Matthew 25:31-46

We stand today at the tail end of the church year; next Sunday, we begin again with the season of Advent. Like people from the very beginning of recorded history, we tell time in cycles, in this case cycles of the church year. The whole Christian story is replayed, at least in outline, each year from Advent through Christmas into Epiphany; from Lent through Easter and on into Pentecost; and then, somewhat anachronistically, through the season of Jesus' teaching; and then today looking proleptically forward to Jesus' Second Coming and final triumph.

It's no accident that in the Northern Hemisphere these seasons line up with the seasons of nature. We crown the year with the end of harvest, and then begin our waiting for light to return at the solstice. We celebrate the stars in the waning dark of Epiphany, and then we draw on Easter faith to believe that what was dead returns to life in spring, because these cycles live in our bones and our blood.

We tell this story in a year's time, as I said, but we also use different texts to tell it, so that once every three years we hear the same scripture but maybe also hear it differently, as the circumstances in our lives change, as we age, as the world turns. We are reaching the end of Year A in the lectionary cycle and moving into Year B, in which we will follow the Gospel of Mark rather than the Gospel of Matthew that we have been listening to.

In Years B and C, this festival proclaiming the kingship of Christ is marked by a reading from Jesus' passion, his appearance before Pontius Pilate. We meditate on the paradox of a crucified king. But today's reading from Year A in Matthew, emphasizes a different aspect of the reign of Christ, in which the king is compared to a humble shepherd.

The festival of Christ the King, you may remember, is a fairly recent one in church history. In 1925, Pope Pius XI declared this holiday, since adopted by Lutherans, Episcopalians, and other mainline Protestants, as he watched Germany and Italy sliding into ultra-nationalism. Echoing today's reading from Ephesians, he aimed to remind Christians that Jesus Christ is over all things, but that his rule is marked by power that doesn'tlook like temporal power: "Christ has dominion over all creatures, a dominion not seized by violence nor usurped, but his by essence and by nature." So well and good.

I think every family has their own roadtrip music. When my kids were younger, we would get in the car and load up both discs of the musical *Hamilton* and prepare to sing at the top of our voices. *Hamilton*, as you're probably aware, tells a version of our country's origin story—the combination of radical new ideas and backroom deals, the lionized founders and their personal foibles—that make up the foundation of these United States.

But the highlight of our singalongs was always the Mad King George, played with enviable snark by Jonathan Groff. He sings:

> Oceans rise, empires fall
> We have seen each other through it all
> And when push comes to shove
> I will send a fully armed battalion to remind you of my love

So, yeah, Americans have plenty of reason to be wary of kings. The belief that kings might wield power with equity and compassion seems largely relegated to fairy tales. Kings are tyrants insofar as nothing checks their self-willed rule. And, while kings and Christianity might seem to be strange bedfellows, monarchs and emperors have often found the Church to be a willing accomplice to their greed for power and more power.

This festival day of Christ the King, then, always teeters at the edge of a vast misunderstanding. Martin Luther would call this misunderstanding "a theology of Glory." The theology of glory suggests that we just need to try just a little harder, bargain a little more shrewdly, and God will bless us with progress and personal power. Really, the more we acquire, the less we need God, goes this belief system. We can all be kings. And then we'll be able to do whatever we want.

Rather, says Luther, a theology of the Cross calls a thing what it is. When Christ calls a person, he bids that person to come and die, at least to their own designs and desires. No flashy sales pitch, no improbable lifetime guarantee. But it has the ring of truth. The savior we follow doesn't ride in a royal palanquin carried on the shoulders of a dozen servants. He carries his own cross to the Place of Skulls. He dies a criminal's death. We are called to follow him there.

This understanding of what it means to follow Jesus would be monstrous indeed if it weren't for the kind of elaboration found in our scripture readings for today. In Ezekiel, for example, we learn that divine kingship doesn't wear a crown but a shepherd's cap: "I myself will search for my sheep and will sort them out. . . . I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strays, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak. . . . I will feed them on justice. . . . I will save my flock and they shall no longer be ravaged." The care of a shepherd for his sheep also permeates the Psalm: "We are the people of God's pasture and the sheep of God's hand."

So that when Jesus characterizes "the Child of Humanity," the Son of Man, as finally sitting on the throne of glory at the end of days, it is with a very different view of that throne than we might have seen previously. Just as in Ezekiel, this shepherd-king busies himself with sorting sheep. And just as in Ezekiel, he has a concern that all his sheep be well cared-for. That the least of these my siblings, he says, would be fed and clothed and sheltered. That *matters* to Jesus just as it did to the Hebrew prophets. It is clear that "the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" values dignity, justice, and compassion.

But note that, just as Luther was skeptical that we could work our way into a position of grace, Jesus' shepherd-king pictures the sheep as merely doing the task God created them to do: their works of love and mercy flow from **God's** creative, saving love, which precedes their very being. Jesus therefore rejects the notion that salvation is a reward for righteous action. The sheep don't even need to be conscious that they're sheep. They ask Jesus with genuine humility: when was it that we did these things for you? And Jesus answers, in essence, every time you did them unawares, especially for those without the ability to reward you.

Notice that this sorting has nothing to do with right belief, doctrine, church attendance, or sectarian belonging. What the sheep *think* literally does not enter into this parable-like story. And this may stand as a challenge to those who believe that only those within the bounds of confessional Christianity can enter the sheepfold.

Homiletics professor Wesley Allen, Jr, says, "Matthew clearly imagines people outside the church who practice mercy as entering God's reign. . . . What might change if the church applied the [Child of Humanity's]

standard to people whose beliefs and ideologies differ from ours but whose acts of compassion embody values we regard as essential to Christian life?”

So it’s true that oceans may rise, and empires will certainly fall, but God has seen God’s people through it all. And when push comes to shove, God will send, not deadly force, not battalions of angels, but God will send a humble child into the world, to remind us of God’s love. For all people. Let us share that love. Amen.