November 22, 2026
The Sunday Last before Advent – Year A
Feast of Christ the King
Trinity, St. Louis
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24
Psalm 100
Ephesians 1:15-23
Matthew 25:31-46

Grace to you and peace from God who is and who was and who is to come. Amen.

When you pick up a new novel, do you turn to the end, to see how everything turns out; maybe to find out who did it? I admit that, in some cases, the beginning and the end is all I ever read. More often, once I know how the plot was resolved, I go back to the beginning and savor all the twists and turns. Or, when picking up a book again, I see things I had missed before. The end casts the entire story in a different light.

The same is true of movies. Who doesn't shout at the screen, "Don't go in there! But they never listen. The characters, whether on the page or on the screen, make the same decisions over and over and over again.

In the last few weeks, the passages we've been hearing from the 25th chapter of Matthew present us with vivid pictures of the end of things. For Matthew's Jesus, the stakes are high, there's not much time left before his arrest and all that follows. A bridegroom shows up after everyone's asleep. A business owner requires an accounting of the investments she's made in her staff. And, today, the Son of Man separates sheep from goats. The characters in these stories all have their parts to play, just like Ahab in *Moby Dick*, or Freddie in *A Nightmare on Elm Street*.

We, however, know the end of the stories. We have the option of looking closely at how the plots develop, of seeing, in a new light, things we had forgotten. And, because you and I are not written into those stories…yet, we have the luxury of examining our own lives and, perhaps, rewriting the script.

Let's start with the setting. We call today the Feast of Christ the King because a century ago, after the end of WWI, a man in Rome looked around the world, and didn't much like what he saw. Armed conflict had ceased, but there was no true peace. The empires of the Hohenzollerns, the Romanovs, the Habsburgs, and the Ottomans had all vanished. Unbridled, often violent, nationalism was on the rise, along with authoritarian leaders like Mussolini, Stalin, and Hitler. (*Sound familiar?*)

This Italian fellow, who happened to be Pope Pius XI, wrote a letter about what he was seeing, urging people to seek the "peace of Christ in the Kingdom of Christ."[1] In 1925, in a second letter,[2] he established the feast we celebrate today: the Feast of Christ the King.

If you have joined, in body or in spirit, a "No Kings" protest in the past few months, this image of Christ as King might feel jarring. After all, no means no, yes? But there are many ways in which we are ideally suited to understand a king – like Christ. At least twice a week, we say that we get it. In both the Creed ("and his kingdom will have no end") and in the Lord's Prayer ("your kingdom come on earth, as in heaven"), we say that we believe in a state of being that is without end, and quite unlike the world we know now.

Holy Scripture is full of royal imagery for God and for Jesus: from the First Book of Chronicles, *yours is the kingdom, O Lord, and you are exalted as head above all* (29:11), to the Psalms, *Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool*. (110:1) to Revelation 19:15), via Handel's great chorus *Hallelujah*: *King of kings and Lord of lords*. Even Paul, in today's lesson from Ephesians (1:23), writes, *and he has put all things under his feet*.

In the fourth century, as the Church became the beneficiary, and then the ally of, the power of late imperial Rome, it's small wonder that our images of Christ as King came to look less like the Christ of the gospels, and more like a weapon-wielding earthly monarch. The royal Jesus that Matthew offers us is homeless, sick, imprisoned, hungry and naked. This is the Jesus who stoops to empty himself, taking the form of a slave.

Which King Jesus should we choose? The one enthroned in glory, attended by angels, or the one sitting at an intersection with a cardboard sign? Episcopal priest and theologian Fleming Rutledge insists that we must see both … at the same time.

She writes that the secret is that "the Son who 'sits upon his glorious throne with all the nations gathered before him' (Matt. 25:31-2) is the same one who, at the very apex of his cosmic power, reveals that the universe turns upon a cup of water given to the littlest ones in his name"'[3]

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[1] *Ubi arcano Dei consilio*, para. 49. 23 December 1922.

[2] *Quas primas*, 11 December 1925. It is interesting to note that the *Lateran Treaty*, which recognized the Pope's sovereignty over Vatican City and finally resolved the conflicts that had stood between the Italian government and the former Papal States since 1860, was signed in 1929.

