

2017-11-26 *Christ the King*

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[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

Alright—so who's into the British monarchy? I see some hands, I see some hands—I will not mock you too mercilessly.

[laughter]

You know, how many people love this stuff, like you see the magazines in the... and you all kind of look at it. I think that there are two types of Americans: those who care about the British monarchy, and real Americans.

[laughter]

It's so mean oh it's getting worse, I promise. So to let you know the type of sarcastic people I follow on Twitter there was like a few years ago somebody got married over there to somebody else, do you remember this? My favorite person on Twitter said this: “oh heavens I can't wait to watch King Simon marry the fairy princess Briana, or whatever. What a magical day for all of us!” That's about how I feel about it. But listen, I'm interested in all kinds of stupid stuff that you probably think is very silly and everybody likes something different, there's nothing wrong with that. But, I think this monarchy thing is kind of weird for us because other than the tabloid magazines and you know who's on the cover of People and how many babies do they have, and which Prince is going to have the thrown, and all that stuff that we kind of follow the way some people follow sports (which is just as absurd and pointless by the way even though I love it).

Aside from that we don't really have much to help us understand what it means to be subjects of a monarchy and today is Christ the King Sunday also known as Reign of Christ Sunday and so we have to try to get our heads around what it means to worship God as a king to serve Christ as a king and we don't have any any material for that. Like our whole relationship with kings is that we kicked one to the curb that was kind of the central premise of the founding of our nation. I should know, I listened to like one fifth of the Hamilton soundtrack.

2017-11-26 *Christ the King*

[Laughter]

Just so long. I was like I don't know which is going to be worse: teasing the the monarchy people or teasing the Hamilton people. Teasing the Hamilton people is way worse, they're coming for me, you know they are. But other than that historical connection what we've got basically is stories, fairy tales, epics, you know Lord Of The Rings, Game of Thrones, you know, some of these are not particularly inspiring examples of living under a monarch are they?

So all joking aside I think we have some work to do if we as Christian people are going to think of Jesus as a king and serve God as if God were our king. Because that's one of the central ways that Jesus reveals God's nature to us in Scripture: as a king, and as it happens also as a shepherd and so today's sermon is entitled "The shepherd in the King". Before we get back to the king part, I want to talk about the shepherd part because these two images: the shepherd and the king, which seem to be so different from each other as to make kind of a nonsensical combination, how could you be a king and a shepherd? Don't kings, like, pay shepherds or enslave them or something? And again I don't know how monarchies work. It doesn't make any sense unless you are shaped by the world of Scripture in which this makes a lot of sense. Not only is Jesus revealed to us as the Good Shepherd and as the reigning king, but in the Hebrew Bible in the Old Testament we have a fantastic example in King David who is taken out of the fields where he is tending his flocks to be anointed the King of Israel.

And in our reading today, you may have noticed when David read it, the lectionary passage from Ezekiel talks a lot about God as a shepherd and there's even a portion at the end where it he says something about David being on the throne, which is a little weird because David was long since dead at the time of the book of Ezekiel's writing, so he must have been meaning something else. We Christians believe, of course that this is pointing toward Jesus. In any case it's a messianic statement, I believe. But here's what we hear God saying through the prophet Ezekiel: I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep. God says: "I will seek the lost and I will bring back the straight and I will bind up the injured and I will strengthen the weak." The picture is of a God who loves and cares for the weakest and most vulnerable members of society: those who have been pushed aside or left behind, those who've gotten lost on the mountain, those who are hungry or sick or injured. That's who God is: a loving shepherd who cares for the sheep. And I'm so grateful for this image because, oh do we need God the shepherd to care for the wounded, lost, strayed sheep today.

Saint Augustine gave a sermon on this passage of Scripture, Ezekiel 34, hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of years ago. And I can't believe what he says, how precious it is! Here's part of it. "Rain and fog, the errors of this world, the Great Darkness arising from the lusts of men. A

2017-11-26 *Christ the King*

thick fog covering the earth and it is difficult for the sheep not to go astray in this fog, but the shepherd does not desert them. He seeks them. His piercing gaze penetrates the fog. The thick darkness of the clouds does not prevent him.”

