

“The Great Divide”

Dear friends, greetings this morning in the name of our Lord Jesus, on this holiday weekend, as we gather to remember and to celebrate the reign of Jesus as King.

Now, we haven't been following it as closely (in our Sunday morning readings) this past year, as we have in some years, what's known as the (Church year). In the past (few months), we've been doing (as you know) a number of sermon series that are a bit more (topical in nature) and end up standing on their own.

But we are, as a church, (nonetheless), in a very real way, tied to a cycle of (Bible readings) that begin each year in Advent (those weeks leading up to Christmas), and that end each year (as it does today) on what is known as Christ the King Sunday.

Throughout the year, whether it's a sermon series or not, the Bible readings (we take on) all serve to point us back to what happened 2000 years ago in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. In the Scriptures, we hear the story of what happened (for us) in Christ. In our readings (each week), we're reminded of what God was planning and doing (for us) in his Son. And (in the process), in those readings, we're challenged with what those stories back then, and what God was (planning and doing) for us (in Jesus) mean for our lives today.

Well, in a similar way, only in the opposite direction, that's what's happening here today. Rather than looking back on the life of Jesus and what's he done, (what he's accomplished), and what we need to learn, on this last Sunday in the Church year, (what we do is), we look forward to where this is all heading, and to a date and a time that has been planned and prepared from the foundation of the world. In so doing, today's readings help us to plan and prepare for an event that is (without question) in each of our futures.

The title I've chosen (for this message) this morning, is one that describes exactly what Jesus tells us will happen. (We just read the story.) When that day comes (our Lord says), when God chooses to bring this world (as we know it) to an end, and usher in a new day and a new world, there will be a division unlike any division this world has ever experienced. There will be a divide (among the peoples) unlike any other divide that has ever taken place.

The King will be seated on the throne, Jesus himself, and he will divide the people into two groups, just as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. The sheep will be on his right and the goats will end up on his left. The people of this world will be divided into two (eternally separate) camps.

And it will happen (our Lord tells us) because of and on (account of) three basic things: The Word of God, the person and work of Christ, and how you and I choose to live. The Word of God, the person and work of Christ, and how you and I choose to live.

Let's talk about each of those three, starting with the first: The Word of God. I wonder how many people actually believe that day will come? I wonder how many people have actually thought about what that day might bring?

As I think about all the questions (in life) we face, about what matters in life and what doesn't, about who we are, where we came from and where this is all going, I find it interesting that this question about what's going to happen when we die, whether there's an afterlife or not, and whether there's (actually going to be) a judgment at the end, it's one of those questions about which nearly everyone (who has ever lived) has asked, but not nearly everyone (who has ever lived) has been able to answer. Almost everyone has an answer. There's (hardly anyone) who has not given it (some thought) and come to a conclusion. But where it all leads and where it all lands, and what answers (along the way) do we have that we can trust?

There was an interesting study done recently by the Pew Research Center in which they asked a simple question about the authority and authenticity of the Bible, about the Word of God. I shared this (I believe) in our Middle Hour “Reformation class” last week. What they asked was, “Is the Bible an authoritative Word for us?” What they wanted to know was, “Is the Bible an authentic Word from God?”

Do you know what they found? They found, of those who were surveyed, that 24% of American adults believe the Bible is an authentic Word from God. 24% of adults (in America) believe that the Bible is an authoritative Word for us. 24%...believe that it is. What that means is that 76% either (don’t know) or believe that it’s not.

I wonder how many people actually believe that day will come? I wonder how many people have actually thought about what that day might bring?

It’s an interesting question: “Will it ever really happen?” It’s an interesting thought: “Will it ever actually come about?” If it doesn’t, then it won’t really matter. If it does, then nothing else will matter. (It’s that simple.)

What it comes down to...it all comes down to the Word of God. What it boils down to...it all boils down to whether or not what Jesus says about God’s purpose and plan for his world (and where it is going) has any basis in what will actually take place.

