

Jesse Perkins
Wednesday, November 22, 2017
Year A, Proper 29 (Christ the King)

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24
Ephesians 1:15-23
Matthew 25:31-46

“A Spoiler Alert”

- There are few things better than watching a good suspenseful movie- be it a good murder mystery, crime drama, or a psychological thriller
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 - [Watching The Matrix for first time- wondering who Trinity is]
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 - The first time seeing a show like this, it is all new
 - You do not know who the bad guy is, or how they managed the murder or robbery until the very end
 - And any spoilers will ruin the experience
 - Then if you were to watch it a second time, you already know the big plot events
 - Now you might catch more subtle clues that you did not notice the first time
 - Then, if it becomes a favorite, you watch it a whole bunch of times
 - You know the ending, the plot twists, the subtle clues
 - You can even say the lines along with your favorite characters
 - And while you already know what will happen and when, even then there is enjoyment to be had
 - The best of books, movies, or tv shows can be experienced over and over again, deepening your appreciation of them
- As we experience this Sunday at the end of the liturgical year, and next Sunday we restart it all over again with Advent 1
 - I feel the same way about our liturgical cycle as I do a favorite movie that we've seen many times over
 - It does not matter how many times I go through it from beginning to end, it still speaks to me
 - Today is Christ the King Sunday
 - This is the culmination of everything we have done since last year at this time

- When we heard about Christ's birth, about his life and teachings.
- His death and resurrection during Easter
- And how God continued Christ's work in the church through the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost
- Throughout the summer, we hear about the early church, and we wrestle with how to be a Christian in our modern context
- And today is the end of that cycle, the big reveal
- It is when the readings give us hints at what will come in the future- we finally see God's plot unveiled.
- In the end, God will be victorious and God's people will be restored.
- In the end, love wins
- Relatively speaking, this church holiday is quite new, beginning only in 1925 and was initially celebrated in the month of October¹
- This was very close to the end of World War 1²
 - The same year Hitler published his book Mein Kampf and began his rise to power
 - Stalin took control of the Soviet Union, and Mussolini disbanded the Italian parliament
 - This feast day originally was planned by the Pope Pius XI
 - And being aware of the happenings in his context, he sought to remind the faithful of this truth
 - That there is hope in the end
 - Beyond and above the temporary and passing dictators, wars, and despair, God sits enthroned
- Later, in 1969, it was moved to the last Sunday of the liturgical year and was emphasized as an importance feast on the calendar
- It now serves as the pinnacle of our church year, and reminds you and me of these same truths
- Let's take a look at our readings today and see what we can learn about how this great divine drama concludes
 - First, throughout both our Ezekiel reading and our Gospel, there is a sense of judgment.
 - Now this can often makes us feel a little uncomfortable.
 - Perhaps we have been in religious situations where God's judgment has been used to produce guilt

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feast_of_Christ_the_King

² <http://biblestudyforcatholics.com/celebrate-christ-king-today/>

- Or where God's judgment has been used to manipulate us into doing something we otherwise would not do
- Maybe we just feel guilty, but regardless, judgment is clearly present as God brings it all to a close.
- In Ezekiel, God speaks directly and says "I myself will judge"
- With justice, God will judge and rescue the sheep, collecting them as they have been scattered and lost
- God will bring them to good pastures, healing the sick and injured, feeding the hungry
- And judging those who have grown fat at their expense
- God is speaking here to his people who are in exile and are at the whim of the oppressing, conquering forces
- I am certain that ancient Israelites felt like lean sheep- everything had been taken from them
- God declares that he will feed the sheep with justice
- God makes it clear that the ones who have taken advantage of the others will be judged, and the victims will be strengthened and helped
- It is a happy ending for those who have suffered much.
- Jesus also talks about judgment as he describes the end of God's great creation drama
 - Here it is the goats who are separated from the sheep and judged.
 - It is a very similar judgment story: the goats are the ones who did not care for the needy
 - While the sheep helped meet the needs of those around them
 - Another call to justice, to treating others fairly and with compassion, like we found in Ezekiel
 - And judgment for those who failed to do as God desired.
 - Another happy ending, where the underdogs prevail, and the villains get what is coming to them!
 - Sounds great, right? Certainly it does if we think of ourselves as the sheep in the narrative
 - But the truth is, and let us just admit it, what makes me so uncomfortable about all of the judgment in today's lessons...
 - Is that I know I can be a goat at times. Stubborn, selfish, privileged, even in the larger sense benefiting from unjust systems of oppression
 - That benefit me at the expense of others, as they grow leaner
 - That makes these judgment warnings from Jesus and Ezekiel a little more worrisome, doesn't it?

