

Last Sunday 11/26/23
Matthew 25:31-46 29A

“THEN THE KING WILL SAY TO THOSE ON HIS RIGHT, ‘COME, YOU WHO ARE BLESSED BY MY FATHER; INHERIT THE KINGDOM PREPARED FOR YOU FROM THE FOUNDATION OF THE WORLD.’”

Back in the early days of North Dakota, farms were few and far between. When a blinding blizzard struck, it would mean almost certain death if someone were trapped outdoors. Cell phones, obviously, had yet to be invented, so the homesteaders, out of love for one another, would do something quite interesting – they would place a **burning candle** in the window. That way, if someone were lost or stranded, they would see the burning candle and know that there was safety. That candle meant hope, comfort, and joy.

Today, on the Last Sunday in the church year, our attention is drawn to the Great Judgment. When we hear the word "judgment" and hear the words of Jesus in our Gospel, we may become frightened, filled with dread at the very thought of standing before the throne of God. But, these words are words of **Good News** for us. The Judgment on the last day stands as a burning candle in the middle of a raging blizzard. The Judgment means safety for us. The Judgment gives us hope, comfort, and joy.

Our Old Testament lesson reminded us, we were “scattered [from God] on a day of clouds and darkness" when our first parents ate of the forbidden fruit and brought sin and death upon us.

I. Each and every day that we toil in this sin-filled world, we are reminded that we were scattered from God and from one another.

Fentanyl. I don't even need to tell you what it is, because you already know. And, Narcan can now be purchased over-the-counter at Target and Wal-mart. And lest you gloat that your family is not in despair because of

fentanyl use, I invite you to count the cost it, and many other illegal drugs, have has on our communities and schools, the huge demands it makes on our healthcare system, as well as our law enforcement and judicial system, which means we all pay.

The perversity of this present age is paraded before us as “enlightenment,” as children are allowed to physical alter then own bodies. Maybe what we really need to ask is, “Who is the parent?”

How many have died in the fighting in the Gaza Strip? How much property and livelihood lost? How many lives in ruin and despair?

But before we become too enraged, let me remind you **abortion** remains the single biggest cause of death worldwide. In 2022, the last full year for which we have numbers, 44 million died in abortion. Today, 20% -- 1 out of 5 – of all pregnancies end in abortion in the United States of American, all in the name of “choice”.

But, we do not even need to look at the world to see how far we are scattered from God. Our lives and our hearts show it. Your spouse once spoke those words, “I do,” but now they don’t. Your own child says to you, “I hate you”... and the door is slammed. Those aches and pains in of body and soul remind you of your own mortality. Thanksgiving is a time of contentment, to rejoice in our blessings from the hand of God, but let your neighbor get something new and bigger and better, and your heart does not know contentment, it knows jealousy and envy.

II. But, Saints of God, rejoice and be glad. God has Good News for us. He promises that He will rescue us from all the threatening perils of sin.

Recall the Judges’ words to the goats on His left in the parable, “Depart from me, you cursed into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (v. 41). You were one of those cursed, destined for the eternal

fire of hell prepared for the devil and his angels, but note the mercy of the Judge – He suffers the sentence of misery and death in **your** place.

He who is seated on that glorious throne is the one who was hungry and tempted in the wilderness, but remained faithful for you. He was thirsty in His dying anguish nailed to the cross. He was a stranger, rejected in his own hometown, by His own brothers and sisters; He had no place to lay His head. He was naked, as the soldiers stripped Him bare. He was sick, for He bore your sickness and infirmity to the cross. He was imprisoned, by the brutal Roman soldiers who scourged and mocked Him; by Joseph's tomb, which held His lifeless bones.

As you anticipate judgment day, the Good News for you, Dear Child of God, is that you already know the verdict: You are **not guilty** in Christ.

III. In our parable on this Last Sunday of the Church Year, Jesus is not teaching us that the sheep save themselves by feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, or visiting the sick or imprisoned. If we were saved by feeding the hungry and visiting the sick, and other good works, then we are saved by our works, not by faith in Christ Jesus.

To understand the Parable, we turn to the Bible, ever remembering that Scripture interprets Scripture. We understand this parable of Jesus in the context of all Scripture. The Bible says, "We know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ (Ga 2)." And again, the Bible says, "By grace you have been saved through faith. And this not of your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one can boast (Eph 2)." The sheep, the believers, are saved because, by faith, they trust, rejoice, and find on comfort in Jesus alone.

THIS PARABLE IS NOT TEACHING US THAT WE ARE SAVED BY OUR GOOD WORKS, BUT THAT JUDGEMENT DAY IS COMING. As

Jesus teaches, He will return in glory to judge all nations, to deliver believers to heaven and unbelievers to hell. Judgment Day is coming, but rejoice! You have nothing to fear. Remember who is it that is seated on the throne and judges on that great day. It is the same Savior who had all of God's wrath and damnation poured out on Him in your place, as your substitute, for your sin, so that your sin would be gone in His blood. It is the same Savior who rose again the 3rd day, bringing life and immortality to light.

It's the same one whom you are baptized into, so that you have died to sin and been raised to a new life, so that you may be Christ to your neighbor.

You live in Christ and Christ lives in you, so that you do good works, according to your vocation. God does not need your good works, your neighbor does. In the vocations of father and mother, parents care for those who are hungry, thirsty, and sometimes sick. In the vocation of child, adult children may find themselves doing the same for aging parents. In the vocation of friend, people help one another, weeping with them in their sorrows and rejoicing with them in their joys. You do the work of Christ by telling others about Jesus, by personal service, and by the prayers you offer for this congregation and for all in need, and by your financial support of this congregation and her ministry. You do not do these things in order to believe, you do these things **because** you believe.

Luther would use this illustration, so I do too: A candle which is not lit cannot give off any light. But once a candle is lit, it must give off light. So it is, apart from Christ humans dead in sin and trespasses cannot do good works. But, once we are alive and live in Christ, the good works we do are evidence, a confession, proof, that we are alive by faith in Christ. That is

why St. James says, “Faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead” (Ja 2:17).

Living in Christ, we live as He lived on this earth. Simply put, as a little Christ, we treat others as Christ has treated us. We do good works -- we feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, give shelter to strangers, clothe the naked, visit the sick and prisoners – because this is what Christ has done for us and to us.

The Good News of this Sunday is that Jesus answers our prayer of longing with the hope of the Judgment. This Judgement stands for us as a light burning in the window in the midst of a blizzard. Our hope in Christ is not in vain. The day is coming when Christ will come to rescue us from all the evils and tears and worries and fears of this present age to reign with Him in the new heavens and the new earth, where there is no sin, only righteousness.