

Sermon

Welcome to the Stranger

Pastor Lisa Giacomazza

Bacon Memorial Presbyterian Church

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Today is Christ the King/Reign of Christ Sunday and I wonder if you know the Biblical history of this special feast day we celebrate each year on our liturgical calendar? Well, there is no Biblical history of this feast day – this is not a day that has been celebrated through any Biblical reference as a day specifically to celebrate. And as we hear the words “Christ the King” it may conjure up that patriarchal, hierarchy that rings through the churches history – and in present time, Kings and Queens are generally not the world leaders they once were, in position of power merely by the nature of their birth. So where does this celebration come from?

Pope Pius XI instituted the Feast of Christ the King in 1925 to remind Christians that their allegiance was to their spiritual ruler in heaven as opposed to earthly supremacy, which was claimed by Benito Mussolini.

The Anglican Church, Lutherans, Presbyterians and Methodists joined in adding this Feast Day to their lectionary though I couldn’t determine exactly when this occurred. 1925 was a tumultuous time with a weakening world economy on the tails of a world war, secular leaders began to emerge such as Mussolini. And as a threat to the world, Pope Pius felt it was important that believers step forth and acknowledge who the true leader of their hearts was. And it really made me

pause and think, is it time to redeclare and define exactly what this means in a world that has drifted in a troubling direction.

Our gospel from Matthew brings the “reign of Christ” into focus for us. It is a reign, a leadership like no other. It paints a picture of not how the leadership looks while Jesus is with us, but how it looks when his physicality is no longer present. Hear our scripture from Matthew 25:31-46.

Matthew 25:31-46

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. 32All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, 33and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. 34Then 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; 35for 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, 36I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ 37Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? 38And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? 39And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ 40And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to

Inspired by workingpreacher.org commentary on Matthew 25:31-46 by Carla Works, Professor, Wesley Theological Seminary and commentary on Ezekiel 34: 11-16, 20-24 by Tyler Mayfield, Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary.

one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’

41Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; 42for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ 44Then they also will answer, ‘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?’ 45Then 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.’ 46And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

This teaching challenges us all to be a champion of God’s kingdom in a broken world. In chapter 24, after Jesus privately warns his disciples of dark days ahead when false prophets will arise and many will lose faith, Jesus tells his followers that the suffering will be interrupted by “the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory” (24:30). He will send out his angels to gather all the elect (24:31). In the passage under study, which marks the end of Jesus’ eschatological discourse (24:1-25:46), the Son of Man has arrived with his angels and is now seated on the throne, where he is called the king.

The question here is who are the sheep and who are the goats in today's world? Or perhaps better worded, which are we both as a collective and individually? When I read the Matthew passage, I think it speaks directly to the time we live in now. The blessed ones have demonstrated their faithfulness by performing acts of loving-kindness. The charge to care for the poor and the disadvantaged can be found throughout scripture, but it is especially exhibited in the ministry of Jesus and Jesus has charged us to do the same.

Our Old Testament scripture from Ezekiel which talks again about Kingship and shepherds. Now we can attempt to relate, but most of us do not see sheep on a regular basis and certainly are not familiar with how to herd them and how they behave so we have to stretch our imagination a touch when we look into this passage but it is powerful and appeals directly to each of us. The first 10 verses of Ezekiel were left out of today's reading but they offer a message that I don't want you or I to miss, so I'm going to share them now.

Ezekiel 34: 1-24

Israel's False Shepherds

"The word of the LORD came to me: Mortal, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel: prophesy, and say to them—to the shepherds: Thus says the Lord GOD: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you

slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and scattered, they became food for all the wild animals. My sheep were scattered, they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill; my sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with no one to search or seek for them.

Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: As I live, says the Lord God, because my sheep have become a prey, and my sheep have become food for all the wild animals, since there was no shepherd; and because my shepherds have not searched for my sheep, but the shepherds have fed themselves, and have not fed my sheep; therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: Thus says the Lord God, I am against the shepherds; and I will demand my sheep at their hand, and put a stop to their feeding the sheep; no longer shall the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, so that they may not be food for them.”

These words from God were directed at the Kings of Israel. Rulers who were not caring for their people but caring almost entirely for themselves and their allies alone – yet reaping benefit from the work of the people they neglected. Sound at all familiar to you in how we live today? World corporations dominating the commerce of the world and feeding off the work of the people yet hoarding the profits?

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“They were scattered because there was no shepherd; and scattered, they became food for all the wild animals.” So many are being pulled in directions away from God, away from loving kindness. We are isolating and connecting only digitally with one another – and who controls that digital world? Who feeds this message? Commerce.

“As I live, says the Lord God, because my sheep have become prey, and my sheep have become food for all the wild animals, sincere there was no shepherd...I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, so that they may not be food for them.”

What changed since this passage was written today is indeed the Reign of Christ. This kingdom on Earth that we all have been born into. We know what it looks like, feels like, and embodies because we bear witness to it each and every week, albeit each and every day! Jesus showed us how we can do this – how we can seek the lost and bring back the stray – and it isn’t with judgment or laws that fit only some. God says, “I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured...I will strengthen the weak...I will feed them with justice.”

So what does it mean for us today to be “fed with justice”? How can we, if we truly believe we are shepherds, how can we set things right?

It begins with finding the lost sheep. We all spent some time this past week likely with family in gatherings – did you encounter any lost sheep? Do you have a friend or a neighbor who you see as a bit lost or confused? What changed since Ezekiel is God has given us – you and I – the ability to find the lost and lead them

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back to the love of Christ. To bring them words of peace, kindness and generosity.

To truly lead others to Christ, we must do so based on attraction rather than promotion. In other words, they will be lead by light to return to the fold of love and that begins with you. Not just with words, though they can certainly be powerful, but with your gestures and actions. You have been fed with justice so it lives within you to know the lost when you see them. To bear witness to Christ as King is to be a messenger of this type of kingdom – to serve others in love and lean into hope that together we can indeed declare that this revolution is underway with the sheep returning so we can empower love and peace in our world.

Amen