Reign of Christ, Year A
Sermon 11.22.26

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24
For thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will search for my sheep and will sort them out. As shepherds sort out their flocks when they are among scattered sheep, so I will sort 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 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 strays, 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.

Matthew 25: 31-46
"When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.' Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You who are accursed, depart from me into

the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels, for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison and did not take care of you?' Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' And these will go away into eternal punishment but the righteous into eternal life." (723)

Matthew 25 has been making the news lately. Our scripture reading for this morning, always the scripture reading for the last Sunday of the church year in Year A, the year we follow the Gospel of Matthew: it's been making the news recently. Just two weeks ago, it was a headline in the *New York Times*: "The Bible Chapter That Helps Explain the New Christian Left," with the subheadline: "A few verses calling people to care for the hungry, the sick and the stranger have become a rallying cry for a new wave of Democrats." I noticed it then, knew what was coming a couple weeks hence, and looked forward to being able to sleep in on a Sunday. "My work here is done."

But not quite. It was a good article, but it lacked a certain spirit.

It begins: "Senator Raphael Warnock, a pastor from Georgia, has called himself a 'Matthew 25 Christian' for years. It's his boilerplate, invoked in response to questions about health care, immigration and even Fidel Castro."

Senator Warnock, of course, you might remember, preached here virtually a few weeks ago. He was the keynote speaker and preacher at the Southern New England Conference of the UCC, of which this congregation is a member. As such, we had access to the livestream link of his preaching, which we featured here the following Sunday.

Sen. Warnock, though, is in the middle of his six-year term as a senator, which makes his being the lede of a story the day before the election a little strange. Not on the ballet, and during a year when the election was (it seemed) all anyone could talk about, he might not have seemed like headline news.

But the article was to give context to something that seemed so surprisingly new. That there might be Christians who were also Democrats, that there might be Christian cause for public policies, or at least public concern, for things more typical of Democratic

politics than Republican: this apparently seemed so surprisingly new, hard to wrap your head around it was worth a headline, a feature story.

And so, a turn to someone familiar.

Sen. Warnock has been in the Senate since 2021. He's also been the pastor of Atlanta's Ebenezer Baptist Church since 2005. As such, he's given the wider public five years to get used to the possibility that a church-going Christian might also be a Democrat, indeed a church-serving pastor might also be a Democrat.

This is a conceptual leap because, as we all know, the most vocal Christians in our public life for the last generation have been the so-called Moral Majority. Prior to this movement there was the phenomenon of right-wing Christian radio, on your AM dial. But this only reached so far. The Moral Majority reached much farther, changing the ways churches themselves function, less denominationally and more according to political affiliation, both in terms of policy and in terms of party, changing also the public discourse around Christianity and eventually the public understanding of it.

This all caught the so-called mainline churches flatfooted, the historical (mostly White) churches with strong denominational ties (Methodist, Presbyterian, Congregationalist, et cetera). Most of these aren't native to the United States. Most of these got their start in Protestant Europe, and they've therefore been less susceptible to nationalistic cooptation. You're less apt to hear "I'm Proud to Be an American" sung in a Lutheran church than in a non-denominational one. In fact, a few years ago I got a mailer inviting me to the non-denominational Hope Church here in Lenox where, on the Sunday before Thanksgiving, there would be singing of patriotic songs and hymns–which, good as some of those songs might be, I'd never advocate we sing at Sunday worship.

See, we were flatfooted largely because the people who tended to be involved with the historic mainline were conservative in temperament, reserved, quiet, respectful of others, as opposed to outgoing and radical and even aggressive. Moreover, the habit of church-going had become so ingrained that our people had, and still have, a hard time articulating what their faith is about, why they're involved with the church or even with their church (church being a very localized thing).

This makes all the more unlikely their articulating how their faith might look out there in the world. What does Christian public life look like? To many in the mainline like

us, it simply looks like being a good neighbor, quietly going about your business, giving to charity, and funding public entities like schools and fire companies, libraries and police departments.

An aside: I've heard tell of a town somewhere in "middle America" a generation ago where there was given out an annual "Good Christian Award." One year a prominent Jewish member of the community won it–and no one thought this was strange or maybe misnamed.

We of the mainline (which you might feel yourself to be, or might not), often called cradle Christians, had no conversion experience to draw on. We were more like fish trying to describe wetness: it's just what is.