In that same “Middle Hour” class I just mentioned, we’ve been studying some of the documents that grew out of that time in our history. One of the things that came out of the Reformation, that becomes clear in studying the scriptures, is that God, in his planning for this world and in his (involvement with it), has done so (and is doing so) in a very orderly way.

There is a systematic approach to what God has put in place. There is a planned and carefully thought out purpose in what he is working to accomplish. And his plan and his purpose (according to the scriptures) have been there from the start. His systematic approach (according to the Bible) has been part of what he has been doing from (the beginning of time) in a very orderly manner.

In our story (today) that’s exactly what Jesus tells us. After separating the sheep from the goats, (it says), “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world.’” In other words, God said (at the beginning) that it’s going to happen, and it’s going to happen. God said (from the start) it will come about, and (when this is all over), it will come about.

In the same way, (only in the opposite way), it’ll happen to the rest. “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.’” As the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats (and the sheep are blessed), in the same way, so the goats will find themselves separated from the sheep (and from the shepherd) and will (as a result) be forever cursed.

It all comes down to the Word of God. It all comes down to the promise and power of God. God speaks and it happens. God’s voice goes out and it all comes about.

I wonder how many people actually believe that day will happen? I wonder how many people have actually thought about what that day might bring? If it doesn’t happen, then it won’t really matter. If it does, then nothing else will matter.

“The Great Divide:” by the Word of God, the person and work of Christ, and how you and I choose to live. I’ll be (open with you) here today. This is one of those stories (in the Bible) that for me, as a Lutheran pastor, to which I really have to pay attention. It’s one of the stories (in the scriptures) that, if we’re not careful, can sound contrary to the rest of what we find.

After all, (in this story) there is a judgment. In this (final scene) Jesus gives us, there is a separation where there is no turning back. And you’re either in or you’re out based upon what you do. And so, it begs the

question. Then why did Jesus have to die, if it all comes down to this? Why did our Lord go to the cross, if it all depends upon how you and I end up living while we're here?

Don't miss what's going on in the story. Don't turn what isn't there into something that is. This is not a story about how you and I will be saved. Jesus did that for us when he went to the cross. This is not a passage that gives us a formula (to follow) to find ourselves in the kingdom. God accomplished that for us in his Son. What it is, is a passage that points us back to Jesus. What it is, is a story that keeps the focus of our salvation 100% on Christ.

Remember the story? (What happened?) What did Jesus say? What he didn't say was, "You were good in your life, so now you're in. You were kind in your life to those who were (in your life), so when this is all over (and we're done), let's all be over and done and make our way into heaven. That's not what Jesus said. That's not how this whole thing works. How it works is what we do in our life with Jesus. What he said (and asked) was, what have you done in your life with Christ?"

Remember the story? That's exactly what happened. That's how it played out. "I was hungry (Jesus said) and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was naked (and without clothes), I was sick and in prison and didn't have a friend." What you did in your life (or not) was in response to Jesus. How you chose to live in your life (or not) was all related to Christ.

In the story, (it's interesting), it's the only question that's asked. (Did you notice?) Everyone (in the story) wants to know the same thing. "When did we see you, Jesus, and not notice? When were you there (in need) in your life, and we never saw your need?"

Have you ever asked yourself that question? Have you ever thought about what you'd do in the presence of Christ? (It's a great question.) If Jesus were here, how would you respond to his suffering? If it was the Lord that was in need, what would you do (in your life) to help him (with the suffering) in his?

What we do for our neighbor is what we do for Jesus. How we serve our neighbor is how we show our love for Christ.

I still remember the one night (years ago) in our youth group when I was in high school. (I might have shared this story before.) We didn't have the support we now have with people on staff. All we had were a few college students who volunteered their time.

I remember showing up at the youth event that night and being told that we were going to take some time to work out the frustration, maybe even (the anger) that we felt toward other people. It was going to be an exercise (that night) in "cleansing ourselves" (we were told) of any of the feelings we had toward others that weren't healthy.

