

*Seeing Jesus Today*  
Matthew 25:31-40  
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Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry,...thirsty,...a stranger,...naked, ...sick...in prison...?” And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

Crash, boom, bang—the end of the church year arrives today. We’ve traveled through the whole story of creation and salvation since Advent, 2022. We’ve moved from holy season to holy season, with ordinary time in between. We end the year on *Reign of Christ Sunday*, one of our biggest, pull-out-all-the-stops touchpoints along the way. In our Gospel reading this day, Jesus tells a story about who will join him on his heavenly throne...and who won’t. **POOF** go the party balloons, as thoughts travel from celebrating Jesus’ heavenly restoration...to worries about the final judgment.

A couple of weeks ago, I mentioned how people of faith spend time wondering about the afterlife. What’s next? What’s it like? Will I get there...those sorts of concerns. *Reign of Christ Sunday* says clearly what we believe about Jesus. The One the prophets proclaimed during Advent, whom we welcomed into our neighborhood on Christmas, watched grow during Epiphany, etc, etc, is the same One who “ascended into heaven,...and will come to judge the living and the dead.” We view this Sovereign Christ with a large measure of awe... and fear. Our celebration can be a little muted by self-reflection...and self-preservation. Ambivalence abounds!! I want us to CELEBRATE today, however, so I will attempt to share thoughts that I hope will rechannel those mixed emotions.

Christians do think long and hard about the matter of salvation. The Presbyterian bottom line: we believe we are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus (God!) did the heavy lifting; we simply stand by and nod that we agree with and accept Jesus’ efforts on our behalf. No worry about whether we are “good enough.” We’re not! No fussing over membership in the “right” church. PPC is just fine. Jesus sums up our part of the deal in John 6: “This is the work of God: that you believe in him whom God has sent.” That’s it: faith, trust, confidence in Jesus as Lord and Savior. That simple message relieves me of the beastly burden of being “good enough.” The notion also transformed the pious monk, Martin Luther, from a guilt-driven, hard-working holy man into the reformer and world-reshaper that he became. He figured out that a person didn’t have to earn their way into heaven; it was grace...a gift. So celebrate!

But wait. Today's parable about Jesus' ultimate reign sounds quite a bit different from that. He appears to be painting a picture of a very demanding judge; about sheep and goats, the "ins" and the "outs." How do you justify these two perspectives, Preach?!? This is **my** take on this story.

The Bible says that in the tense moments before he was arrested, Jesus comforted his followers:

**Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places....And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.**

That assurance was meant for **all** who believe in Jesus across the ages. Once a person believes, life changes! **MY** eternal lodging is being prepared for me by Jesus Christ, residing and reigning in heaven. Some formerly important things dwindle in significance. Other Christ-like behaviors begin to show up on our "preferred action" list. Often the trek of transformation goes on and on! But over time, our lives—our preferences, our inclinations, our behaviors, our motivations—change. We are not always even aware of the modifications. And backsliding occurs!!! Witness St. Peter. However, as we become more comfortable in our new Christian clothing, we act more and more like Jesus. And we begin to see Jesus...in many of the people who inhabit our daily shared environment.

That, I believe, is what Jesus the King is rewarding here. I love the fact that the "righteous" ones in the parable (not the self-righteous) didn't even know they were passing the test. Probably thought they weren't. "Lord, when did we you hungry, thirsty, sick, etc?" Jesus says, (my translation) "It just became a part of your everyday, walking-around life." And what holy, monumental, almost impossible tasks did the sheep undertake?

**I was hungry and you gave me food, thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you gave me clothing, sick and you took care of me, in prison and you visited me.'**

"Whoa, that's a demanding list," we cry!! But not really. In Jesus' day, these were everyday, ordinary acts of kindness, easing common misfortunes; including imprisonment, where family members, and not the state, provided for incarcerated folk. Yes, Jesus was mostly referring to relatives, fellow believers, and people in one's immediate community. Not to the strangers in Portland city center or the residents of the omnipresent pop-up tent cities we see these days. Not literally; but in principle, for sure. One of the hugest tasks 21<sup>st</sup> Century Christians have is to apply these biblical principles to our lives.

So what does this story mean to us today? I think, this. In the course of everyday human events, the proverbial sheep kept their eye on those around them; and, as they believed Jesus would do, they gave themselves away to others in need. Not to

**earn** salvation, but to witness to the fact that they believed in Jesus and took his instructions to heart; so much to heart that Christ-like actions simply became who they were. They lived like believers...because they were.

That's why I love Reign of Christ Sunday. We shout and holler and praise the One who is seated on the throne, high and lifted up. **He** gave up all that glory so that **we** might attain it by grace through faith. AND He showed us how to give ourselves away to others in humble gratitude for the gift we ourselves have received. So look to and learn from Jesus if you want to see Jesus today.

Still a little nervous about the sheep and goat thing? Stop to take a look at your life. Do you spend time studying the Bible to figure out what Jesus' life looks like? Then, are Christ-like words and deeds emanating from your daily living? The king declares, "Come, inherit the realm prepared for you!" Feeling a little more goatish these days? Stop kicking yourself! You have another reason to celebrate: The end of the church year has arrived, but time has not run out for you to do "the work of God, that you believe in him whom God has sent." It's as simple as turkey and pumpkin pie: Pray, "I love you Lord, and I trust in you as my savior. Help me to see you in the people I meet as I live as your devoted servant where you have placed me."

It's the end of our church year. The new one begins next Sunday. Resolution time! Why not resolve to make this great day of celebrating **your** day of salvation.