us to remember what it is like to experience God's love in the promises given to us. I invite you to listen once again to the promises of God in these words. I invite you to listen for a specific word or phrase that, as Ephesians so poetically says, open and enlighten the eyes of your heart.

15 I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason 16 I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. 17 I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, 18 so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, 19 and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. 20 God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, 21 far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. 22 And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, 23 which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

This is not just an abundance of beautiful words, it's a description of God's abundance. God's authority comes not from power as the world knows it, but from the power of love. I have recently introduced new people to the movie "Back to the Future" and maybe you remember the theme song of that movie is the "Power of Love". The world often laughs at love as powerful but we know it as a superpower. The Greek word for power in this text is the same as the root word for dynamite. This dynamo power can create a chain reaction of love in our world. And in our gospel lesson the places God's reign is revealed are unexpected places.

31 "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. 32 All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, 33 and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. 34 Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; 35 for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 36 I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.'

It's so easy for us to get caught up in the questions of whether we are goats or sheep. Whether we are in or out...right or wrong. But I think part of our own human sin and part of the reason we want to know that is so that we can hold it over others. Many people spend their lives pointing the finger at those that we believe to be in the wrong. We get caught up in "justification by pointing" instead of justification by faith! This text from Matthew is what is known as an apocalyptic story. And just like the characters in "Back to the Future" these images of apocalypse are not bound by time, but show God revealed in time. Reading the Bible is always a little like time travel and this description of judgment and an end times is really about a revelation that reveals something eternal to the hearer that affects the here and now, like I talked about in the sermon last week. It means that this truth, this insight, is not meant to be kept secret, or weaponized as often is the case with apocalyptic interpretations of biblical texts, that create insiders and outsiders.

I know our hear and now is really strange these days and we are hearing about Christ the King in one of the strangest post-election times in American history, and that this is how most of us experience politics in the United States, as a deadlock of denial and accusations, whether it be in calling something fake news, or shutting down the voices of those who oppose you. There is so little room for compromise. It's much easier to paint by the numbers someone else gives to you, and so often this text is

interpreted as a way of separating into blue and red, Coke and Pepsi, Ford and Chevy or any other way of dividing populations. But we need to remember that Jesus is still Lord, Christ is King and God is watching over this process as a shepherd. It's not really about sheeps vs. goats and it shouldn't lead us to conversations about donkeys vs. elephants. The sheep and the goats are described as a continuation of other themes and promises of Matthew, the Sermon on the Mount, loving your enemy, and turning the other cheek.

In this story, the goats don't know they are goats and the sheep don't know they are sheep. Both those we think of as goats and sheep have questions about who they are and how they got that designation. Those designated as righteous ask. "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? 38 And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? 39 And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' 40 And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' **And the others ask** "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' 45 Then he will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.'

Both sheep and goats seem to have been missing the point or don't know what to pay attention to, but God let's everyone in on the revelation about what God's kingdom and reign are about.

So how does this power of love break in? It's about taking the king up on his invitation and acting in real time to meet those that are suffering and in a weak state... Those that are hungry, thirsty, naked, those that are in prison, those that are a

stranger in the land. And at the same time recognizing each of us has taken a turn as one of the least of these or we know that it could be us someday.

Loving our neighbor as ourselves, means seeing ourselves in the least of these as Jesus also says that we will see him in the least of these. We love without questions of sheep and goats, and who's in and who is out. We love freely as Christ loved us freely, remembering that Christ made a judgment seat a mercy seat. He is our savior apart from our works or any human judgment and designation. If we follow Jesus as King, we follow where the love leads us and that is also how we share in Christ's reign here on earth and throughout time. Amen.

Our hymn of the Day is "Lord Whose Love in Humble Service" and it is a reminder that with any telling of Christ's reign and Lordship, we are not to get stuck in the glory of a crown and throne without seeing Jesus in our midst and connecting with his reign and the glory of his cross, through our service and love of his sheep...and that means all of our neighbors, especially the ones easiest to overlook.