Now I'm not going to go too far down this road because doing so would be potentially very painful for many people in the room, but if you've ever thought: “Man these old dead people, these old saints of the church from, you know, over a thousand years ago have nothing to say to us in our time.” Just think about the fact that Saint Augustine wrote over fifteen hundred years ago about a Great Darkness arising from the lusts of men and then imagine the news cycle over the last two months and you think: “well, maybe he has something to say to us.” And he says it is difficult for the sheep not to go astray in this fog, in this darkness.

You may find yourself today having gone astray. You may find yourself lost in the dark. And yes sometimes, very often, that darkness, that sense of being lost, that going astray, is the result of things that we have done, missteps that we have taken, times when we thought the marked trail isn't really for me right now, I'm going to do my other thing. But I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge the fact that sometimes you end up lost and strayed and hurt and injured and in the dark because of something that somebody did to you, no fault of your own. You are not responsible for it, yet you bear the consequences of it.

You may have been harmed or pushed aside. God will come and find and restore you. You may have been injured. God will come and heal you. You may have had your portion stolen by somebody who already had plenty of their own. God will feed you and give you what you need. And, God has something in store for those, what is it that Ezekiel called them? The fat sheep who pushed with flank and shoulder and butted at all the weak animals with their horns until they scattered them far and wide. He's going to feed those sheep too. But with justice. Which I think maybe we need just a second of levity, I think sounds a little bit like a bad line from an action film: “I'll feed you too...with justice!”

But that's what it is! And I think sometimes for me and my station in life, the place that I am in, the spaces I inhabit, the way that society views me, I feel like I don't ever necessarily get to that place where I need God to do justice on my behalf. And so consequently when I read texts in the Bible, particularly Old Testament, of God, like, crushing enemies and destroying things and, like, going after people with a vengeance I feel like I worship Jesus who reveals God to me perfectly and I don't see any of that in Jesus. And I would rather just leave that other stuff aside and focus on Jesus. That song, “Jesus It's Only You” that we sang a minute ago was a prayer of mine that became a song and it's really my guiding principle in life and in faith to see everything in the scriptures through the lens of Jesus Christ, specifically Christ crucified. Because in that we

2017-11-26 *Christ the King*

have, other scriptures tell us, the the perfect image of God, the exact replica of God's very nature. And yet we should not cast aside too quickly -- especially those of us who are more we'll say fortunate or privileged in society -- because some people really need to know first and foremost before they can get to the nonviolent Jesus stuff that God is their defender and that the people who harmed them are going to be crushed. That the sheep who are fat and are, you know, butting the weaker sheep out of the way are going to be fed with justice.

Now allow me a brief diversion from the lectionary text for the following reason: I think the lectionary editors omitted some verses in this chapter which would be very helpful for us to hear. I'm not going to read them to you, but I'll tell you what they contain. So could you show us the actual passage on the screen, Keith, from Ezekiel that the lectionary assigns to us today. It's Chapter 34:11-16 and then it skips a few and goes verse 20-24. Now first of all, the first verse of Ezekiel 34 is kind of like the...it kicks things off in a way that sets everything else up, so we are missing that. Why does it start in verse eleven with with God saying: "I myself will care for the lost sheep. I myself will bind up their wounds. I myself will feed them."? Well, because the first part of Ezekiel 34 is the prophet Ezekiel speaking on behalf of the Lord against the shepherds of Israel -- those who were supposed to be caring for the weak and the lost and the strayed were derelict in their duties. And God go so far as to say: I am against the shepherds. I will do it myself. I myself will go and care for them because you've been too busy shearing them and using the wool and fattening them up and then slaughtering them and eating the meat to care for those who are in need. So God says if you won't do it I'll do it, but watch out because you might get swept up in it. So then we have this space between verse 16 and verse 20 and in that space the prophet kind of goes after the other sheep of Israel, the more fortunate sheep. The ones who are, you know, pushing with shoulder and flank and butting with their horns. And God warns them as well. So we're all on the hook for caring for the weaker sheep, the lost sheep, those who have gone astray. And none of us are doing it, from the top down. The shepherds aren't doing it, the other sheep are looking out for their siblings. And man, we've seen a lot of that too, haven't we, over the last couple of months? A lot of shepherds who should be protecting vulnerable people instead protecting the wolves. It's horrifying.

