

## **SCRIPTURE READINGS AND SERMON**

### **Last Sunday After Pentecost**

**November 22, 2020**

**Psalm 95:1–6 (ESV):**

#### **Let Us Sing Songs of Praise**

1 Oh come, let us sing to the LORD;

let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!

2 Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;

let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!

3 For the LORD is a great God,

and a great King above all gods.

4 In his hand are the depths of the earth;

the heights of the mountains are his also.

5 The sea is his, for he made it,

and his hands formed the dry land.

6 Oh come, let us worship and bow down;

let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!

**First Reading: Ezekiel 34:11–16; 20-24 (ESV):**

#### **The Lord God Will Seek Them Out**

11 “For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. 12 As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. 13 And 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 ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country. 14 I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. 15 I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares 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, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice.

**Ezekiel 34:20–24 (ESV):**

20 “Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD to them: Behold, I, I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. 21 Because you push with side and shoulder, and thrust at all the weak with your horns, till you have scattered them abroad, 22 I will rescue my flock; they shall no longer be a prey. And I will judge between sheep and sheep. 23 And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. 24 And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them. I am the LORD; I have spoken.

**EPISTLE: 1 Corinthians 15:20–28 (ESV):**

20 But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. 21 For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. 22 For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. 23 But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. 24 Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. 25 For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. 26 The last enemy to be destroyed is death. 27 For “God has put all things in subjection under his feet.” But when it says, “all things are put in subjection,” it is plain that he is excepted who put all things in subjection under him. 28 When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all.

**THE GOSPEL - Matthew 25:31–46 (ESV):**

**The Final Judgment**

**31** “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. **32** Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. **33** And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. **34** Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who 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 drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 36 I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' 37 Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? 38 And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? 39 And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' 40 And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'

41 "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. 42 For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, 43 I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' 44 Then they also will answer, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?' 45 Then he will answer them, saying, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' 46 And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

## **Sermon 45 – Last Sunday After Pentecost**

### **"Goat In Sheep's Clothing"**

#### **Matthew 25:31-46**

Dear friends,

Jesus speaks further on the end on our Gospel lesson, getting to what is perhaps the ultimate end for all humanity beyond even the end times. This isn't a parable, but Jesus uses comparative language here, the illustration of shepherd

that runs throughout all our readings, especially the Old Testament lesson. There is a key difference between sheep and goats, and that is what we will focus on. The difference seems fairly straightforward, but Jesus muddies this as He does sometimes. The question I want you to ask is which category do I fit in between these two? Or do you occupy an entirely different category altogether?

Jesus is right at the end, here. He is about to be crucified, and at the end, He speaks of endings. The Time of Ending is always upon us. That's something the Scripture makes fairly clear throughout the New Testament. Jesus arrived at the beginning of the first millennium, did His work, suffered, and died, rose, then He ascended and went away. After that going away, after His return to heaven, the Time of the Church begins. This is our time, and it has been for the past two thousand years. This is our time to grow, to change, to spread, contract, spread again. This is our time to teach, to preach, to do all the things Christians do as they go about the rest of their daily lives. The countdown started with Jesus ascension, and its timer has blessedly not run out yet, but that timer is unknown to us. We don't know when Jesus will return, but it could be any minute now. That's hard to believe sometimes, we often think there's more to do, that it won't happen in our lifetime, but the Scriptures tell us that we just don't know that for sure. The Time of the Church and the Time of Ending are the same. We're always ending here on this Earth. We're always just one decision away from Judgment Day, and that is God's decision, not ours. Sometimes we pray for God to wait, just a little longer, because we want so and so to be saved, we want more of humanity to know the truth about Jesus. Sometimes we pray for God to hurry up and just end the thing, because the Scriptures describe this period as one that is like labor for a pregnant

woman. That is, its painful, out of control, and heading inexorably toward its conclusion, so we ask God to just hurry up and get to the endgame.

My point is, the end is always upon us, and God's Word tells us to act like it. We would assume that, if the world is going to end, suddenly nothing would have a point. Why go to work? Why plant a tree? Why take care of the yard? Why do any of this if the world is going to end? God takes a different view, and you find this in our Gospel lesson for today. If we are in the middle of the end right now and have been for thousands of years, how should that make us behave? Well, let's hear Jesus speak on this.

