**Matthew 25:31-46 November 22, 2020**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text for this morning comes from our Gospel lesson, Matthew 25 here re-reading these words. “Jesus said, When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.” This is our text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Game over. In many ways the final picture of the Church Year is the culmination of all things, the final judgment day where Christ returns and judges the nations. This is the final buzzer moment. No added time. No over time. Nothing else remains of this world in that instant. This is it. The sheep go to the right, the goats go to the left. It’s over. The nations are gathered as we just heard and the separation happens, there isn’t anything that anyone can do once the Son of Man comes in his glory. Everyone will see the truth, and it will be too late for any sort of changing or turning. This is the final picture of a series of themes for the last few weeks of the Church Year. Bridegroom comes, light your lamps, there won’t be any time to go and get more oil. Master returns, show your talents, there won’t be time to grow what the master gave you once he is standing right in front of you. Son of Man returns, judgment happens, sheep go right, goats go left. No excuses, no special circumstances, no appeals process, or a number you can call if you think you’ve ended up in the wrong group, no paperwork to be filed if you want to raise a complaint, just a final judgment and sorting. This is it. Game over.

For the sheep the judge compliments and praises them, he welcomes them to the “kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world.” Here we see the culmination of the prophesy of Ezekiel in our Old Testament lesson, who said “Behold the Lord God says, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered.” This is a momentous and happy day for the sheep, they are finally back in the presence of the shepherd, and will remain with him for all eternity. The separation from the world and from the goats, is a blessing, no longer does the perfect animal have to be mixed with the imperfect. The lost animal no longer is scattered and wandering but is finally found. Christ’s coming is a happy moment, the sheep wanted the game to end, they were happy to be rid of the world and to finally be with their leader, and the one who takes care of them, they can’t wait to get into the kingdom that has been prepared for them.

For the goats the judge sends them away, these cursed and imperfect ones, he sends them as far from the kingdom as he possibly can, they enter into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. These are the ones that Ezekiel describes saying “The fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice…..Because you push with side and shoulder, and thrust at all the weak with your horns, till you have scattered them abroad.” This is a terrible and sad day for the goats, they are going to experience separation from the Son of Man for all eternity, they are going to be punished for the sin that they have committed. The separation is their greatest curse because they have never known what it is like to be 100% separated from God until now. Christ’s coming is a shock, and suddenly in an instant it is revealed that everything that was said about Jesus Christ in the Scriptures and others, every inclination they had about God from nature and from their own consciences was true, and they are afraid. They wanted the game to continue, they didn’t want this world to come to an end, and now they enter into the fire that wasn’t prepared for them, but for the devil and his angels.

Two very different experiences in the same final scene. So for you sheep out there, look with joy and anticipation to the skies, wait for the Lord in eager expectation. For you goats, enjoy this world while you can, because Jesus is coming and you will get yours. Can you imagine if it was that simplistic? If that was the only message you heard throughout your life and if you were just labeled a sheep or a goat from the moment you were born? Some churches may have that false understanding and may teach a false teaching of some sort of double predestination where once a sheep always a sheep, or once a goat always a goat. But what does Jesus say is the great thing that the sheep did, and the terrible thing that the goats failed to do? What is the test to see if you are one who will be at Jesus’ right as a beloved sheep or at his left as a cursed goat?

Jesus says that the sheep were the ones who served the Lord in various ways. “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.” He praises the sheep for what they did, and curses the goats for what they didn’t do. “For I was hungry and you gave me **no** food….” And it goes on and on. In every way that the sheep served the Lord the goats failed to. This isn’t some born identity as God’s child or God’s enemy, we’re talking about what these people actually did. Does this mean that the sheep are the perfect individuals who serve the Lord in a perfect way and never sin, and the goats are those who never do anything good and never serve the Lord in any way? Yes, but not in the way that you may think.

With that criteria we are all goats. The sheep perfectly serve the Lord, giving food, water, and care in all circumstances, and the Son of Man never brings up anything they have done wrong. That’s not us. No matter how hard we try. If the standard for being saved is perfection, which we have studied through the Church Year and we know to be true, then none of us are sheep. Matthew 5:48, the very words of Jesus “You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Or even further back then that, as God says to the people of Israel in Leviticus 19:2 “Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them, You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.” And since we are the ones who aren’t perfect, we must be goats, headed for destruction, headed for the fires of hell reserved for the devil and his demons. We have to do better! We have to be perfect. We have to start getting out there and feeding, clothing, giving water to drink, visiting people in prison. We don’t want to go to hell so we have to get busy, it’s the only way to be saved!