But suddenly there was a vocal new cohort in our public life, and they didn't share our assumptions. They rather concentrated on being able to articulate their faith, and moreover to those who don't share it, all with the aim that they might come to share it. In short, they had an agenda, in its full intention hidden but more and more seen by those not in it. The Moral Majority came at politics and policy. Focus on the Family came at education, children, and the home. Most recently Project 2025 (which I haven't read because I like to sleep at night) came at it all–public, private, and everything in between.

But now: Matthew 25 Christians, one here, one there, a few more coming to Congress while we've long sat quietly in the pews. As the New York Times explains Sen. Warnock and others for whom he's blazed a bit of trail: "In the New Testament's book of Matthew, chapter 25, Jesus tells his disciples that if they offer care to the most vulnerable in society, they are also offering devotion to him. 'For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me,' Jesus said, according to Matthew's author. 'I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.'"

"It's a famous passage of scripture," the article goes on to explain. "It's also a favorite reference for the new wave of religious Democrats heading to Washington. James Talarico of Texas, Adam Hamilton of Kansas and Sarah Trone Garriott of Iowa all wove the verses into their campaigns — and won. If Christian nationalism is a shorthand for the dominant religious politics of the right, Matthew 25 may be the key to understanding the new religious left.

"The bulk of Matthew 25 is focused on two parables," the article expounds, which we know because we've spent the last two Sundays on these, "[one] of the ten virgins and the [other on the] talents… But the Democratic politicians [cited here] generally focus on the end of the chapter, which is softer and more soaring in its rhetoric. It speaks of hunger and thirst, nakedness and need, and is one of the best-known passages of Christian scripture. 'It's so vivid and so arresting and so colorful and so dramatic,' Dale Allison, a professor at Princeton Theological Seminary who studies Matthew, said. 'When you hear it once, you remember it.'

"It describes a future judgment day, with Jesus sitting on a throne surrounded by hosts of angels. Before him are the world's people. Those who have helped the most in need with food, drink and clothing are welcomed into the kingdom of heaven. Those who have not are cast out."

Which might be a detail that we get snagged on. The question of consequence for our failure to live up, the worrisome drawing out of some eternal punishment: we might get snagged on this.

If so, it's worth recognizing that this is the one and only time Jesus mentions such a thing, really the one and only time such a thing as eternal punishment is mentioned in all the Bible. To be sure, there's talk elsewhere of casting out, there's talk of weeping and gnashing of teeth, there's talk of fire, though as purifying and not merely punishing. But there's nowhere else thought of punishment that goes on forever. It's only here, which makes the question less, "Is this true?" and more "Why here? Why is Jesus raising such stakes here? Why is the writer of the Gospel of Matthew remembering Jesus as doing so here?"

What happens next: what happens next according to Matthew is the note, "When Jesus had finished saying all these things…" and what "all these things" might well mean is not just these three parables and perhaps not even the several chapters just prior, the several chapters of enigmatic teaching that these parables cap off, but *all* these things, everything of Matthew, everything of Jesus' life as a teacher and preacher, which according to Matthew he very much was.

Really, Jesus according to Matthew had a lot to say. Really, Jesus according to Matthew was well-versed in the Jewish mode of scripture and teaching, well of the faith

that the things of his concern, while far beyond what can be summed up or captured in word, are though articulable in some way, able to be communicated by word if but in part.

Matthew imagines Jesus as communicative in word while also in presence and action, and so this capping off, "When Jesus had finished saying all of these things: "it names something more significant than just that he had completed his story, or his set of three stories, but that he had completed his life as a teacher, he had at last said all of crucial importance that he had to say, that he spent his adult life saying. For now, indeed, according to Matthew, when Jesus had finished saying all of these things, he said to his disciples, 'You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.'"

Jesus had reached the moment when the stakes were high indeed, high for he himself now facing the cross, high also for his name in the world which would go on without him, with his work in the world all done in his name which would be done by those who'd followed and learned but might still be struggling to understand the full weight of it– justice for the least of these, justice for the least.

See, those who would remain to continue on in his name had better get it right. Those who'd continue, who would live and serve in his name: they'd better get it right.