[3] Fleming Rutledge, *Royalty Stoops*. https://www.religion-online.org/article/royalty-stoops-matt-2531-46/

As Mtr Rutledge said, the secret is that the God we worship as the God of power and might, is the very same God who is present in the panhandler we cross the street to avoid. No wonder we have trouble seeing this kind of King. To us, it makes about as much sense as our God appearing in a manger and on a cross.

Highlighting this ancient tension between the two natures of Christ, divine and human, helps me to understand a particular feature of today's gospel. What leaps off the page when I read this story is that everyone is surprised! Everyone. Sheep and goats, righteous and unrighteous. We hear the phrase "when was it?" four times in this gospel story. When was it? No one had figured out that when they were dealing with the "least of these" – the vulnerable, the marginalized, and the overlooked – they were also encountering the Lord of heaven and earth.

So, fellow plot watchers, what do we do with that knowledge? If we know that the characters in the story are surprised, is there a way for us not to be surprised? God continues to show up where we least expect God to be. The command to care for the most vulnerable is clear throughout Scripture; the real surprise is God's promise to be revealed to us when we do.

The plot of today's story shows us that an experience of God's presence is not limited to some mountain-top experience, or the end of a grueling spiritual journey. The experience of God's presence is also connected to actual, physical bodies in their actual, physical circumstances.

In John's gospel, we hear Jesus say, *This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you* (John 15:12). Today, we hear Matthew's more plain-spoken Jesus say, "Want to see me? Look to the needs of your neighbor and, especially, your most vulnerable neighbors in the here and now."

Today, both the sheep and the goats cry in surprise, "Lord, when was it?" In other words, "if we'd only known it was you! Why didn't you tell us?"

Thorton Wilder makes this point beautifully in *Our Town*. The play's central character, Emily, is given a chance, following her death, to view a scene from her past. She is told that it cannot be some obviously important day but should be a fairly ordinary time from her life. She is told that re-visiting even the *least important* day of her life would teach her something very important.

Emily chooses to re-visit her 12th birthday, only to discover a huge number of things about that day she had completely forgotten. More than that, however, she is stunned to see how fast life moves and how little she or anyone paid attention to what was happening when it was happening.

In the end, Emily cannot bear to watch. "I can't. I can't go on," she cries. "We don't have time to look at one another . . . Do any human beings ever realize life while they

live it?" she asks. The answer is pretty much no, Emily is told. For the vast majority of folks, being alive is "To move about in a cloud of ignorance."

Lord, when was it you? Why didn't you say something? In our own cloud of ignorance, we often don't live in the here and now; we don't see who is right in front of us.

We spend a lot of energy planning for the future. How many of you have every day between now and Christmas all planned out, at least in your head? Meals to prepare, and presents to buy and wrap. Sometimes, the opposite is true, and we spend a lot of time looking over our shoulder with a mix of nostalgia and regret. That means almost all of us are focused on the future or the past; what we will do or what we didn't do.

At this point, it's worth remembering a scene in the often-overlooked classic spiritual film, *Kung Fu Panda*, when Master Oogway says to Po:

> "Yesterday is history,
> tomorrow is a mystery,
> and today is a gift...
> that's why they call it the present"

Because we know the end of this story, you and I should remember that some of the most important things we do in life are things that, at the time, seem to have no real significance. Like passing by Jesus in the hospital, or at the grocery store, or with a kind phone call or email, or at the Trinity Food Pantry or Sundy Hot Lunch. Maybe even across your own dinner table.

But, if we've been paying attention, we shouldn't be surprised at this. "When was it?" It's happening right now. The good news is that Jesus is really and truly available to us in the actual, concrete needs of those around us. When we reach out to those who are struggling, we will find that God is blessing our efforts and meeting our deepest needs.

We cannot change the story line after we close the covers of the book or watch the last film credit roll by on the screen. But here and now, in the light of these stories about ultimate endings, you and I are living a story line that we can change.

So, then, my friends in Christ, with the eyes of our hearts enlightened, let us, today, decide to look, really look, into every face we see, knowing that there, we will catch a glimpse of the God whose will it is to restore all things in the well-beloved Son, the King of kings and Lord of lords. And so, we pray:

Hasten, O God, the coming of *thy* kingdom; and grant that we *thy* servants, who now live by faith, may with joy behold *thy* Son at his coming in glorious majesty; even Jesus Christ, our only Mediator and Advocate. Amen.

Happy Thanksgiving to you all.