- Fortunately, judgment is only the first part of what this Sunday is all about.
- And even though we do not like to hear about it, judgment is a necessary first step:
- Brian McLaren argues in his book *A General Orthodoxy*, that without judgement, there can be no grace ³
- Grace, along with judgment, meets us at the end of our year-long liturgical journey
 - It is these two concepts that go hand in hand- they must be there together, to make sense of these readings: judgment **and** grace
 - Within these scriptures today is also a wonderful image of God as a shepherd and as a champion of the down trodden
 - We hear about God calling out to God's oppressed people promising that justice will be served
 - That those who are victimized will be strengthened, healed, and brought back
 - And no surprise, Jesus tells us that those who follow him are the ones who do those exact actions, they imitate God
 - They feed, clothe, and provide water.
 - If we take God's judgment and combine it with grace, we get something like this:
 - God's judgment is really a saving judgment ⁴, showing us where we fall short so we can understand just how much grace God is giving
- At the end of God's great plan, the last 20 minutes of the movie when all is revealed
 - God's judgment reminds us that what we do while we are walking this earth really matters to God- has eternal consequence
 - God's judgment shows all that was wrong and hurtful, all that did not live up to God's laws and Christ's example
 - And then God's grace then redeems that sin.
 - You see, we are at times both the sheep and the goats, the lean and the well fed
 - We all will receive God's judgment, but also God's grace.
 - And through that redeeming act of God's judging and forgiving, we will be changed into God's people

³ Brian D. McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, p. 93 of 297, from the Kindle Edition

⁴ Brian D. McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, p. 95 of 297, from the Kindle Edition

- We have the chance to begin to choose to be less like the goats and the chubby sheep
- And to live more fully into the life which mirrors God's priorities.
- Thanks to this Christ the King Sunday, we not only know how things will end, we have the chance to more fully participate.
- We know not only that there will be a final evaluation, we know the questions on the test, and also the right answers
- We know how it ends.
- We know what God wants from us, we know we do not always live up to it, and yet God's grace is sufficient.
- The wonder of watching a movie dozens of times, yet still enjoying it and seeing new things is what this liturgical year is all about
 - If it were not true, we could all go through one year of church and be done with it!
 - Please don't do that! :)
 - Year after year, we experience the greatest story ever told through our liturgical calendar
 - And each year, it can speak anew to us.
 - Eventually, it changes us- molds us to be a little more like sheep rather than the goats we know we can be sometimes
 - Moves us to respond as Christ responds almost out of habit, if we let it.
 - That is what happens when our hearts are changed- responses become more automatic
 - What surprises me about the Gospel today is that neither the sheep nor the goats knew they were interacting with Christ.
 - They were both surprised, and both asked, "When did we do that?"
 - If neither group knew they were being watched, then it can only be that each were acting out of their core being
 - They were doing what came naturally to them: some helping, and some turning away
 - I am convinced that through the retelling and re-experiencing the church year
 - That through hearing God's judgment and allowing the grace that follows it to impact us
 - That our core being can be changed so that we become more like sheep by nature
 - That even when don't think anyone is watching, we will still be inclined to feed, clothe, and care for- to love

- For me, that is the whole purpose of repeating this liturgical cycle year after year.
- Next Sunday is Advent, and we start all over waiting... waiting for the Christ child to be born
 - Living into the mystery of how God's plan will unfold
 - Some stories are worth encountering over and over again, like a good book or movie
 - And I think this is one of them.
 - That God came into the world not to judge, but to save
 - That along with judgment God will give grace.
 - And we know how it ends!
 - Finally, love will triumph over death and hate and violence and injustice
 - My prayer is that each time we hear the story, and each time we experience this saving drama in our liturgical celebrations
 - It will change us from being a little less like goats, and a little more like Christ.

Amen.