

Reflections on the scriptures for Christ the King Sunday

November 26, 2023

Baltic and East Nidaros Lutheran Parish

I hope each of you had a wonderful Thanksgiving. Our family had a wonderful time together relaxing on Thanksgiving and enjoying great food. As we say in the words before we receive the Lord's Supper, "It is good for us to give thanks and praise."

Adding the specialness of this week, I stepped down from the pulpits of our parish so that I could attend my grandson's First Communion Service at Willow Creek Lutheran Church which also happened to be Pastor Tom Stadem's last Sunday as their pastor. He has now accepted a call at First Lutheran in Sioux Falls serving primarily in a Youth and Family position. Pastor Tom and I attended seminary together and his wife and Kim and I have enjoyed singing together for several events (including his final worship). One of the most memorable events we shared was going to Norway together in the summer of 2016. Blessings to Pastor Tom on his new call.

The Rev. Renee Splichal Larson who is the assistant to the bishop for the South Dakota ELCA led worship and preached for me in my absence. Her sermon was clear as she preached clearly from the scriptures and our Lutheran tradition.

Christ the King Sunday is celebrated as the last Sunday of the Church year. It also is a day in the church when we remember that Christ our King will come again to judge between the sheep and the goats. The sheep will be gathered on the right hand of the Father and the goats will go away to eternal punishment. This is where the preaching of this text can go terribly wrong. Those listening can be left in uncertainty wondering if they are sheep and be gathered to the Father or goats that will be cast away from the presence of the Father. What makes this uncertainty even greater is the understanding that sheep become sheep by what they have done in this life on earth. The scripture even says that they are the ones who fed the hungry, clothed the naked, cared for the sick, visited the imprisoned and the goats failed to do these things. But Jesus is not done talking about the sheep after he describes what they had done. Jesus continues by telling how the righteous, the sheep, responded to what Jesus said they had done. The righteous have NO recollection of doing ANYTHING at all.

Jesus adds this necessary response of the sheep to point out that sheep do not become sheep by their works and deeds. They become sheep by hearing the voice of the shepherd who claims them as their own. Jesus calls us sheep, not because sheep are particularly smart. Sheep are not good at leading. Sheep are good at following. And God's sheep follow what his Son came into the world to do. They will not go and do good things on their own or for their benefit. Instead, they hear the voice of the shepherd, and they will follow what he would do. They begin as sheep and do what the shepherd tells them to do. They do not become sheep by doing what they hope will please the shepherd.

I would encourage you to read the first lesson from Ezekiel. Notice who is the subject of every good deed throughout this passage. It is clear who is the shepherd and who is the sheep. Every good work is done by the Shepherd who seeks, rescues, brings, waters, feeds, judges, and protects. You can hear the words of the 23rd Psalm in this passage. When you know this, you will not worry about if you have done good deeds or even remember if you have done them, you will simply do what the shepherd would have you do.

Each of you has already been named as sheep of the Lord's pasture. You already have been given the blessing that you will sit on the right hand of God. You already know this because the work of your salvation has been done for you in Christ's death and resurrection. You are sheep and will one day hear the blessed words of your heavenly Father, "Come inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."