

When He Shall Reign
Ezekiel 34:11-24
Matthew 25:31-46

“I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.”

Come, ye thankful people, come, raise the song of harvest home. All is safely gathered in, ere the winter storms begin. God our Maker doth provide.... The church doctrine that is foundational to the grace we will say on this Thursday next is the doctrine of God’s providence, God’s providing. Looking back together in gratitude, most of us will remember how it is that we have been upheld, directed, sustained and governed by God’s providence.

Yet I doubt there will be a table set that has managed to escape tribulation or a family that does not know the provisional nature of God’s providence. We are given this mortal life within limits, and so our prayers will remember, as well, our grief before an empty chair, a blank stare, an unspoken estrangement, an impending death that God’s providence cannot alter. Looking forward to the gift of eternal life, therefore, we will conjugate the same providential verbs in the future tense, beseeching the God who will seek, bring back, bind up, strengthen and feed with justice those whose names are written on our hearts when he shall reign. *Even so, Lord, quickly come, to thy final harvest home. Gather thou thy people in, free from sorrow, free from sin.*

The story before us this morning lives on the cusp of our astonished gratitude and our empty-handed beseeching. It is the story of the Last Judgment; but it is also a story whose premise has everything to do with the near-at-hand means of God’s providence until he shall reign. Like the parable of the foolish virgins and the parable of the talents, Jesus’ story of the judging of the nations is a story told to the disciples on the Mount of Olives: it is a story told to the church. With this audience in mind, Matthew could be certain that the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger and the prisoner in question would immediately be identified as followers of Jesus. The

witness the early church began bearing to Jesus after his crucifixion and resurrection found Christians as vulnerable as their Lord, with no place to lay their heads save the city streets, the dusty and dangerous highways, the cells reserved for those who threatened the reigning social order, the mouths of lions. In the story, Christians are the recipients of God's providing.

Therefore the judgment rendered by the Son of Man is not a judgment upon would-be followers of Jesus, but upon "the nations", which is to say the Gentiles, the pagans, those who—when reckoned from a human point of view—know not the Lord Jesus. To the astonishment of the church in every age, among the nations are some unsuspecting characters who will be ushered, by the Son of Man, into everlasting life: into God's life. What we know of them is they knew Him but did not know they knew Him. Seeing only the other in all vulnerability and need, they provided, they emptied themselves, they were available for God's purposes. They loved as they anonymously had been loved by Him. "After one has settled the credentials of believing," wrote Christian ethicist Paul Lehmann, "one always sooner or later is bound to encounter another human being who had never been baptized and appears to be totally unaware of, or indifferent to, the koinonia, yet who behaves like the Lord's anointed. This may be one of God's happy private arrangements in order to keep baptism from becoming an advertising campaign."

The obliviousness of the sheep to the ethical import of their self-giving provides the first clue for Jesus' judgment: that it was he whom they loved and succored. Not their goodness but the other's need was all in all because, said Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Jesus voids our knowledge of our own goodness." Our meeting of Him, if it is Jesus we meet, "is entirely transformed into action, without any reflection on [our] selves. [Our] own goodness is now concealed from [our consciousness]." *When did we see thee hungry, thirsty, naked, a stranger?*

But even more critical for true believers' hearing of this story is the hiddenness of God's presence in human history. God's revelation "never has a recognizable form, its wisdom and

power can never be proved, its triumph is never apparent, its success is not tangible and its benefit not for immediate enjoyment. Certainly,” says Karl Barth, “these things do exist; but if one insists on seeing revelation in them, one must clearly understand that what one sees there is certainly not divine revelation. To be divine it must first be concealed.” Hidden in human flesh, in the second place, is God--not in the sense that we all carry a little of God around inside of us, but rather God’s presence, God’s purpose, God’s providence can only be mediated, and most often is mediated in the lowly and the unlikely. Anticipating the season ahead, Mary’s lowly estate foreshadows the stable where he is born, the swaddling clothes in which he is wrapped, the poverty in which he lived, the cross on which he died. God chooses to come to us, to reign over us, where we would not, on our own, seek Him--in all that is too low to be noticed by our pride or our power or our piety. *When did we see thee hungry, thirsty, naked, a stranger?*

So the story presumes, first of all, the concealment of our own goodness if it is really good and, second of all, the hiddenness of God’s revelation if it is really God who is revealed. Then in the third place, there are the goats. One does not get the impression that these equally startled creatures are the persecutors of the early church. They are merely the indifferent and the invulnerable. “To love at all” wrote C.S. Lewis “is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping [your heart] intact,” he said, “you must give your heart to no one. [*When did we see you hungry, thirsty, naked, a stranger?*”] It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. [*You that are accursed depart from me....*”] The alternative to tragedy,” says Lewis “is damnation. The only place outside heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all dangers and perturbations of love is Hell.” [*And these will go away to eternal punishment.*”] Invulnerable and irredeemable, these will be those who are astonished that anything ultimate might have been at stake in another’s need.