But we’d never do enough, and perfection isn’t a standard we ourselves can meet. That’s the biggest teaching lesson from this particular Gospel lesson of Jesus Christ, that fits into the former two lessons of the foolish and wise virgins, and the parable of the talents. It’s not that we earn our place in the kingdom by what we do, it’s not that we have to make ourselves perfect and therefore hit the standard of salvation. The sheep are praised for what they’ve done, with no mention of anything they’ve done wrong, not because they were perfect, but because the perfection of Jesus Christ has been given to them. They are clothed in Jesus Christ, they are covered in the blood of the perfect lamb of God and made sheep of the true Shepherd. So in the eyes of God the Father they are perfect, their sin has been paid for and destroyed. Death has no claim to them because the Son of Man has destroyed death, it’s gone and defeated. As Paul writes in our Epistle lesson “The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For God has put all things in subjection under his feet.”

The sheep are saved by the work of Jesus Christ in their hearts, in their lives, and on their behalf. Judgment Day, can be filled with exciting and strange and fascinating subjects and themes and imagery and illustrations which draw our attention, but the reality is, it’s still all about Jesus, it’s not about praising the work of the perfect ones of Earth and how they perfectly served the Lord in giving to the poor, the hungry, the thirsty, etc. Judgment Day is still all about Jesus, the one who has taken away their sin, so that all that is seen by God our heavenly Father is the good works that have been accomplished in faith by the working of the Holy Spirit through us.

The goats on the other hand are those who have no good things attributed to them, we would think that the goats are those who are truly evil, the really really bad people, but that’s not true. The goats are simply those who believe that they can do it on their own, and the reality is, that no matter how nice of a thing it may seem that the unbeliever does, in the eyes of God those works are not attributed to their salvation. The unbeliever, the goats of the world so to speak, can’t earn it on their own any more than we can, and what the Son of Man describes in his words to them on Judgment Day is the reality of life outside of God. Only the bad is emphasized because there is no good in them, they have failed in every way, only sin remains and sin has tainted and corrupted everything about them. They aren’t perfect and clean animals they are sinful and unclean, they have remained in the dirt, and the grime, and the mud of sin that is all that the Son of Man sees. The Son of Man can’t find evidence of their works of faith because no faith exists, which is why he only points out the things that they haven’t done. There are no good works because good works can only be done by the faithful, so the goats have chosen to be separated from God, and go to the place of eternal separation with the devil and his demons. It is a sad picture of the judgment of God for the goats who foolishly thought that they could do it themselves, but it is an important one to see in our lives because it is the oldest temptation of Satan. To think that we can do what God has done, that we can be like God, that we can share in God’s power, that we could in anyway be equals or even superior to the almighty God. It is poisonous to our souls, to our hearts, and to our salvation.

But it is not our future, not on account of what we’ve done, but because of the love of Jesus Christ, the same Son of Man who will return, the one who loves the entire world and dies to save them from their sin. The final words of the Gospel lesson are a summary of the whole section “And these (meaning the goats) will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” And what will that eternal life consist of? It’s summarized perfectly in our closing hymn. 2020 has been a year of extraordinary challenges. What we’ve attempted to do in this service is take a trip through the different seasons of the Church Year to touch on different hymns. We will end our service with just a small picture, with the smallest experience of the highest point of the Church Year which we weren’t able to all be together to observe this year, as we sing the Easter Hymn, “Now All the Vault of Heaven Resounds.” So when you think of judgment day, this final moment when the Son of Man returns, don’t think of it in terror or fear, remember that you are clothed with Christ, that you are made perfect through the Son of Man who died for you, and as we sing these words to end our service this morning, remember what waits for you, when the shepherd comes to take you home. “Adoring praises now we bring, And with the heavenly blessed sing, Christ has triumphed! Alleluia! Be to the Father and our Lord, to Spirit blest, most holy God, All the glory, never ending, Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia!”

Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all human understanding keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.