

WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH



SERMON

November 26, 2023

The Last Word

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Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: November 30, 2023

After the carnage of the first world war, that war to end all wars, church leaders sought to confront the nationalist pride that fed hostilities between nations. They also wanted to dethrone the idea of any one person or people claiming supremacy over others. For these reason the church designated the last Sunday of the liturgical year to be known as the Reign of Christ Sunday. Today marks the Reign of Christ.

Our liturgical year began in Advent last December, as we prepared for the arrival of the Christ child. The year progressed through Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and a period of ordinary time for us to learn how to follow his teachings. The year culminates as we affirm that Christ alone reigns in this life and life eternal.

Standing at the cusp of a fresh beginning, as with other new years' eves, we are invited us to take stock of our lives, to set aright any bad habits or false beliefs.

When we profess our faith with "I believe in God the Father almighty" as the maker of heaven and earth, do we trust God over all others? Do we live, and give, and forgive as faith teaches?

The lectionary texts for the day asks us if we understand the extent to which God will chase after us to live among us and to restore us.

The prophet Ezekiel wrote during the 6th BCE at the time of Babylonian exile and just before the fall of Jerusalem. We might have said the words he uses in his prophecy, such as “exile,” “exodus,” and “occupied territories” sound archaic. Given the news of Ukrainians exiled in foreign lands and the masses of Palestinians fleeing from Gaza, the concept of losing our homes or falling prey to a warring government no longer seems abstract.

Ezekiel writes with an urgency relevant for today.

His first thirty-two chapters berate Israel’s rulers for hoarding wealth and weakening the state. A minority of rich people feasted at the expense of the masses, leading to the overthrow.

Ezekiel distinguishes himself with utter originality as a prophet. His judgements and ecstatic visions almost transgress the borders of sanity.¹ And then we get to chapter thirty-four. He is as clear as day.

His prophecy reminds us of God’s sovereignty and the elusive name God spoke to Moses; “I am who I am.” And translated as “I will be who I will be.”

¹ Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation and Commentary, The Prophets*, (New York: W. W. Norton & co. 2018), p. 1049.

In Ezekiel's prophecy, God promises "I will." God says, I will come. I will judge. I, God, will restore. Listen for all the ways God will be to us.

Dear God, you spoke the the first words of creation.

All your words since then instruct us how to live with one another.

*At the end of our days, you alone have the authority
to judge the quality of our lives.*

We pray you will silence any voice but your voice.

Startle us with your truth so we

devote ourselves to your son's reign. Amen.

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24

For thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep.

I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land.

I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. 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....

Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD to them: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide,

I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep. I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the LORD, have spoken.

Let me tell you a simple story.

There once was a king of uncommon royal lineage, amassing more power and influence than any other ruler. Statesmen tremble at his decrees. His wealth grew as tributes arrived on a daily basis from lesser kings attempting to curry his favor. Yet, their gifts mean nothing to him.

This mighty king loves a humble maiden who lives in the poorest village. He longs to go to this maiden and announce his love for her. This is the heart of the king's dilemma: how to declare his love?

He can adorn himself in royal robes and surround himself with a royal guard. Prepare a carriage inlaid with gold and precious stones to rescue her.

He can crown her head with jewels and clothe her in the finest silks. She would surely not resist this type of proposal. No one dares to resist the king. But will she understand these gifts flow from love? Will she love him?

She might be awed by his royal splendor and tremble at the thought of being blessed with such an amazing turn of circumstances. She's likely to tell herself that only a fool will reject such a marriage proposal.

But will she love him?

Will she go through the motions, living a life of empty duty, and nurse a private grief for the freedom she left behind? As if imprisoned against her will. Will she love him or regret the moment?

This king wants a wife, not someone who behaves as a subject to his royal decrees, cringing at his word, and grudgingly agree with all he says and does.

He wants a bride whose love knows no restrictions or limitations. He wants the intimacy of one who will speak to him in good and bad times, without hesitation. He wants a relationship that has neither barriers nor walls, a relationship based upon mutual respect and understanding, desire it to last, forever, and not until another monarch comes along.