Hearing this story two millennia hence, God knows a congregation such as ours cannot be counted among the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, nor have we been thrown into prison because of our witness to the gospel. Quite the contrary! Comfortably wed to the powers and privileges of the reigning social order, we have made Matthew's last judgment into a moral tale. Believing the shepherd will judge us on the basis of our treatment of the least of these, the most goodness we can muster without disturbing the free market is to make them dependent upon our charity rather than invisible by our indifference. So we have Sloppy Joe's for Our Brother's Place, clean our closets annually for the poor, buy Christmas gifts for the less fortunate, contribute modestly to a budget that supports a ministry to the poorest of the poor in Haiti, all in an effort to do what we believe to be good to do by our own reckoning and reading of this story. Go figure, we say, figuring that in addition to personal morality, our ticket into the kingdom must now bear the mark of our charitable good deeds toward those in need. "How could I have missed this for so long in the Bible?" wondered Rick Warren to Malcolm Gladwell in a New Yorker article on his purpose-driven church, "this mandate to care for the poor?"

Yet all of this misses what appears to be the critical turn, what accounts for the genuine surprise of those who are recognized and singled out when the Son of Man mentions their feeding and sheltering and binding and visiting from his throne of glory. In his reading of this story, Bonhoeffer turns to the Pharisee who "rendered thanks to God for his own good deed. The Pharisee," Bonhoeffer notes, "knows the good he has done." Standing in contrast is the tax collector who knows not his own goodness but God and so cries, "Be merciful to me a sinner!" From the beginning—from each of our own beginnings, says Bonhoeffer—we have chosen to know good and evil rather than to know God. I think he means, in reality, we do good for the other without giving ourselves to the other, without being vulnerable to the other, without, in a word, loving the other as Christ has loved us, all the way to the cross. I repeat: "Jesus voids [our]

knowledge of our own goodness. The knowledge of Jesus is entirely transformed into action, without any reflection on [our] selves. [Our] own goodness is now concealed from [our consciousness]. It is not merely that [we are] no longer obliged to be the judge of [our] own goodness; [we] must no longer desire to know of it at all; or rather [we] no longer are permitted to know of it at all...[Our] deed is no longer one possibility among many, but the one thing, the important thing, the will of God.”

Whether or not we recognize him or call him by name, when we truly meet the other in all vulnerability, when we respond in self-giving love to the other’s need, with no hope of reward or fear of punishment, when we are of use to God as God’s near-at-hand providence—upholding and sustaining those for whom Christ died, it is as though we enter into a relationship with God, the God who may be hidden to our sight but is never far from our beseeching. Addressing himself directly to our text, Bonhoeffer concludes, “When Jesus sits in judgment, His own will not know that they have given Him food and drink and clothing and comfort. They will not know their own goodness; Jesus will disclose it to them.”

“What struck me most about Christ that winter,” wrote author Heather King, “was his smallness, his hiddenness...the way, after the resurrection, nobody had recognized him. Here in this church, at least, he remained hidden. The little unassuming chapel, with its chintzy tabernacle, was dwarfed by the towering banks and investment firms and lawyers’ offices that surrounded it. We fallen, lonely strangers...were hardly the kind of people any public-relations-savvy Messiah would have chosen to glorify his cause. And yet things happened in that little chapel. People with briefcases and business suits got down on their knees and buried their faces in their hands. The elderly priest talked about his own struggles and failures....At the sign of peace, we took each other’s hands and sometimes even smiled. This is where we found him, among these wax flowers and stifled sighs...we came with our burdens, our fragile flesh...our

ridiculous stubborn belief that the body of Christ was not a symbol but food, real food. Each tiny, broken piece of bread might enable us broken people to go out—anonymous, small, hidden—and transform the world.”

“Come” he will say to them, “you that are blessed by my Father, and inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” *Come with all thine angels, come*, we sing in response. *Raise the glorious harvest home.*