I have to get to the Gospel reading. Our Gospel reading for today on Christ the King Sunday comes from Matthew twenty-five, and if you've never heard the Ezekiel reading maybe you have heard the Matthew twenty-five reading. When I start to read it you may recognize it as the story of Jesus at the Last Judgment separating the sheep from the goats just as, just as the Lord says in Ezekiel "I'm going to separate these sheep from these sheep, we're going to separate them" now Jesus is saying "I'm going to separate the sheep from the goats". And this has been a challenging passage of Scripture for me, Matthew twenty-five, let me read it to you

2017-11-26 *Christ the King*

first and then I'll explain what the challenge is. It's a little bit long so I'm going to truncate it some what, I hope that you'll forgive me.

Jesus is speaking and says: "When the Son of Man comes in His glory and all the angels with Him then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the 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 put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left then the King will say to those at his right hand 'Come you that 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 something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me' then the righteous will answer him 'Lord when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food or thirsty and gave you something to drink and when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you or naked and gave you clothing and when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you' 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' and then he will say to those that his left hand 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink' and he goes on and repeats all of the things that the sheep did the goats did not do. Then they also will answer 'Lord when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison and did not take care of you.'" You can almost hear the defensiveness in their voices "Surely if we had seen you Lord we would have taken care of you'. And Jesus says 'Truly I tell you just as you did not do it to the one of the least of these you did not do it to me' and these will go away into eternal punishment but the righteous into eternal life".

Now That's a challenging passage for me as I said for a couple of reasons. One is the punishment aspect, it's hard for me to hear, to be honest with you. But also I'm a good Protestant kid, I was raised in an Evangelical Protestant setting and I was taught that we are saved by our faith not by our works and here's Jesus seeming to say that salvation or damnation are dependent on your willingness to care for the least of these. That sounds to me like a, like a "do" like a work not like a belief, not like a faith. Now in a slightly more mature space I have come to understand the inextricability of faith and works, that's the place I'm in now. But this passage has always, was always a challenge for me to to grasp given that I had been taught so often and regularly that you're saved by faith not by works "don't believe like those Catholics do" right?

[laughter]

And the same goes for, you know, Jesus is supposed to be the one that takes the mean Old Testament God and sort of sands off the rough edges and gives us something all charitable and loving and nonviolent as I said. And I think to an extent that is true, there is an extent to which Jesus reveals God's truest nature to us in a way that eclipses and supersedes everything that came before, this is what Hebrews 1 says: That in the latter days the Lord spoken to us through the prophets but now through a Son, that's a paraphrase. But here's Jesus essentially saying the same thing that Ezekiel said and maybe even taking it a step further and saying: Not only is it the people who have done the harm who are about to get it but the people who could have stood up for those and help those who had been harmed and chose not to are in the same boat. And they're in trouble too. Well maybe the answer to this conundrum that I have is that I'm not very good at being a subject of a king. Maybe what it is is that I would rather have my faith be like a representative democracy where the ruler, if I don't like him or her or let's say him, there's a clock ticking to when I can vote against that person and hopefully get rid of them, right? You could find certain websites that even count down to the second.

[laughter]

Right. That's what I want the world to be like. I want however small my say may be, I want to have a piece in deciding who rules over me and. That's not the way king's work and the way monarchy operates. You get the king that you get and you serve the king whatever the king wants, that's how it goes. So maybe what it is is I need to be a little more humble, maybe I need to sort of subjugate my own preferences and will. Rather than that to instead focus on the will of God and maybe I just need to kind of get over my challenges. And I think that might be part of what faith is. But also let me give you a little bit of context around this particular text Matthew twenty-five which is helpful to me and maybe if you have the same kind of challenges with this text it would be helpful to you. Remember Jesus is speaking to His disciples who are all of what religion? They're all Jewish, right. They're all good, observant Jews in first century Palestine essentially. And who's in charge in those days? The Romans. Are the Romans Jews? No, they're Gentiles, they are pagans, they are the oppressors. And so when Jesus says to these disciples when the Son of Man, which by the way is at the time an accepted phrase borrowed from Daniel to represent the Messiah right, He was referring to himself as the Messiah. When the Son of Man comes in His glory and all the angels with Him then He will sit on the throne of His glory all the nations all the nations will be gathered before him and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And the people are loving it. Because when the Son of Man comes in His glory he's going to separate the people according to the nations that are before him, do you—can you guess what they're hoping that means? All

