

Last Sunday of the Church Year
November 22, 2020

Pastor Lew Upchurch
Matthew 25:1-13

“The Unexpected Presence of God”

*I Just wanna be a sheep
Babababa
I Just wanna be a sheep
Babababa
I pray the lord
My soul
To keep
I Just wanna be a sheep
Babababa*

Back when we had the Family Service on Sundays in the Children Center, we sang that song many times. One child, I remember, when asked, “what do you want to be,” would **always** shout as loudly as she could, “a sheep!”

We seemed to talk about sheep a lot at that service. After all, Jesus says “*I am the good shepherd. The sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow me.*” Reminding families over and over that through faith in Jesus, we are his sheep is a good thing. So we talked about sheep, we sang about sheep, and in one service we actually made sheep.

Here’s one that still sits on top of my bookshelf in my office. Wesley, our DCE, actually came up with the idea. A paper plate for a body; a couple of clothes pins for legs; and a paper head. It was a great little project that each family got to take home and put together on their own. And while I doubt any of these are still on display in people’s homes, like this one is in my office, the truth of what the sheep represents remains very real in all of our lives.

Because as Jesus reveals in our gospel lesson today, at the end of all things, he will return in glory. He will be surrounded by angels and sitting on a throne. All nations will be gathered before him and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left.

The goats are those who reject him. But the sheep, of course, are the true believers—those with faith in him. This is a huge part of the final message Jesus shares. Because we have to remember, that here, we are reading the end of Jesus' teachings as he wraps up his ministry. What's left after this are the final days leading up to his death. So death looms large in this reading. But the good news for the sheep is so does life! Because what Jesus reveals here is that even the smallest acts of mercy are part of his kingdom that has no end. And it's that reality that I would like to focus on today.

But before I bring this teaching into the present, I invite you to imagine this scene Matthew records—maybe even close your eyes if you have to- but try to place yourself at the feet of Jesus as he first spoke these words at the end of his ministry. *“Then the King will say to the sheep, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’”* Imagine if you were there, and with these words Jesus opened your eyes to see times when you were near his presence in a suffering world just by showing mercy to people and being kind. To those Jesus says, *“truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me.”* I mean, as Jesus reveals his final judgement, imagine as one of the blessed—one of the sheep- how amazed you would be by the unexpected presence of God you shared in these moments of everyday life.

Well, my fellow sheep, if you're not already amazed, prepare to be. Because in this world of suffering— and we all know what that means at this point, don't we? In this world, Jesus opens our eyes to see the times when we are near his presence. Visiting the lonely. Dropping a winter coat off at a clothing drive. Donating to the local food bank. Such things are acts of mercy **for** Christ, my friends. And what he's telling us is that he's here in the midst of these seemingly simple things with us as we serve others, and on the last day, **will** remember them. They won't move us from the goat side to the sheep side. They won't save us. But that's not the point here.

Jesus is reminding us that even in a world where it can be so difficult to see the presence of God because of all of the suffering, all of the crime, all

of the racism and the hatred. In a world where where a lack of respect and such little acceptance of Christianity is just a normal part of the system. When we see all the pain of sickness and an out-of-control pandemic—when our minds become so overwhelmed with all the negative stuff that makes us feel so powerless and hopeless. When, not only the kingdom of God, but the power of faith, feels so far away, Jesus promises that he's here in the middle of it all.

Christ died on the cross, my friends. Never act like that's not the most decisive event of your life.. He entered suffering of every kind to conquer it for you. When God raised him from the dead, he seated him at his right hand to rule over all things. And today, we are reminded that he will return to judge the living and the dead. The sheep will see that on that day, he will take away all suffering and bring about a new creation. But never think that he's deserted our world. I mean, sometimes when we speak about Christ—that he came, lived, died, and rose again—we make that history. Like it happened and it's over. No way! Christ is here and he is at work in miraculous ways that we can't comprehend or explain. And he is at work through you and me drawing us near, while filling people's lives with his unexpected presence.

So what does it look like to be one of the sheep here at Hope Lutheran Church? Well, If you had all day, I might be able to, at least, scratch the surface and tell you. We have so many people among us living the Christian life, doing their thing, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. And he is using them to make a difference in people's lives. It might not seem like the most exciting stuff in the world. It might not always be fun for the people doing it, or look all that important at the time, considering everything else that's going on in the world. But Christ is right there in the middle of it all, because it's all part of his kingdom—it's all part of him using us to fill others with the unexpected presence of God.

He's there when Connie picks up a church-member from the hospital and gets her settled back in at home. He's there when Pat, Roger, and the countless others of you bring in your weekly food donations to the church. He's there when Jill and her dedicated team of helpers load up and deliver that food to Tri-Area Ministries, so that the hungry can be fed. He's there when our Stephen Ministers lend a listening ear to those who are going through difficult times. He's there when the usher helps a first time visitor find a seat. He's there when Dr. Joe or Dr. Peter treats a patient in need for

free. He's there when work is done on mission trips, like the one that just happened on the gulf coast. He's there when Andy gives money to the alms fund and that money pays a power bill, buys gas, food, or clothes. He's even there when Paul and Rene are here polishing the Communion-ware, so that the things of the Lord will shine as they should. Our Lord is in the midst of all of us when we share our time, talents, and treasures, which keeps this congregation engaged and active in the lives of those who desperately need what only he can offer.

My friends, of course there is so much to be worried about in our nation and in our world. We all know that. But there is true hope and true peace to be found. Jesus will one day come to restore all things. That's the promise he makes to us in our gospel reading today. That's good news. And yet, while we wait, he makes another promise to us—a promise in which we can all find a little hope and peace, even in what seems like such a dark world. And it is this—*“As you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me.”*

When we feel like the stuff we do as Christians doesn't make a difference, this promise reminds us of the reality that is Christ's kingdom of life! So we care for people. Whatever it takes, we soothe their pains as best as we can. And when we do, we trust that these small acts of mercy have eternal significance in the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ.

So like we used to ask at the family service, I ask you today. What do you want to be? **A sheep!** As silly as it might sound, sing it with me.

*I Just wanna be a sheep
Babababa
I Just wanna be a sheep
Babababa
I pray the lord
My soul
To keep
I Just wanna be a sheep
Babababa.*

Through faith in the crucified and risen Lord Jesus, that's exactly what you are—a sheep! **Amen.**