



## Sermons from

### **“An Unlikely King”**

The Rev. Dr. Fairfax F. Fair  
November 20, 2011  
Christ the King Sunday

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24

Today is filled with unfamiliar. Our bulletin proclaims Christ “King.” Our scripture is an apocalyptic drama. People are described as sheep and goats, and we hear talk of the devil and angels. By stepping into this familiar sanctuary this morning, what strange world have we entered?

Today is the last Sunday of the liturgical year, a time when we appropriately point to the end times, to the coming reign of God, when all other forces and dominions will be vanquished and Christ will be acknowledged as sovereign over all. The classical terminology for this is Christ’s kingship. We are taught by the Seventeenth Century Westminster divines that Jesus Christ fulfills the offices of prophet, priest, and king, words we do not use much anymore, but terms which describe different facets of Christ’s life and work. Today we celebrate Christ’s reign and imagine the dramatic Day of Judgment when the actions and inactions of our lives will be reviewed and we will be held accountable.

A recent *New Yorker* cover (“The Book of Life,” 10-17-11, Barry Blitt) pictures Steve Jobs standing at the pearly gates while Saint Peter looks up his name on an iPad. It’s a great piece, pointing up the ubiquity of all things Apple. But does scripture teach us that God is a great scorekeeper in the sky, a celestial tabulator of capital S and lower case sins? Does God really care if we ran a yellow light yesterday on Stadium or told a telemarketer that we were the babysitter rather than the homeowner? What can we know about the unknown? What can we know about when the Son of God will come in all his glory?

If we start with unknowns, we begin by stating clearly that we cannot know when the end of time will occur, no matter what the latest prognostication is. For centuries, people have prophesied that the end of the world would come on a certain, predicted day. A man from Nashville, Tennessee was the leading theorist the summer of 1988 when I was a few weeks into in my first call in nearby Franklin, Tennessee. The local newspaper called me to speak for the Presbyterian Church (USA). What was our position on when the world would end?

The truth is, no human being can know – or prophesy – when the eschaton will be upon us. As Jesus himself says, “About that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (Mt. 24:36). The codes contained in The Revelation to John – symbolism and numerology – do not correlate with current political states and events but were written to encourage Christians who were being persecuted by the Roman Emperor Domitian. Christians who refused to address Domitian as Lord and God were being martyred

and John hoped – by giving them a future vision – to inspire them to remain steadfast in their faith.

We do know in faith that the One who will sit in judgment over us is the One who has showed us how to live, the One who humbled himself and lived among us and who loves us so much that he gave his life for us. Yes, our judge is our savior, one and the same, One who does not promise us fairness but justice and forgiveness.

This morning's apocalyptic story, this vision of a future time, pictures Jesus as the undisputed king, seated on the throne of grace. All lesser gods are gone, their ultimate powerlessness exposed. Before Christ is all humankind, a gathering which dwarfs a crowded Tiananmen Square. Jesus is no ordinary king, resting on his laurels, above the fray. His sensitivity is that of a shepherd, one who is intimately familiar with his flock and their idiosyncrasies; despite their number, one who knows them well. His test for them is not a theological exposition. He does not ask them questions about their faith. He calls for no beliefs to be affirmed. Instead, the people are divided into two groups – sheep and goats – based on how they have treated those around them in this life. Ethics are the key to inclusion.

Civil libertarians have raised concerns about cameras that record Americans' actions in public places. In some states, motorists who run red lights may find a ticket in their mailboxes. Certain places require that signs be posted before such traffic cameras can be used. That way, everyone is aware of them; everyone is forewarned. Why are cameras and the threat of punishment necessary for us to be motivated to do the right thing?

Benton is a young man, unlike – in many ways -- his tall, athletic brother. Benton is not top in his class or popular; he has not been voted most likely to succeed. But Benton is special in his own way, and his brother, Jeremy, is noteworthy because of the dignity he affords his mentally-challenged younger sibling. Jeremy gets it. All of us are creatures of God. All of us deserve love and respect, no matter who is watching. Christ, our king, knows what is in our hearts. Because we all are brothers and sisters in Christ, beloved children of God, Jesus is in those around us. Can we see him?

Jesus invites, "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."

And those who are addressed stand still in shocked silence. When have they served the Mighty King? When have they met his needs or showed him kindness? They have only lived their lives, showing love in the course of their daily routines. They have reached out, family to family, at Christmas, so that a neighbor can have food on the table and presents under a tree; they have paid a weekly visit to an elderly family friend, sometimes changing a light bulb or shoveling a walk. They have taken the time to talk with a man at a street corner, one who has all his worldly possessions with him in a shopping cart and who needs a shower and a shave. But when was it, Lord, that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you?

There are others – those depicted as goats in this drama. They are the ones who live by the maxim, “Everything is legal until you get caught.” For them, it matters not what is done as long as you get away with it. They are deferential to those whose favor they want to win. They are quick to serve those who hold an advantage, those thought able to benefit them in some way. These are the people who flatter the high and mighty. These are those who are obsequious to some while treating others like dirt. “When was it that we saw you in need, Lord, and did not take care of you?” We would have bent over backwards had you identified yourself. But therein lies the point. Those depicted as goats act not out of love but to further their own self interest.

This apocalyptic tale calls us to evaluate our own actions and inactions. Do we consistently respond to those around us -- all those around us -- in love, treating them as we like to be treated? Or does it depend on who they are and on who is watching us? Do we put cans of store-brand cranberry jelly in food bins for the needy and Ocean Spray in our own carts? Do we ever donate a box of cake mix and a package of birthday cake candles, or do we make imperious decisions about what the poor need? Do we sit back while deep cuts are made to social service budgets and never consider cutting back our planned vacations or other luxuries?

What are we willing to do for someone we know? Why are we not willing to do the same for a person who is homeless? Are we not all children of God, created by God’s hand, loved by God without distinction?

At some point in our lives, all of us are dependent upon others for care. Paid or unpaid, some people care for us because it is a job. Others care for us with love. The difference is unmistakable. It is as obvious as sorting sheep from goats.

Bill Robinson is the President Emeritus of Whitworth College, a Presbyterian school in Spokane, Washington. He says that one of his most important life lessons was learned long ago in prison. The chaplain at the state penitentiary in Stillwater, Minnesota cautioned him, “Don’t forget, Bill. If Matthew 25 ... is right, you didn’t come to bring Jesus to these guys; you came to find him” (quoted from *Whitworth Today*, Summer 2001: 15 in [The Churchbook, Matthew 13-28](#) by Frederick Dale Bruner:575).

Friends, on this Christ the King Sunday – when we anticipate the consummation of God’s reign – we acknowledge our unlikely king: the One who notices our adoration in the simple acts of kindness we do for love, not for credit; the One who sees us bow before him when we serve our fellow human beings, not passing judgment but passing on the grace God shows us. Our unlikely King is humble and lowly in heart. We cannot hope to be more.

To God be all glory, honor, and praise, world without end. Alleluia! Amen.

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