What they had on the wall, when we walked in, was a big bulls-eye target on some poster board. What we were (told to do) was to draw a picture of someone we (didn't like) and put it on the wall. And then, we'd take turns throwing darts at the pictures to get rid of all of the (penned-up anger) we felt toward that other person.

I remember thinking (at the time) that this didn't feel right, but why not give it a try. These were good leaders. They'd done some good stuff in the past. Maybe this one would turn out all right.

And so we did. (So I did.) I wasn't very good at drawing, but I drew a picture of this kid (in my High School) who was always driving me nuts. Something about him rubbed me the wrong way. So I drew his picture and put it on the board. It didn't matter that it didn't (look like him), because I knew who it was. And so did all the other kids (in the group), with pictures of kids they didn't particularly like.

And then we took turns throwing darts. I remember feeling like (this doesn't) feel right, even as it was happening. But it happened. Each one of us took our turn. And then we sat down.

And that's when it happened. That's when one of the college leaders walked up (to the wall) and took down the pictures, (the ones we'd drawn), one at a time, until they were all gone. And then he took down the

target (that was there), and there it was. Behind the target (right in the middle) was a picture of Jesus. Torn apart, ripped to shreds, looking like he'd just had a bunch of (High School kids) throw darts at his face.

I still remember. No one said a word. We all just listened as one of the leaders read from the story, (words of Jesus), Matthew 25, verse 40: "I tell you the truth, whatever you did to one of the least of these, you did to me." I still remember it. The picture (I had drawn) was "one of the least." I'll never forget.

When did I see you, Jesus? If only I had known it was you. When were you hungry, Lord? If only I had known, I would have stopped. And when were you thirsty, or naked, or in need of help? If only I had known, I wouldn't have (thought) it was someone else.

In the story, Jesus is (telling us) that now we know. In the story, he's saying to us that it's (not just) someone else, but it's him. He's the one on the side of the road. He's the one sitting out in front of that store. He's the one who looks like a bum, who'd be much better off, if only he'd get a job.

Now, I realize this starts getting personal. And I realize that there are no easy answers. (I don't want to pretend there are.) I also realize that there's a risk in helping people, because it's easy (when you help) to get burned.

Maybe there's not a real need? Maybe you're becoming an enabler? Maybe this is nothing more than a scam? Who knows what it might be? The answer is we don't. (Maybe we need to become more creative?) I don't know. All we know is that (behind that person) is Jesus. All we know is that (in helping) that person (who is there), we're helping Christ.

And so we come to the end of another year in the life of the Church. And so we find ourselves (at the beginning of the next), standing (in judgment), face-to-face with Jesus.

It all comes down to three simple things. The Word of God, the person and work of Christ, and how you and I choose to live. The Word of God, the person and work of Christ, and how you and I choose to live.

My friends, this is not a story about how you and I will be saved. That judgement (on your life) was made long ago, when this whole thing started. This is not a passage that gives us a formula (to follow) to find ourselves in the kingdom. That formula played itself out when Jesus went to the cross.

Now it's our turn to respond to him. Not it's your turn to offer your help to Christ. And it may not be easy. Following Jesus, loving "the least of these" rarely is. But that's the Christian life. That's how we show (through our lives) that we truly do love and believe in Christ. "The Great Divide"...Let's pray.

Lord God, we thank you for your saving word, spoken long ago (for us) in and through your Son. We thank you for your saving work, offered to us in Jesus and given for us on the cross.

Help us, as we seek to follow him, to offer our lives in return for those for whom Jesus died. Help us to see our Lord in the lives of others. Help us to serve our Lord in serving those he loves.

On this day in which we remember and celebrate Jesus as King, enable us and empower us (through your Spirit) to recognize his rule (in our lives) and to allow him (through our lives) to be seen and known as King by others...in his name we pray. Amen.