

A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

Judge, Shepherd, and King

Matthew 25

November 26, 2023

In today's Gospel, we find Jesus teaching his disciples for the last time before his arrest and crucifixion. They are soon to feel like the whole world is shattered, and God may be dead or as good as dead. But Jesus says to them: "When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats."

Let's pause a moment and allow this amazing statement to penetrate our minds and hearts. On this final Sunday in the church year, we bring back mental images from the year like a photo album retrospective of Jesus' life. Here is a man born to a poor, wayfaring family. He went to no university, had no special privileged childhood. His father sort of disappears from the telling of his life. He was not married, had no children. He had no bank account. He had no possessions, no house, no job certainly no career, no political aspirations, no title, no rank, no power. He is about to be judged and found guilty by the highest religious and political power of his time. They are about to declare him unfit to live and sentence him to death. (closely following Fleming Rutledge here)

And here he is telling his disciples that he is going to come again, at the end of the world, personally, to determine the fate of everyone who has ever lived. This is an utterly astonishing claim. It either makes your brain break or it makes your heart leap. Or both. He who has no power whatsoever claims a power that only God could have. He who is about to face judgement from the judges of the world, tells his disciples he is actually The Judge of All. He is who like a lamb led to the slaughter, tells his disciples he is the shepherd over the goats and the sheep of the world.

Today we bear witness to the one who will come again to judge the living and the dead. Christ the King Sunday could be called Christ the Judge Sunday, and we could decorate with a gavel. Or could be called Christ the Good Shepherd Sunday, and we could have lambswool or shearers. It shouldn't escape our notice that in these final words to his disciples, the judge who sits on the throne as king, is also a shepherd. Of all the designations of the deity, shepherd seems to have been his favorite. In the last days, he established himself as the world's judge, creation's king, and the shepherd of a flock that seems to have plenty of suffering and need to go around.

A shepherd, as you know, is the Old Testament's favorite way to picture God and those who exercise authority in God's name. Kings at their best were called shepherds. So were priests. In God's kingdom, the most powerful purveyors of power at their highest wore the mantle of the

lowliest of societal roles—that of the shepherd of the sheep. Kings and priests were the shepherds-designates of the people-sheep. They were to lead the people on behalf of the One Good Shepherd, the one who makes us all lie down in green pastures, leads us beside still waters, and restores our souls. And exceeding all of this gives provision and protection to those in his charge. Deep in the catacombs of ancient Rome where early generations of Christians were buried, some of the earliest Christian art is found. One of those is of a shepherd carrying a sheep on his shoulders. Christ is the Judge of the Nations, the King of all Kings, and the Good Shepherd who lays down his life and takes ours up with him in glory at our deaths.

In a few weeks, these images may be pushed far from our minds as we picture Christ as a baby, swaddled as an infant in Bethlehem. Christ the child. But if we think of him, then, less than we do today, we will romanticize the incarnation, and we will have missed the whole point. Those wise men, the three kings, who brought the gifts and knelt at his manger knew what they were doing even if hardly anyone else did. The shepherds who ran in from the fields to greet him knew something, too, that few others did. Mary his mother, knew the one who was being brought into the world where “the proud are scattered, the mighty brought down, the hungry filled, the rich sent away empty.” She knew even if few others would yet understand. Even there at the manger: King, Shepherd, Judge of the Nations.

Christ as divine ruler. Christ as good shepherd. Christ as righteous judge. Christ’s judgment is exercised with the authority of the rule of God, and Christ’s judgment is made with the heart of the Good Shepherd. For this is God’s world, and the people of the world are God’s flock.

Deep in the prophets is one of the most remarkable chapters in all of Scripture. Ezekiel 34. The first chapter in a long series of restoration promises after 30 or more chapters of judgment and doom. This is how God will set the world right. All three divine images are bound together here. God interjects in history as a king who judges the leaders for their poor shepherding and then the people for their poor “sheeping”, if that’s a word, toward one another.

To the supposed shepherd-leaders, God the judge gives the verdict, “You have been feeding yourselves. Should you not be feeding the sheep? But the weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered. My sheep were scattered over all the earth with no one to search for them.”

The heart of God is not for the powerful who make themselves comfortable on the backs of the poor and suffering. The heart of God is always with those in need, and God judges the powerful by the conditions of the lives of those in need. A nation, then, is not judged on how rich are the richest nor on how powerful are the powerful. A nation is judged on how those at the bottom are doing. Do those at the bottom have their health cared for, do they have a home, do they have a way to make a life? Is there justice for them? In God’s judgment, those questions are the only ones that matter for a person in power or influence or wealth: How is your neighbor

doing? The great preacher James Forbes famously said, “Nobody gets to heaven without a letter of reference from the poor.”

It's not just the shepherds who neglect to care for their sheep. The sheep are also accountable for how they treat one another. In a piercingly ecologically relevant metaphor for our time, to the people, The Good Shepherd reverses the idyllic imagery of Psalm 23's lying down in green pastures and drinking from still waters, asking the question, “What are you doing to those pastures and what are you doing to that water for everybody else? I judge between sheep and sheep. Is it not enough for you to feed on good pasture, that you must tread down with your feet the rest of the pasture, too? Is it not enough for you to drink clear water, that you must muddy the rest of the water with your feet? Why must my sheep eat what you have trodden into mud and drink what you have muddied with your feet?” This picture of environmental injustice is not as life should be.

The shepherds are accountable. The sheep are accountable. This is what's at stake when you sing *Let Us Crown Him Lord of All*. You're accountable to the one whose head you've put the crown upon. All are accountable to the one who is the Judge of all nations, King of all kings, The Good Shepherd.

In his last words to his disciples, Jesus interweaves these divine images from the prophet together again. These divine images, king, judge, shepherd, once wound tightly together, and in the eyes of the disciples blown apart at the crucifixion, now are rewoven in a picture of glory. The king who judges the nations, separates them sheep from goats, right hand, left hand.

He does so in the same way the justice of God has always bent and in the same way the heart of God has always broken—on behalf of those who suffer. At our baptism, when we confess “Jesus is Lord,” we see clearly how the lordship of Christ is and will be exercised. From the beginnings of creation to the redemption of Israel from slavery to the giving of law of Sinai to the prophet's thunderous warnings, God is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

But this time in Jesus' parable, God doesn't just interject in some future time on behalf of those who suffer. He calls his people again to do so in the here and now. Christ identifies himself so closely with those who are suffering that he can say, “What you do for them, you do for me.” And, of course, we hauntingly hear, “What you don't do for them, you are not doing for me.”

The God whom we crown as king and lord, this God's justice is true.
God's power is mighty.
God's compassion is unending.

Some days it will seem that God has abdicated his throne and is powerless against the powers and principalities of this world, but it is not so.
Some days it will seem that you are sheep without a shepherd, but it is not so.
Some days it will seem there is no justice in the world. It is not so.

It is not so, not forever and ever. Despite what it may seem on the darkest days, when you feel all alone, when the world breaks against you, despite all of this, when, not if, but when the Son of Man comes in glory, he will come as judge and as shepherd and as king, the unity of the image of God fully restored. This God who is with us and with you even now in these moments and in these days. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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