Because not everyone is going to sit down and study it all. Not everyone who never knew Jesus in the flesh, on the path, is going to sit down and catch up on the back story, study the finer points of Christology and cosmology, bone up on the missional aspect of the faith and the understanding of sin and sanctification. Not everyone is going to become fluent in the prophetic tradition and the struggle of divine law and social order, or of the mysteries of long tradition and ripe time when Christ is born unto us to redeem the time and mark a centerpoint in creation and history. Some people, most people, are going to have but a cursory understanding of it all, have but light if also intuitive experience of it all.

It's been interesting to see how this all plays out. As Christianity in the United States has recently become an evermore grotesque version of itself, as it's become marred by American nationalism and White jingoism and Protestant banality, it's been interesting to see how non-Christians in the wider public have essentially said, "That doesn't seem quite right." The cross on the flag, the image of the cross drawn with AK-47s and their crosshairs, a confession to Christ belied by a more actualized faith in military might or financialized

power: as these of sacrilege have been paraded around, it's been interesting to see members of the public who are not church-goers, who are not Bible-readers, who are not allied with any faith tradition, who are thoroughly secular in their imagining, say essentially, "This seems wrong. This doesn't seem to resemble the Jesus I've heard about all my life but never paid close attention to. He seemed nice."

It's been interesting to be called to account by those who haven't read the books but are actually on to something, on to the truth of it, if from a distance, like those who watched from a distance the things of calvary, the things of Golgotha, Jesus hanging and breathing his last.

Watched from a distance but sensed the truth.

I think of a song that came out of the art-punk underground. By the band King Missile, it was called, "Jesus Was Way Cool," and its lyrics go thus: "Jesus was way cool. Everybody liked Jesus. Everybody wanted to hang out with him. He walked on the water and swam on the land. He would tell these stories and people would listen. He was really cool. If you were blind or lame you just went to Jesus and he would put his hands on you and you would be healed. That's so cool."

The list of cool things continue until comes the climax of the albeit deadbeat song: "But then people got jealous of cool he was so they killed him. But then he rose from the dead. He rose from the dead, and danced around, and went up to heaven. I mean, that's so cool. Jesus was so cool. No wonder there are so many Christians."

And there's no indication that the lyricist of King Missile is one, a confessing Christian. But his accounting of Jesus strikes me as more accurate than, say, for example, Pete Hegseth's vocal and embodied claims.

I happen to like Christ the King Sunday, or if you prefer Reign of Christ Sunday. Though it's a relatively new feast day on the church calendar, and it has no direct scriptural cause, and though I have no experience of having or still less wanting a king in my life, it being thus a metaphor for Jesus that's inert to me at least, I like the feast day for how it came to be.

First celebrated in 1925, it is of Pope Pius's time in the papacy, a time when the Vatican was surrounded by Italy in the thrall of Fascism. Mussolini had been Prime Minister for three years at that point, but his ultranationalist agenda had already taken shape, and

was beginning to infect other nations: Germany, of course, but also Hungary, Greece, Croatia, Romania.

Not that the pope had as much sway in these other nations as he had in Italy. But the sideswipe remained, and so remains, Pope Pious with his feast day trolling the trolls. *Christ* is King, Christ and none other. *God* is sovereign, God and no other. Though sovereign nations do also reign; though national self-determination would offer, in the world to follow its horrifying World Wars, our best chance for peace or at least for laying down arms; in this fallen world where good enough is often (always?) the best we can arrange; in this unfinished world yet lurching toward completion, painfully lurching toward that glorious end, though lurching two steps forward and one step back: in this materialist realm, this created order, God is sovereign above all, the Lord God Yahweh the only true majesty of our hearts and lives, of all history and all creation.

Mussolini can bark from his balcony. Hitler can goosestep his way through his camps. Rulers who rely on testosterone and lies can do pushups and shame any whose hair isn't coiffed just right. And their weird thrall can capture the minds of many for a time. But God is sovereign. Christ is king, he whose throne is the cross of self-giving love, he whose rule is marked by mercy and the sanctification of selfless care, he whose majesty is best to be found in the humble things of the world.

Truly, the kingdom is the realm where the least of the world get succor and care, and where the truest followers hope for such kindly outpouring, the truest disciples offer their hands and hearts to make it all so.

So, we've reached the end. Another year of journeying with Jesus. Another year to bless unto our understanding what we hope might be true. Another year to work to make it so, with our meager imaginings, our imperfect efforts.

Wherever we might have fallen short, however we might have been altogether too meager, we begin again next week.

There is hope.

Thanks be to God.