

Ps 100; Ez 34:11-16, 20-24;
Eph 1:15-23; Mt 25:31-46

Christ the King Sunday 2020

Today we see the ancient image of the Shepherd who is a King – the King who is a Shepherd. This Shepherd comes home carrying the lost sheep on his neck, or in his arms. We don't live as close to field and pasture here in Western Washington County as our ancestors did. Few of us deal with feeding, guiding and caring for sheep (or goats) in our day-to-day reality. We know by heart "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want..." But the actual work of a shepherd is very demanding – endlessly keeping the flock together – out of danger – healthy and content. It is a lot of effort. In Ezekiel's time, a shepherd lived out on the land with the flock. The hours were long – rewards were few. We tend to romanticize the image of a shepherd the Bible writers describe. The truth is that shepherding is a tough job – a tough calling. It also produces great joy.

Think for a moment about how people are like sheep. We need our God to watch over us – to shield us from harm, to guide us out of temptation, to provide spiritual nourishment for us in a dry and barren land. I certainly am a sheep trying to follow close behind the Good Shepherd. So are you. Today's psalm gives us words and images to express the humble gratitude that washes over us when we stop and realize the goodness, the justice and the faithful care God gives us.

The prophet Ezekiel preached at a time when the people of Israel had been led astray by lazy, greedy, good-for-nothing shepherds. The spiritual leaders of the nation had led them into idolatry. They were also taking advantage of the people – making themselves comfortable but allowing the needs of souls to go unanswered.

The result was defeat, exile and suffering for the entire nation. Ezekiel describes God's sovereign decision: "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." (Ez 34:16-19). Justice cuts two ways. When we find ourselves facing a just God, we must examine all that has brought us to that moment. My prayer: Lord, let us do all we can to follow You, and all we can to guide those in our care to "green pastures ...quiet waters...paths of righteousness." (Ps 23)

You say, "Wait a minute, Preacher, you said I was a sheep. You never said I am supposed to lead anybody anywhere." Here's the thing. To follow Jesus means you and I live out His calling. Jesus says, "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me." (Jn 10:27). When you and I are seen in the presence of Jesus Christ, doing what He does, we make a clear statement in the world. We are continually singing His praise – speaking of His goodness and love – sharing with the whole world the wonderful things Jesus is doing. We lead by following Jesus. You are a sheep. You are a shepherd.

We have come to the last parable Jesus spoke in the Gospel of Matthew. We see a scene of glory. Jesus is seated on the great throne. All the nations are gathered around Him. And we see Him separating the sheep from the goats. There is no reflection on the actual animals: sheep and goats. Jesus is not talking about small grazing animals that flock together. He is talking about us. When He says "sheep" He means the true followers of the Lord – as in "gentle as a lamb." They are placed on Jesus' right. By "goats" He means those who have not done as Jesus does – as in "the old goat," or "smelly old goat." These are placed at Jesus' left hand.

This vision of Christ's glory is not meant to scare us into running around only doing good deeds morning, noon and night. The Apostle Paul teaches: "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is* the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them." (Eph 2:8-10)

Let's not focus on the great mass of humanity standing around the throne of judgment. Let's look at Jesus. In His earthly walk, whom did Jesus identify with? Who did He spend His time with out on the streets, in the temple courts, and in the countryside? Jesus served the poorest, the hungriest, the most wretched of His people. He looked like one of us. His glory was not apparent. On the last day, Jesus will appear as He truly is.

Now I know there are no goats here. Imagine for a moment that you are the smelliest, orneriest goat in the world. You hear the gospel message. You learn that Jesus loves the goats too. Wonder of wonders, you surrender your hell-bent lifestyle, you seek out other Jesus-followers, you begin to listen to the words of Jesus and to take His words to heart. You have been reconciled to God. You have been rescued from sin's destruction.

How will you live out the New Life Jesus gives?

When did we see You, Lord? We see Him in the face of everyone we meet – especially the ones who are wandering away from God – lost, hopeless, confused. When we reach out, we see Jesus' nail-scarred hand. He reached out to you and me – even before we knew better – even before we surrendered to Him.

Amen.