This is the dilemma: How will he win the maiden's love without destroying her free will to choose?

He has only one choice: he has to become like her, without power or riches or the title of king. Only then will she be able to see him simply for who he is and not for what his position makes him.

For him to come to her, he must leave behind all that he has. And so, one night, after everyone in the castle sleeps, he lays aside his golden crown and removes his rings of state. He takes off his royal

robes and puts on the common clothes of the poorest of the kingdom. Escaping by way of the servant's entrance, the king leaves his crown, his castle, and his kingdom behind.

As the morning sun rises in the east, the maiden emerges from her cottage to find herself face to face with a stranger, a common man with kindly eyes who requests an opportunity to speak with her and, in time, to court her for her hand in marriage.

By now you'll have recognized this as a parable. Soren Kierkegaard's story lacks the mind twisting drama of Jesus' parables. Its simplicity hits us squarely in the eyes with the truth about God's reign and each one of us.²

God could have remained aloof, beyond and outside our imagination and experience. How would we know how loveable we are?

God could have wooed us with gifts, and status, and luxury, and bribes. Maybe that's the splendors of lakes, and waterfalls, and sunsets and flowers and butterflies. But what do these gifts evoke in us? Gratitude at best: a sense of wonder, quite possibly; but too often a desire to possess the beauty, and not to tend and sustain.

² The story of the king and the maiden is adapted from Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, Translated by Howard V and Edna H Hong, (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1985).

Alternatively, God could have raised us up to be like gods ourselves. We know what perils that could bring since God instilled some of that creative spark in us. It's what compels us to fly beyond the speed of sound and explore the human body and mind to heal. But, such creativity fuels the competitive spirit to dominate others and the pursuits become greedy. Or, God could arrive in fiery judgement to vanquish the disloyal, putting fear and trembling into everyone's heart.

Such an image of the king comes straight from the tyrannical rulers of the day. We know fear never inspires loving.

God didn't do any of these things in this parable. God knows all the potential shortfalls on our side. God seeks the best for us. This is the central mystery of God and the wonder of grace.

God comes to us in humility. God meets us where we are, and to raise us up from our poverty.

Ezekiel prophecies to a fallen people. They had vested power in rulers who lured them into a false sense of security with empty promises. They were taxed into poverty and imprisoned with injustice.

To these people in despair, Ezekiel speaks and speaks for God: “I will tend you like a shepherd. I will feed and protect you. I will rescue the lost.”

All of these statements of the loving shepherd remind us of the Twenty-third Psalm. Then, towards the end of the long string of “I will” statements, without a twist in the tone of voice, God says “I will judge.”

God will call to account those bullies who butted the weak. God says, “I will save my flock” from those who “ravage the weak.” Without vengeance or fire and brimstone fury, God will come and set all the sheep in line.

Even in judgement, when Ezekiel speaks on behalf of God it is with the gentleness of a parent intent on teaching a child, who knows a consistent tone of voice calms, who promises to quietly and firmly correct.

God will set the people on the path of justice. Ezekiel’s prophecy comes true in the arrival of the Jesus. God never gives up. God remains true to God’s word.

If we want to celebrate the Reign of Christ, then we must do so by remembering the kind of king Jesus is and also the kind of king he adamantly and repeatedly refused to become.

Even though pressed to kingly status, Jesus wanted nothing to do with power, glitz, glamour, or privilege. He did not want a throne as much as a place—any place would do—where he could simply be with the poor, the sad, the sick, the lonely, the misunderstood. And when he was with them, he said things and did things that re-made our whole world. He treated them with a love and a grace that made those who had been of no account suddenly realize they did count.

Those who had been lonely found a friend who felt, oddly enough, that he might just be an eternal friend. The invisible people whom everyone else routinely overlooked came to realize that someone did see them, notice them, and was interested even to find out their names and to hear their stories.

The corrupt, who who feasted on injustice, and bullied the other sheep were judged and restored to harmony within God's realm.

God offers the first word, all the words to envelop us in this life, and God gets the last word. God will come to us over and over again. To love us. Guide us. Correct us. God always gets the last word to bring us home.



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