

Matthew 25:31-46

Last Judgment

November 8, 2020

5-year old Johnny was in the kitchen as his mother made supper. She asked him to go into the pantry and get her a can of tomato soup, but he didn't want to go in alone. It was an old house. The pantry was located under a stairway with no light in it. *"It's dark in there and I'm scared."* She asked again, and he persisted. Finally she said, *"It's OK--Jesus will be in there with you."* Johnny walked hesitantly to the door and slowly opened it. He peeked inside, saw it was dark, and started to leave when all at once an idea came, and he said: *"Jesus, if you're in there, would you hand me that can of tomato soup?"*

On the serious side, however, just like that little boy, we fear things that are unknown. We are afraid when we're suddenly caught off our guard and don't know what to do. We fear when we don't know what we're up against, and we don't know what will happen to us. We fear when something is much bigger of a challenge than we ever thought possible. We fear something when we are not prepared.

If there is one thing the year 2020 has taught us, it's this: be prepared. Were we prepared for a pandemic? Were we prepared for unrest in our nation? Were we prepared to go back to school? Were we prepared to live a "new normal"? In more ways than one, 2020 has felt like the end of the world! But what about "THE END", when Jesus comes back in the same way He came, to judge, to resurrect, to save? How can we be certain that we are prepared for it? This morning, in our text, we see Jesus' answer to that question.

Jesus begins: **"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left."** Our text is Jesus' last parable that he teaches his disciples. In a few days he will die on the cross. Even though 3 days later he would be raised from the dead, he would be leaving them 40 days later. As Jesus was getting his disciples ready for his departure, he wanted them to remember these last words. Jesus wanted to calm their fears that they might have upon his return to judge the world.

"I shall return," said General Douglas MacArthur as he left the Philippines in 1942. Under a lightning fast Japanese attack which had superiority on land, at sea and in the air, he was forced to retreat to Australia. But from that moment he was determined to liberate what was then still a United States possession, the Philippine Islands. *"I shall return,"* he said. He wanted his last words to the Philippine people to be a message of hope. Two and half years later, he did return. He spoke these words: *"People of the Philippines, I have returned!"*

Last words can be very powerful. Perhaps you have been there for someone's last words: someone who had time to think about their last words and wanted to say something important to you. Maybe those last words inspire you, maybe they haunt you. Whichever way, last words have a way of sticking with you. Jesus knew that. Jesus' return is certain. There is nothing that anyone can do to stop that from happening. Jesus is making an outrageous claim when he spoke these words to his disciples. He is that that back there in our Old Testament reading in Daniel 6, Jesus is saying, *"That's me!"* The man, who standing in front of them in sandals and dirty and dusty feet, would one day return in all of his glory. He's telling them: *"A time of judgment will come, and I will be the divine judge!"* His words are clear: He WILL sit on his throne. All the nations WILL be gathered. He WILL separate them one from another. Notice, when not if. Will, not might. A clear separation WILL happen.

The separation picture that Jesus uses would be a picture common to the people of his day. Like a shepherd separates the sheep and the goats, Jesus will separate the people of the world into two groups. **"All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left."** Now I have never raised sheep or goats. From what I understand, they are different animals. Sheep are more docile and obedient. Goats are more stubborn and defiant. They were separated at night by their shepherd so that the goats didn't harm the sheep.

On the Last Day, the Good Shepherd will separate the mass of humanity before Him. While on earth, his true followers coexist and roam around with unbelievers. But there will be a separating on the Last Day. Once and for all eternity, the Good Shepherd will usher the sheep – believers – to his right into the green pastures of paradise. The Good Shepherd will direct the goats – the unbelievers – to his left into the gloomy dungeons of hell. Judgment Day will be a time of sorting and separation. The basis for the Shepherd's sorting is not what they did but what they are – sheep and goats. Not good and bad sheep. Not religious and irreligious goats. Just sheep and goats.

Jesus is the Judge seating on His throne. He makes his judgment on the basis of the Gospel, not on the basis of works. **“He who believes and is baptized will be saved”** (Mark 16:16). The sheep are the ones who took God at his Word and trusted him to forgive them and rescue them through Christ's perfect life and glorious resurrection. How can Jesus know who the sheep and goats are? He can look into their hearts and see the faith that they have in him. How do the believers show that they are believers? Jesus tells us. **“For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.”**

Their faith in Jesus showed itself in all the little things that they did out of love for Jesus. It was not that those little things earned faith. It was the things that they did flowing out of love of Jesus. For those who don't believe in Jesus, the opposite is true as well. Since there is no faith in Jesus, there is no love of Jesus coming through actions. For the people who don't believe in Jesus, that last day will be a terrifying day. But for those who believe in Jesus, they will hear the comforting words of their Savior: **“Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.”**

Judgment Day is coming. But it isn't something to panic about. There is no reason to be terrified. We know where we belong. We belong to Jesus not because of anything we did, but because of what he did. Therefore, we join with the Apostle John in saying as he speaks the last words of the Bible: **“Amen. Come, Lord Jesus. The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people. Amen.”**