

What if God Was One of Us?

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on November 21, 2021

Friendship Presbyterian Church

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 and 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."

Then he will say to those at 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, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me." 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?" Then he will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to 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. (Matthew 25:31-46, NRSV)

The story of the Bible is truly the "greatest story ever told." It begins with the poetry of God's majesty in creation and of the planting of a garden. The intimacy between God, human beings, and the rest of nature is deeper than we can possibly imagine. And then that intimacy is broken through sin, and human beings are exiled from that Garden.

The whole sweep of the Bible is the story of how that original exile is overcome. God calls a people, Israel, to prepare them to be that nation through whom salvation comes to the whole world. They often falter and resist, but God is patient and longsuffering, protecting and guarding them, loving them despite their rebellion, pleading with them through prophets, singing to them through poets. And at last, this divine determination to love to the end culminates in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, whom God sends to reconcile all in heaven and earth to himself.

The final books of the New Testament reflect those days in which the early followers of Jesus struggled to live faithfully in the face of hostility and persecution, but were strengthened every day in the power of the Spirit. And one of those faithful followers penned the words of

Revelation and so concluded the greatest story ever told with a vision in which the Lamb which had been slaughtered is declared King of Kings and Lord of Lords ... a vision in which the New Jerusalem comes down out of heaven from God, "prepared as a bride adorned for her husband" ... the Garden of the Tree of Life is restored ... and together there with all the saints, the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb will reign forever and ever.

When we're looking at things from this sweeping point of view, it makes sense that our liturgical year – which ends today – ends with "Christ the King" Sunday. Next Sunday, we will be starting all over, with Advent, with the promise and expectation of the *birth* of Christ. That will be an adventure of its own, but let's not jump over into the "new year" just yet! This Sunday we conclude this liturgical year with that triumphant message at the end of the Bible – that Jesus is indeed *Lord*.

And what a passage we have before us today! It's called the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, and is a vision of the Day of Judgment, when Christ returns as King at the End of Time. This parable is the last in a section of *four* such stories told by Jesus, as he teaches his disciples – then and now – how we are to live as we wait for the coming of the Kingdom. All four center on the return of a master or a bridegroom or a king, the judgments that come with that return, and how those who await his return are to spend their time.

But this story does more than just conclude a chapter and a half of text. It could be said that the whole Gospel of Matthew has been moving toward and preparing for this dramatic scene. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus is the great teacher, and *this* parable is his last formal act of teaching, the final point, the parting lesson. You could imagine that he wants to make it count!

It's a grand scene of victory. The Jesus who had nowhere to lay his head (Matthew 8:20) is now seated on the royal throne ... the one rejected even by his hometown is now revealed as the Judge of the whole human family. And before him are all the nations of the world, gathered for the final judgment.

And like a shepherd in that time would sometimes divide the larger flock, separating the sheep from the less valuable goats, so the Son of Man divides the people into the "sheep" on the right and the "goats" on the left.

And then the judgment comes. To those sheep on the right, the King pronounces the blessing of ultimate homecoming: "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." They are the true heirs, for they *served* the King, the Son of Man ... they fed him, they gave him drink, they welcomed him, they clothed him, they took care of him when he was sick, they visited him when he was in prison.

But to those on the left, the King pronounces the judgment, for they did *not* serve him ... they did not feed him when he was hungry, or give him drink when he was thirsty, or welcome him when he was a stranger, or clothe him when he was naked, or take care of him when he was sick, or visit him when he was in prison.

If this were all there is to this parable – that those who do good will be rewarded and that those who don't will be punished – then it would be a fairly conventional morality tale. But as we've seen so many times, that's not how Jesus rolls. He always seems to have a surprise up his sleeve.

The twist here on the conventional morality tale is that neither the sheep nor the goats have any idea whatsoever that in their actions (or inactions) towards those in need, they were engaged the whole time with the King himself!

“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?”
(Matthew 25:37-39, NRSV)

Even the *sheep* didn't know, didn't recognize *who* they were serving in serving “the least of these.” Why? Because we don't expect to find Kings among the poor, among the hungry and thirsty, among the lost and the naked, among the sick or those languishing in prison. Kings are above all these things. Kings are about *glory* and *might* and *getting what you want*. Everyone knows that.

And so, we assume we know exactly what *real* power is, and so where to look for Christ the King, and in this, we are one with both the sheep *and* the goats of this parable. Everyone, sheep or goat alike, is looking for the same thing because everyone knows what a Messianic King should look like.

Do you remember the scene at Jesus' crucifixion? His cross stood between those of two others. You may remember that one of them joins the mocking crowd and challenges Jesus to save himself – and them – if he *really* is the Messiah. There *is* only one way to prove it. But then there's the second criminal. He breaks the mold. He knows that neither he nor his companion in crime have any claim to being saved from death now, even if this Jesus *does* have the power to come down from a cross. He knows that *that's* not going to happen.

And yet he sees something else. He knows in his spirit that Jesus has done nothing wrong, but he sees more than just innocence ... he hears Jesus *forgiving* his murderers! He sees the love in Jesus' eyes, and a strength and a faith which soars over his comprehension.

He begins to see that *this* man's power is not power as we have always known it. It is not the strength of coercive force or threatened violence, but a strength of a higher and deeper order ... the key which unlocks the door to true life and the meaning of it all. He sees that the man hanging next to him, his body broken, has identified himself, in love, with all humanity in its brokenness. He sees that the man hanging next to him is the King of Kings.

You know there was a popular song twenty-five years ago or so that I thought of this past week. It was by an artist named Joan Osborne, and it was called "What if God Was One of Us?":

*If God had a name what would it be?
And would you call it to his face?
If you were faced with Him in all His glory
What would you ask if you had just one question?*

*What if God was one of us?
Just a slob like one of us
Just a stranger on the bus
Tryin' to make his way home?*

Naturally, there were some at the time who misunderstood it, but the point is as biblical, as *true*, as anything there is: What if the living God is nowhere to be found in those fortresses of human power and glory, but rather *chooses* to be found by us in the faces of the broken, the poor, the lost, and the all-too-human? Incognito in the midst of this messy world! And what if we as a church ever seek to re-vision our mission and ministry around this simple, incarnational truth?

George MacLeod, the founder of the Iona Community in Scotland put it best:

"I simply argue that the cross be raised again at the center of the marketplace, as well as on the steeple of the church. I am recovering the claim that Jesus was not crucified in a cathedral between two candles, but on a high cross between two thieves: on the town garbage heap; at a crossroad so cosmopolitan that they had to write His title in Hebrew, in Latin and in Greek ... At the kind of place where cynics talk smut, and thieves curse, and soldiers gamble. Because that's where He died. And that is what He died about. And that is where church[people] ought to be and what church[people] should be about."

May this path be our path into a new year - to the glory of God! Amen.