2017-11-26 *Christ the King*

of the Jews, all the Israelites are going to go over here because they're the sheep all the Romans the Gentiles are going to be over here because they're the goats and I can't wait what's Jesus going to say he's going to do those goats who have been oppressing us for a generation and then Jesus switches the script on them, because that is what Jesus does, and he says the Son of Man will say to the sheep and they're all thinking "Yes what are you going to say to us good observant Jews Jesus" [laughter]. He says all this stuff about helping the poor, helping the less fortunate and the like. Well, yeah that's important but what are you even talking about when we can see that and then he explains to them: You have to do this to everybody, you have to treat everybody this way and if you don't it's like you didn't treat me this way and guess what the people who are the goats, the ones who are actually being separated out into punishment, it's not because they're Gentiles, it's not because they're from the wrong nation or family group or tribe— the words are all interchangeable in the original language— it's because they haven't done what is right, they haven't walked in the way of the Lord who you claim to follow. And that kind of distinction knows no nationalistic boundary. It doesn't matter what family you're from or not, it's about the character and the quality of your heart.

So they wanted one type of separation and they expected one type of separation and he had an entirely different separation in mind based on who had lived out the calling that he himself places on all of us and the calling persists to this day: To live at peace with one another, to resist the temptation, to throw our weight around, to bind up the brokenhearted as one of the other prophets will say to us as we get further into Advent starting next week. That's the separation and that's the judgment. And that helps me with Matthew twenty-five a little bit because of the way that Christ reigns in power and the way that Christ kneads out judgment is based on our willingness to follow him and walk in his way which is itself an act of faith, yes. That's a little bit easier for me to accept than the kind of on the face of it reading, of what I see when I read Matthew twenty-five. But just because it's a little easier to accept does not mean that it is easier to implement and actually might be a whole lot harder to carry out. It's easier to get in by virtue of your family group, whether that's first century Jews or twenty-first century Evangelical Christians. It's easier just to check off the boxes, to show your membership card and walk through the pearly gates and doesn't seem to be the way Jesus wants to carry out. So let's pray together and ask God to help us with this difficult teaching with this difficult, heavy calling.

Gracious God who is revealed to us in Scripture as the Good Shepherd as a reigning King we pray for your help today. We pray for your help to understand what it means to be subjects of a king. We pray you would remove from us our constant need to be in charge to be independent, to control our own destiny, to live the way we want to. And instead replace it with the tenderness of your own heart for all of the lost and hurt and strange sheep. Help us to see when we are among their number, when we think we are part of the group but have actually

2017-11-26 *Christ the King*

walked off into the wilderness bring us back we pray. And give us courage and strength to bind up the brokenhearted to heal the wounds of those we encounter in society. And to do it with cheer and courage and steadfast hope that is one step on the road to a fully restored heaven and Earth, which is our hope at advent and always. We pray these things in the name of Christ our good shepherd and our reigning king. Amen.

Well our table will be open now. We're going to sing a couple more songs together. Our communion table is an open table which means that you don't have to be a member of our Church to participate in the sacrament. If you are a servant of Christ the King this sacrament is for you and you can come and receive the bread and dip it in the cup, we have wine and juice. Remember Christ's broken body, his shed blood. Receive it as not only that act of remembrance but as spiritual food for your hungry souls. And may it be for you an act of unity with each other and with all Christians around the world and throughout time who have observed this sacrament. We will also have a member of our prayer team at the back of the room who would be happy to pray with you if you prefer not to take communion right now you're still, that's still available to you if you wish. Your kids are ready for you to go and get them and they can take communion with you as well. Let's continue to worship God in sacraments, in prayer and in song.

[end of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information visit us at ArtisanChurch.com