

Christ the King A 2017

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

November 26, 2017

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Psalm 95:1-7a; Ephesians 1:15-23; Matthew 25:31-46

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

On Thursday, at the end of the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, Santa Claus rides down the avenue in his giant sleigh. Macy's wants the world to know that once the turkey and cranberries and stuffing have been put away, the Christmas season has arrived.

What do you call this time of year? The *season* that sort of ranges from Thanksgiving into early January? Do you call it the holiday season? It's not just Christmas. For Christians it's also Christ the King Sunday and Advent and Epiphany. For Jews, there is Hanukkah. A great deal of what we do at this time of year is anthropological. In other words, it is rooted in the human psyche, and in humankind's relationship to the earth and to the climate, and in culture and in tradition.

Before there were Christians and a Christian religion, there was the winter solstice. The shortest day of the year. This year it will be on December 21st, like it often is. The days get shorter and shorter until then. Then the days begin to get longer again. This has been important *anthropologically*, to the human family. Ask the Romans. Ask the people who erected Stonehenge. Ask the Mayans who built Chichen Itza.

So the Romans, when they created a calendar, they put the new year close to the solstice. The time when the days begin to get longer again. And they named the first month January after Janus the two-faced God. Because when we cross into the new year we look backward and forward.

Think, then, for a moment about how you observe New Year's. Many of us, probably most of us, celebrate. There may or may not be champagne, dancing, feasting. We are glad for a new beginning. But there is another aspect to New Year's. What we call "resolutions" which is similar to what the Church calls "repentance." A desire to amend our past ways and do better in the future. There is a certain amount of judgment that arrives with the new year, not unlike what some of us experience on our birthdays. How have we spent the time entrusted to us? How much time remains? New Year's is the marking of the passage of time. With it comes hope for the future, but also loss for what is gone, and judgment on how we have lived our lives so far.

The Church year also marks it passing. Today is the last Sunday of the church year, Christ the King Sunday. Advent begins next Sunday. All of the same themes that are triggered by the civil

calendar in connection with December 31st and January 1st. are with us as we end one year of the church calendar and begin another one.

For example, there is judgment. There is judgment on how you and I have lived our lives. In the great parable this morning, the great parable of the sheep and the goats, the judge appears on judgment day. But it turns out– to the surprise of the sheep AND the goats, the righteous AND the unrighteous– it turns out that the judge was with us all along. In the poor, the rejected, the isolated, the desperate. The words of Jesus are familiar to us all: “*Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family you did it to me.*” This was arguably the foundation of the work and ministry of Mother Teresa of Calcutta. The judge– Christ– is all around us, 24 hours a day. “*Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family you did it to me.*” Members of this church and others regularly speak to me about the difficulty of encounters with homeless people. The difficulty is that the homeless person is a judgment. A judgment on us, and on our society. Understanding THAT is the first step. We push them away, sometimes, because they smell bad, or because they lack good manners. But we really push them away because they make us uncomfortable. They remind us of the vast work of the kingdom of heaven. They remind us of this parable. “*Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family you did it to me.*”

Looming behind this parable is the prophecy of Ezekiel. I encourage you to explore the entirety of chapter 34 of Ezekiel. We have selected verses included this morning. It is an apt message for today, a scary message for today. There are two levels of exploitation that are condemned. There are the bad shepherds, who have been eating the sheep. Shepherds are supposed to feed sheep and care for them. But the shepherds have been eating what has been entrusted to them. This is in the verses prior to the selected verses deployed in our first lesson. Thus God says, in the verse (v.10) immediately prior to our reading, *Thus says the Lord God, I am against the shepherds.* The shepherds in Ezekiel means the political leaders. In our own day, we can name many leaders, not just political. Who are predators. Whether they are entrusted with health care, or with the spiritual care of souls; whether they are entrusted with responsibility for the environment or with responsibility for pension funds. Whether they are in the entertainment industry, or the real estate industry, or the church, or in Congress or the White House. When the shepherds become predators... *Thus says the Lord God, I am against the shepherds.*

And then, in the verses that we DO have in the first lesson, we see that when the shepherds become predators, the sheep turn against one another. That is why in this parable, God the Good Shepherd separates not the sheep from the goats, but the fat sheep from the scrawny sheep. The fat sheep have become fat because they became goats. *You pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns.* Pushing and shoving, butting aside the weak. This is what happens when the law of the jungle becomes the foundation of a society. And God says he is going to put an end to it. The bad shepherds will be dealt with. And the sheep who take advantage will be dealt with.

So there is judgment in the *gospel* parable, and the background for the parable of Jesus is the

judgment in Ezekiel. These are aspects of the year coming to an end. A reckoning with time and the values which have governed our lives so far. An acknowledgment of judgment now, and in the future.

But the other part of a new year is hope. Renewal, the chance to do better. “This is the year that I’m going to fit back into my skinny jeans!” “This is the year that I’m going to put as much money into savings as I do into Starbucks!” From Ezekiel today we get our first taste of Advent: *I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the Lord, have spoken.* Advent is full of promise. The prince who is coming. Who will rise up from the line of David.

In addition, our second reading and our psalm this morning are two classic expressions of hope. The second reading, from Ephesians, points to the future fulfillment when God rules all in all. This reading is used sometimes on All Saints, and always on Ascension. It is a favorite. *And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.* There is the possibility of goodness, even greatness, in the reign of God in Christ Jesus. All in all. Goodness pervading everything. This is the hope and promise of Christ the King at the end of the church year.

And our psalm, number 95. For almost as long as Christianity has existed, this was the first psalm in the first prayer of the morning. *Come, let us sing to the Lord; let us shout for joy to the rock of our salvation.* Of 150 psalms in the Bible, this is the one that was used in the daily prayers of Christians, the first psalm of a new day, the first prayer of a new day. A song of joy and confidence in the possibility of the day ahead. And of the reign of God in our lives.

So today, we mark the passing of time. And we mark the cyclical nature of time. We reckon with what has been. And we hope for what will be. God bless all the saints, and all the creation, from east to west, from north to south, as we live into the kingdom of our Christ. Amen.