

“Reign Check”

Sermon – November 26, 2023 Stone Presbyterian Church

Who is in charge? That is what we answer and affirm today on this last Sunday in our liturgical calendar that ends our marking of Ordinary Time after the Day of Pentecost and moves us to the threshold of Advent, the season of hope for Christ’s coming again at the end of time.

Today is traditionally called Christ the King Sunday, which is appropriate, but also has patriarchal undertones—as if the maleness of Jesus incarnate was important.

We could perhaps use “monarch” instead as a more gender-neutral term but instead we tend to use the phrase “reign of Christ”— that is, R-E-I-G-N meaning sovereignty or rule. Not R-A-I-N as in the precipitation nor R-E-I-N as the leather strap used on the bridle of a horse.

Today’s scripture passages point to what this reign or sovereignty looks like. On one level it is about judgment.

For example, the Old Testament lesson today is from chapter 34 of Ezekiel of which the whole book is on judgment. But it also about care. Today’s passage begins with verse 11 saying, “For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out.”

And in verse 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, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.”

And from verses 22 and 23, “I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep. I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd.”

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This is echoed in today’s gospel lesson from Matthew 25 and the parable (as it were) of the sheep and the goats where the Son of Man, the king, will judge between those who helped the unfortunate and those who did not.

But note, the judgment comes from God—not from any of us. In fact, we should be cautious of the fire-and-brimstone kind of theology that sets us “Christians”—the good people—against those “others” and smugly look forward to them getting their punishment. As Jesus tells us in the Sermon on the Mount in chapter 5 to “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

In Ezekiel God’s care is both implicitly and explicitly associated with justice. As Christians, care for others is one of our hallmarks.

Indeed, the first public hospitals were started by Christians in the first century.

But as vital as care for others is, we must also address the underlying causes of these great needs. We need to seek justice—not judgment—along with care. As Bishop Desmond Tutu said, “There comes a point where we need to stop just pulling people out of the river. We need to go upstream and find out why they're falling in.”

Ezekial reminds us that God requires believers treat each other with love and forbearance.

The gospel of Matthew as a whole underscores that with today’s parable from chapter 25 as the capstone.

What stands out in the parable is that both the sheep—the righteous—and the goats—the unrighteous—are both surprised at their fate and were not aware whether they had either neglected or responded to “the least of these.”

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Judgment we see then is not so much from on high but spoken through the need of our neighbor. Judgment has more to do with mercy than good works. In other words, it is not because you go out and consciously do good things, racking up the gold stars trying to earn your way into heaven.

It is viewing others with compassion and empathy and thus caring for them is simply an organic outgrowth of who you are. Good works are just a natural consequence of having God at the center of your life.

Paul notes this in today’s epistle lesson from Ephesians chapter 1.

Typical of letters of that time, today’s passage follows a greeting in previous verses with one of thanksgiving—most appropriate for this holiday period! Yet, this thanksgiving resembles more of a prayer—and, in fact, one of the longer ones in Paul’s letters. Arguably, the entire letter is one of thanksgiving.

As verses 15 and 16 start today’s passage, “I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers.”

Faith here is not just a mental assent to some creed, but is active trust in what God has done and will do. It is a life lived in participation in, response to, and reflection of what God has done. You don’t just *have* faith—you *live* your faith.

And with “love for all the saints”, Paul is thanking them not for warm feelings toward others, but love in action—reconciliation in Christ through purposeful intent. It is the union of God, Christ, and the believer participating in God’s plan.

It was God’s power to raise the crucified Jesus from the dead from him to then reign as Lord of creation.

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God’s energizing power for us is born out of this. Christ’s system is not power but service. Paul’s prayer reminds his audience, including us, of the wisdom, power, and glory of God that give birth to a new existence, an existence rooted in the one whose suffering and death reconciled the world. It is a prayer that lives of faith active in love are established upon and molded by the wisdom and subversive power of God.

Today we celebrate the crucified and risen Christ, whom God exalted to rule over the whole universe. Christ’s reign is a negation of all earthly rulers.

Christ reigns supreme. Christ’s truth judges falsehood.

As the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, Christ is the center of the universe, the ruler of all history, the judge of all people.

In Christ all things began, and in Christ all things will be fulfilled.

Christ does reign now but his sovereignty is not yet fully realized. That is our hope to come.

But in the meantime, as followers of Christ, we don’t get to take a “rain check” on being imitators of Christ. We don’t get to put off living lives of faith and love, of total trust in God and reconciliation of others.

We must promote care and justice for all people and mercy not judgment.

Because the last I checked it is Christ who reigns.

In the name of God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer.

Amen.