

**Sermon prep for November 23, 2008**  
**Christ the King**

**Readings:**

***Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24***

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.

***Ephesians 1:15-23***

Or

***1 Corinthians 15:20-28***

***Matthew 25:31-46***

Jesus said, "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 that 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 who are members of my family, you did it to me.' Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that 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."

### **Content thoughts:**

- 1990: Ted Turner makes the now-infamous statement that "Christianity is a religion for losers."
- Paradox between shepherd and king
  - In the time of Jesus, shepherds were sort of the "anti-king." Scorned, looked down upon, suspicious.
  - Yet they will be among the first to receive the message that the Anointed One has come into the world.
    - Even before the kings!
    - But both kings and shepherds are called to be witnesses to the birth of the Anointed One, the Christ, the Messiah.

### **Burning questions:**

- What does it mean to be a Christian "loser"?
  - Change one letter from loser to get to loner
- Is it worse to be a loser, or to be unaware that you are a loser?

### **Theological context:**

- Christianity is a religion for losers—indeed, all faith traditions have this strain to them. Many faith traditions recognize the incompleteness of the human, and offer the goal of completing something through an adherence to that faith tradition.
  - What are we completing?
    - Religion from Latin meaning "to bind back or again."
    - Implies a connection to others, to God through the life of faith
    - An active connection, and one that pushes us to be active (back to Matthew)
  - So, I believe it's not oneself that is meant to be complete, but they we are meant to complete each other, and the world, through the actions our faith calls us to.
- According to Christian theology, we are all lost, we are all losers. All have fallen short of what's been asked of us by the Divine and by our fellow man.
- Jesus was a loser as well—born a carpenter's son, poor, rejected by his hometown, abandoned by his followers, and eventually killed in a humiliating and excruciating way.
- Notice in the gospel that Jesus isn't talking about believing. He's talking about doing.
  - We've all been in the role of loser. And we have the opportunity also to be those aiding the loser.
- Advent is a penitential season, a time to remember both our loser status and the loser status of others.
  - God is calling out to us to recognize that the true loser is the one who can't see he is lost, who actively works

against being found, and stubbornly will not be part of the community

- Ezekiel says God will feed the fat and strong sheep with justice
  - When the fat and strong cease to care about the other sheep—indeed, the world providing for their fatness and strength—that’s when they hit the chop! (Matthew)
  - Striking, too, is that much of what passes these days as Christianity, particularly in some strains of evangelical or fundamental Christianity, is that God desires us to be fat and strong sheep—at least materially.
- As long as we see religion as a sign of weakness—of being a loser—the true work of winning (if we can even call it that), of completing the work God calls us to in the world, of completing each other in community, of completing the world can never begin.
  - Victory is hearing the call of God and the needs of others and the world and working, in whatever way seem best to us, toward the fulfillment, the completion, of the world and each other.
  - Let’s prepare for a new coming of the King, the Shepherd.

Christ the King  
November 23, 2008

Michael Oxley

In 1990, the media mogul Ted Turner made what is a now-infamous comment about we here gathered today. He said, "Christianity is a religion for losers." And while many people were outraged by this remark—and rightfully so—on this Christ the King Sunday I've been puzzling over the word "loser," and wondering what, if any, importance it might have for us.

Because, in a way, I think Mr. Turner was right. Christianity is a loser religion for losers.

Think about the events that we acknowledge as important for Christianity. Who was Jesus' family? Joseph, an elderly carpenter and Mary, a young woman who had somehow become pregnant before she was married. Jesus is born in Bethlehem, even though his family lived in Nazareth, because the people of Judea had been forced to return to ancestral towns for taxation purposes by the conquering state of Rome and its Emperor. And even among the Judeans, Jesus' family doesn't do well. They're forced to take shelter in a barn, where Mary goes into labor and gives birth among livestock. Among their first visitors? Shepherds, who in Jesus' time were outsiders—scorned, looked down upon, suspected. Shepherds were sort of the "anti-king." Yet they will be among the first to receive the message that the Anointed One has come into the world. Even before the kings!

Think about the events of Jesus' ministry. Rejected by his hometown, he is a homeless preacher and healer in the backwaters and on the back roads of Judea. His followers? Fisherman, tax collectors, prostitutes, paralytics, the possessed. He portrays himself as one of those filthy, outsider shepherds, and tells stories in which shepherds are the good guys. At the end of his life and ministry, he finally goes to the big city, where he is betrayed by one of his closest followers, is subjected to beatings, interrogations, and is finally condemned to die in one of the most humiliating

and excruciating ways possible. His followers are forced into hiding.

Not a very auspicious life, put in those terms.

