

“Reign of Christ”

Ezekiel 34:11-16; Matthew 25:31-36

Thanksgiving Sunday & Reign of Christ Sunday, Nov. 20, 2011, Year A

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According to our UCC calendar, today is Thanksgiving Sunday. According to our national calendar, this Thursday is Thanksgiving Day. These are the days set aside to thank God for all the blessings we have. We remember the first Thanksgiving when the Pilgrims and the Native Americans celebrated the harvest and their newfound friendship. As we all know from our history books, the spirit of that first Thanksgiving deteriorated, as Europeans edged the Natives further and further away from the lands they had cultivated and harvested for so long. No longer was there trust and cooperation; there was distrust and conflict. The promise of a New Jerusalem for the Pilgrims turned out to be the sacking of sacred places for the Natives. History judges our actions; God judges our hearts.

So, if it's Thanksgiving Sunday, why are we talking about sheep and goats? It's turkey day not lamb day – unless, I guess, you live in a place where there are no turkeys and then lamb will have to do. According to the Christian calendar, it's Reign of Christ Sunday. It is the day that we think about the promise Jesus made to return to us one day. This is where talk of the sheep and goats comes in, as we hear from Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew.

The beauty of Jesus' stories – how they were so appealing to his listeners – was that they were grounded in real life. The Bible's stories were not fabricated from thin air, by people who happened to think up good ones all on their own and write them down. The Bible stories come from real life. They come from people who testify that they have had an experience of the holy that they can't keep to themselves – they just have to share it.

The story of the sheep and the goats is a story like that. In these last weeks of Ordinary Time, we have been reading the stories of Jesus and his prophecies about the coming of the Kingdom of God. Jesus told many stories and parables about the Kingdom. He compared it to a tiny pearl which is great value, a mustard seed that grows into a mighty tree, a net scooping up good and bad fish in the sea, a wedding banquet where those invited didn't come, vineyard workers who get equal pay no matter how many hours they logged in, harvesting wheat and weeds together, and sheep who were lost and now were found.

So we are back on sheep again. What was the life of a shepherd in ancient Israel and the Near East like? Shepherds had charge of a very important commodity of those times – sheep – that were not only bred and sold by them, but were a mainstay of their own diets. Shepherds not only cared tenderly for each animal but they were fierce protectors of them as well. The familiar shepherd from the 23rd Psalm is comforting to his flock, not only for his tender care, but for the fact he is armed to the teeth – with a rod in one hand and a staff in the other. Shepherds were ready to defend their flock against predators and thieves, sometimes risking their own lives, so we can understand the economic reasons why.

The Shepherds that we read about in scripture are often metaphors for God. For example, Ezekiel says, “As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep...I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign Lord...I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak...”(Ez 34:12, 15-16).

Sheep are often metaphors for Israel and we read how God is often torn between loving them and wanting to punish them. Punishment could be dealt on the Israelites as a whole if they did not keep covenant with God; for their leadership who took advantage of them; or for foreign kings who rule over them with a cruel hand. In Ezekiel’s prophecy, God speaks to Israel and her oppressors, “I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice,” (Ez 34:16).

As Jesus speaks of the coming Kingdom of God, when there will be judgment passed upon those who keep covenant and those who don’t, he echoes Ezekiel’s metaphor of the shepherd and the sheep. This time Jesus adds to the sheep metaphor the image of the goat, and he does this to point out a stark difference. Goats were not as valuable and not as highly prized as sheep; it seems they were expendable, more so than the sheep. The word “scapegoat” comes to mind. On judgment day, Jesus says God will separate the beloved sheep from the undeserving goats. The Kingdom will belong to the sheep whom the shepherd loves.

How do we know if we are sheep or goats? Jesus gives us a clear scenario. The Reign of Christ will come, he says, and Christ the King will come in glory to judge how we have lived. He says:

³¹ “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. ³² All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³ He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

³⁴ “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, ³⁶ I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’

³⁷ “Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? ³⁸ When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? ³⁹ When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’

⁴⁰ “The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’

Let’s stop here for a moment and think about what Jesus has just said. It seems that those who take care of others selflessly are invited into the Kingdom of God. This comes as a surprise to the sheep, those on God’s right hand, because they didn’t realize even small acts of kindness done in any kind of situation, qualifies them to be children of God. All they did was offer simple gifts: a cool drink, a clean bed, warm clothing, care during illness and visits in prison. Is that really all that is required to earn us membership in the Kingdom? What about those 613 laws of the Hebrew Law? What about making the proper sacrifices in the temple? What about observing the Sabbath? This is really startling news from the King of Surprises, God in Jesus Christ.

Jesus goes on with the story:

⁴¹ “Then (the King) will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. ⁴² For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’

⁴⁴ “They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’

⁴⁵ “He will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’

⁴⁶ “Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

The goats are as surprised as the sheep. They are unaware they have been dealing with God when they have dealt with their fellow human beings. Sadly, they have consistently not treated others the way they want to be treated, and God takes offense at that.

These passages in scripture about God’s judgment on the last day are hard to hear. If God is the God of Love, doesn’t God love us all unconditionally? That is true, yet there is that covenant thing we have to consider. When we become believers in God, we make a pact with God: “You will be our God and we will be your people.” God has criteria, as Jesus tells us in this parable. We need to hold up our end of the bargain, our half of the covenant. Jesus asks us to love God with all our hearts, with all our souls and with all our minds, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. In return, God welcomes us, loves us, nurtures us, listens to us, forgives us, and blesses us. God is our shepherd and we are God’s flock.

The Reign of Christ becomes a reality when we keep our covenant with God. Must we wait to see how it all turns out, until the final, judgment day when Christ will come in glory to separate the sheep from the goats? Only God is our judge and we cannot judge God or know what God will or won’t do. But there’s no reason not to start right now, or continue right now, to create the world that Jesus dreamed of for us – a world without hunger, loneliness, nakedness, sickness, and imprisonment; a world where there is respect for all human beings; a world of trust and cooperation; a world of promise; a world of surprising grace – the Kingdom of God here and now, forever and ever. Amen.

References

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