

November 26, 2023

Pr. Steve

Texts: Ezekiel 34: 11-16; Ephesians 1: 15-23; Matthew 25: 31-46

...encouragement throughout history in the Scriptures. What do we learn again and again of God's involvement and compassion—rescuing through redemption and liberation—enlightening, encouraging, delighting. Open your ears, people! God is at work, just saying it (?), trying to seize our whole beings, and raise us up to new life. What a contrast—a Paradox between this 'I dunno', and people whose lives are shaped—shaped in mercy and a sense of responsibility to life. What a contrast!

Second Paradox—the grandeur of God. We hear it in that Ephesians text today [1: 15-23] Beyond all-knowing, incomprehensible. The fullness of God, residing in the Christ, raising us from the dead—our inheritance.

When St. Paul and John write in the Scriptures about who Christ is they're only scratching the surface—barely the surface. It's been said that Christianity is in its infancy. We're just beginning.

However, the images that have permeated the church for generations are usually those of the King of kings sitting on that celestial throne while you, the people, are groveling underneath. *'You nobody's. Why do you embarrass God with your terrible behaviors? Aren't you humiliated enough yet? Just obey and ask no questions. That's the God I want'.*

You can't even get a cheerleading squad out for a God like that, right? We run—we cower in the dark. Who wants that kind of God? I don't. Should we take a vote? That's the paradox. How did we get there—with this all-merciful One who subjects the people to obedience? *'That's As Good As It Gets.'* I can tell by your silence you know what I'm talking about—and we still feel bad questioning that, don't we? *'Can God really be merciful, and wants me to come to life, and to live in joy?'* I don't know. You think we can?

The 'Messiah' was sung here last Sunday. It, too, embodies the paradox of this grandeur. All of the soloists (including Elizabeth) were on—the musicians, the director, and the mass choir were engaged, they were excited, they were committed. It was profound. That choir was composed of people of all kinds of different faiths and no faith—and it transcended all of the divisions we invest our lives in. They just disappear.

Now this does not always happen. Just because you sing Messiah doesn't mean an evening of transcendence. Sometimes it's just a nice historical review because we like old things, don't we? No, no the intention is that touching and changing of the hearts, melting into wholeness, just...ahhh!

Near the heart of the evening's performance, the mezzo sings over and over and over and over and over and over and over, *"He was de-spis-ed, rejected. A man of sorrows, shamed and spat*

*upon.*” I don't know any other religion who speaks about its God in that fashion—*De-spis-ed, rejected, filled with sorrows, shamed and spat upon.*

And a few moments later we sing the Hallelujah Chorus! We can't know Christ the King, except through Christ the Vulnerable. There is no other way.

The third Paradox is our text for today—this famous passage from Matthew 25—the judge sitting on the throne judging the nations. (Take note of that. It doesn't say individuals, which means some of you may get a break.) *‘Judging the nations, separating the sheep from the goats.’* And what's the criteria—*‘What did you do for the hungry, the ill, the imprisoned, and those who don't matter?’*

And when, when will this happen?

It's happening now, right now. The judging, assessing is going on now. I think it's the tenor who sings. *“Why do the nations rage?”* Right? We know about raging nations these days, don't we? Has anybody missed that in the news yet? It's raging. And why don't we live in accord with the peace, and the justice, and the healing that God desires?

And who will be the judge? The one who, shortly after he was born, has to flee with his family as refugees to Egypt, the one who is houseless and homeless for a lifetime, the one who was condemned as a common criminal to imprisonment, and torture, and death. That's the one who shall be our judge. Do you think he has a bias? The one who says, *‘Forgive them all’* from the cross, the one who embodies the mercy which knows no end.

Interesting, there's no talk in this text of streets paved with gold, and pearly gates, and an exalted hierarchy of saints. No, just the question, *‘Did you live by that merciful love with outcasts and the betrayed?’* For Christ the Vulnerable is trying to survive in Gaza right now. Christ the Vulnerable is in the Palestinians and the Jews who are slaughtering each other—in their deaths and their abuse of the children.

You see, this is our God, with us now, crying out for mercy. Jesus said, *‘By water and the Spirit—that's how we come into the presence of God, that's how we become the new humanity and the new creation, through water and the Spirit.’*

Can God do more than merely rescue us from our enemies? Can God transform our hearts, so that we can transform our enemies into brothers and sisters? *Ruach*, that spirit of God, is hovering over us, breathing in us, inviting us to live by that merciful love—with God, and others, and outcasts, and our enemies—though it makes us terribly vulnerable

Amen.

The peace which surpasses all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