And what about the members of this faith tradition? We're often reminded—in liturgy, texts, and practices—that we are far from perfect. In fact, there's no way we can ever measure up. We read in Scripture about what kind of people God expects us to be, and we quickly realize...it ain't ever gonna happen. We've lost from the beginning.

So what does this have to do with us? And Christ the King Sunday?

It's a bit of a paradox, isn't it? How do we square the notion of this poor, homeless, marginalized, executed criminal with the idea of his being a King? Or, even more, *THE* King? What about the idea that Jesus identifies with the outsider, the sinner, the shepherd? Even his judge, jury and executioner Pontius Pilate isn't quite sure what to make of it. When he's asked to remove the sign above the crucified Jesus that declares him King, Pilate refuses, not telling us why, but only saying, "What I've written, I've written."

And what does this say about us, the people who have faith that this Jesus is indeed *the* King, the Anointed One, the Christos, the Messiah? The Shepherd? How do we make this work?

If we're not losers, how are we not losers? If we're not shepherds, how are we kings?

Look at the other side of Jesus' life and ministry. The people healed. The possessed rid of their demons. The hungry fed. He died, yes. But was resurrected into an even more glorious, triumphant life. His followers were forced into hiding, yes. But the community of believers grew steadily, almost in spite of itself. And Pentecost brought Jesus' closest students and followers out

dramatically, and proclaimed that Jesus' message and life were for everyone.

Several things always strike me about these re-tellings of the lives of the patriarchs, the prophets, the kings, the leaders and the suffering, the sinners, the sick and hungry, that we hold dear in our faith tradition.

One is that certain defeat seems always to be followed by victory. Granted, sometimes that victory is a long time coming—the people of Israel in slavery in Egypt and in bondage in Babylon spring to mind—or still hasn't yet come.

Another is that these stories are about actions, not beliefs. Look at the gospel for today. Jesus isn't asking his followers to recite certain formulas of belief. He's asking them to do something. Specifically, he's asking his followers to take actions in relationship to others. He's not saying, "Keep your nose clean, pay your bills, change the oil in your car regularly." He's saying, "Look over there at the hungry, at that man in prison, at that woman and her children living in a shelter, that elder who is ill and without health insurance or income enough to buy necessary prescriptions. You want to be Christian? Go take care of them, and you'll be serving me."

Finally, that victory isn't the product of one person. Yes, there is a protagonist, a main character, in many of these stories. But without the people needing help, the people helping them, the people believing enough in the king, the prophet, the master, nothing is ever done. It's takes more than one for the life and work of faith to be complete.

The word religion shares a root with words like ligature, ligament, legato (for us music types). The root can be taken to mean "to tie." So religion, in a sense, means to tie again. But tied to what? To whom?

Perhaps to God. Perhaps to Jesus. Perhaps to the tenets of our faith tradition. But even more, I think, to each other. Because the work of God, the work Jesus calls us to in Matthew and over and over again in other places in the gospels, is action for the benefit—not of God—but of each other. God's creation will never be completed by those who see themselves as complete, whole, self-sufficient, self-reliant. The work we have in the world starts with seeing the holes in ourselves and in others, and recognizing that those holes aren't wounds to be healed. These incompletions in us are indication of where we fit into the body of Christ. Who and where our place is, and how we go about finding and fitting into that community.

We're meant to complete each other. We're meant to complete this world, this creation. Yes, we may even be meant to complete God Godself.

God calls out to us, in every moment, to recognize that the one who truly loses is the one who can't see he is lost, who actively works against being found, and stubbornly will not be part of the community.

The reading from Ezekiel says God will feed the fat and strong sheep with justice. Jesus tells us in Matthew today that if the fat and strong cease to care about the other sheep, and the world providing for their fatness and strength, they may well be sent to the chop!

We can't make a good world alone. We can't make ourselves whole and well alone.

As long as we see our life of faith as a sign of weakness—of being a loser—the true work of winning (if we even need to call it that), of completing the work God calls us to in the world, of completing each other in community, of completing the world, can never begin. Victory is hearing the call of God and the needs of others and the world and working, in whatever way seems best to us, toward the fulfillment, the completion, of

the world and each other. The fulfillment and completion of the world and each other in accordance with Jesus' call and desires, that is victory. That victory is royal. That victory is that of the body of Christ...Christ the King.

This Sunday finds us on the cusp of Advent, a period of waiting and penitence. Advent is a penitential season, a time to remember both our loser status and the loser status of others. We've all been in the role of loser. And we have the opportunity also to be those aiding the loser. Not just ponder our loser status, but to take on a loser role, and act as shepherds to each other, and to this world we find ourselves in. That world we work in and for, these people we work for and with, is a kingly place and people. The right kind of world for a King coming into the world once again.

Let's prepare this Advent for a new coming of the King, the Shepherd.