**31 “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. 32 Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. 33 And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. 34 Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who 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 drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 36 I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ 37 Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? 38 And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? 39 And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ 40 And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’”**

This is how we are supposed to behave. We are supposed to greet the end, not as if it would make nothing matter. We are supposed to greet the end with the idea that nothing matters but the well-being of our neighbor, taking care of his needs. That's counter intuitive but fits in very much with all the rest that Jesus says throughout His life. Judgment Day doesn't make everything pointless, Judgment Day reminds us that the point, the *only* point, is the good of our neighbor. And most of this doesn't have anything to do with salvation, do keep that in mind. The king does not say to the sheep, all the things you said were doctrinally correct. The king doesn't say to the sheep, your communion practice was great. He doesn't say, that book you read was just the right book to read. He doesn't say to the sheep that they taught well, spoke well, saved souls, baptized or gave the Lord's Supper. He talks about doing. Helping with hunger, thirst, clothing, and loneliness. Earthly needs, not spiritual ones.

That is not something to forget. We are very focused on what we say, making sure that what we say is right, and other parts of the Scriptures tell us this is a good thing. Jesus speaks in specifics, He uses special words, and we should understand and echo those words. But those words aren't just there, they tell us something, and what they tell us is that we should see to the needs of our neighbor's earthly life. This isn't all just about salvation, it is about easing the pain of existence, showing kindness and empathy, and so on. The King himself cites several examples in the Gospel lesson. Feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the Stranded. Sin creates these empty places, it turns hunger into a danger, a weapon. It turns thirst into a killer. Sin makes our bodies vulnerable to extremes of heat and cold, it requires us to clothe ourselves. When we seek to help each other with these basic needs, we are alleviating the symptoms of the problem that

we collectively create. Sin is everybody's responsibility, no one is free from it. Because of that shared culpability, we have a shared burden of making it less a problem than it already is.

The King makes his judgment on that basis. On what we do. We shouldn't lose sight of that. We call this vocation, that God places us in a place with people in order to benefit those people. In order of priority, those should be family, neighbors, friends, church family, community. Those are the people that God gives us to serve. The ones in physical proximity. That's a nice focus for our efforts, along with the mandate to see to the earthly needs.

So which are you? A sheep who helps his neighbor, or a goat who doesn't? I know which I am. If we're judging on the basis that God judges, on the basis of what the person does, I'm a goat. A big, fat goat, butting with the horns, shoving my way through my neighbor to get what I want. More, I'm a lazy goat, and that's probably what condemns me more than anything. This judgment that the King makes is flat and has no caveats, and that's what makes it puzzling. Who's a sheep, who's a goat? What are you?

You're a goat, like me, dear friends. You look like goats, you act like goats, you butt your heads, move with the shoulder, and sit down when the time comes to move. We all fall into the goat category because we've all done this, we've all ignored the good we could do, or talked ourselves out of it because it didn't seem like good. It seemed like it was getting in the way. We're all goats. That's what sin means.

But this is what makes this confusing. As absolutely as this is stated, Jesus is still King. Jesus still shepherd. And Jesus is not simply judge, we know this

from the rest of the Scripture. We know this from the rest of the Gospel. A goat is someone who has let his sin speak for him, who has leaned into his sin, or just let it get the better of him. We're all goats sometimes, and this lesson reminds us that this condemns us. It isn't just a harmless mistake. It's bad, it hurts people, and it offends God. But still, you and I don't want to be goats. We want to be better sheep, we want to show that love. We just don't want to make things worse, we don't want it to be wasted. We don't want to butt in where we have no business being.

Jesus changes goats like you and me into sheep. He understands our human frailties. He doesn't excuse them. Far from it. He doesn't tell you it is okay because its just a little mistake, He tells you it is sin, it is unforgiveness, it is cowardice, it is pure selfishness. But He takes the blame for that, the punishment for it, and drags it to the cross. Jesus changes the nature of things, He changes the heart, and not just ours. Jesus changes the heart of our God, makes it warm and loving toward us. He makes this judgment a good one by making us good sheep.

So we're goats, but we're also sheep. We're goats in sheep's clothing, sheep in goat's clothing sometimes, and we have to wrestle with that. Scriptures like this hit us in our complacency, reminding us never to discount the requirements that God places on His people. They tell us to shake it off, be a sheep, because Christ has made you sheep. He had made you to eat rich pasture, so share it. He has made you to be clothed, so clothe each other. We can't fix the big stuff, but we can be good sheep. Sometimes its hard to know where to start. But we know who started it.

Amen.