

Reign of Christ Year A Matt: 25:21-46

Rev. Carol Rodin

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Today is the last day of the church year, Reign of Christ of Christ Sunday, and on this last day we read about the Second Coming or the judgment day.

I'm going to ask you today to take a minute to think about how you imagine the place where the day of judgment happens. Pause for a minute and think about what that place is like.

Where did you imagine that place to be? Did you visualize the cloudy gates of heaven that we see so often in the world of cartoons? ? Is it someplace in between heaven and earth...a kind of brighter nebulous no mans land? Do any of you see that final judgment scene right here on earth?

Was it a happy scene or a sad scene, was it exciting or terrifying?

Did you see it as the end of everything...or as the dawn of a new age?

When I did a google image search of the second coming of Christ, there were almost no images of the day of judgment portrayed as an event here on earth, the images were mostly of a place between the earth and the heaven.

The Renaissance art I saw showed Jesus suspended between heaven and earth with others organized in a re ordered almost geometrical shape.

The day of judgment is often spoken about as the end of time, but I think it might be better understood as the end of an age that marks the ushering in of a new age.

In other words, The Second Coming is not about the end of the world as much as it is about the ushering in of a new era... seen in this way ,the reign of Christ and the final judgment, is not so much about THE end, as it is aboutwhat is the most important in the end.

As far as location goes, I'd like to suggest that we look at it today as if it is happening right here on earth, let's imagine a new era has begun and that all of our current political systems have fallen away.

In their place, it's Christ who is reigning as God's representative here on earth. What would be different, what would change?

Matthew suggests (and by the way, Matthew is the only gospel writer who includes this story...it's not found in any of the other gospels) but Matthew suggests that Christ's first action would be somewhat vindictive and exclusionary...he would separate the "sheep from the goats", the sheep we are told are blessed by God and inherit the kingdom prepared for them... While the goats are asked to depart into the eternal fire.

It seems the difference between the goats and the sheep is that the sheep have earned their right as members of this new kingdom by their good works and the goats have failed to earn enough credit to enter into the kingdom by their failure to do good works, they are instead doomed to live in the eternal fire.

This idea is troubling, it seems to contradict the message of God's grace, the idea that God's love is unearned, a gift that is freely given to us. And ...it's universal, it's inclusive. But this passage portrays an exclusionary, violent, even vindictive God.

Then, in the same passage, this idea of God seems to be directly contradicted. We are told that Christ is not the exalted King over all, but is

actually embodied in the most marginalized, is present in the lowliest of all people, the weakest members of society, the powerless.

It seems I'm not the only one troubled by this passage, there are many many different ideas of what to do with this thorny problem because it doesn't seem consistent with what we hear in the rest of the Bible about the character of God.

Some of the ideas include:

- 1) Matthew just didn't get it, he's just plain old missing the point.
- 2) Another is... We read all of the messages of non-violence in the Bible wrong because we have a cultural preference for non violence. So our cultural filter causes us to get it wrong.
- 3) Or, Matthew speaks for two different points of view, the exalted vindictive God is one point of view and the lowly God who is incarnate in the powerless is another point of view. This is consistent with much of the Old Testament where different points of view seem to be preserved almost as a record of the progression or the development of Hebrew thought...this theory suggests this is why we have two creation stories...they come from two different communities who experienced God in different ways at different times.

And there are many, many more ideas that try to find a rational reason for the tension we find in this passage.

But The idea that seemed the most attractive to me twas given by Catholic Feminist Theologian Barbara Reid, who suggests that

“One interpretative possibility is that God does not change from being all loving and gracious to becoming vindictive and violent at the end time. “

She maintains that... “divine love remains constant, God does not actively mete out cruel punishment, but those who refuse to imitate the gratuitous, unearned love of God choose instead to fuel the cycles of violence, and thus by their choice, (they) become victims of this violence themselves. “

By their choice...we are offered grace but it our choice to accept or reject it.

In light of this view it's interesting to note that God does not throw the sheep into the eternal fire but instead the reading says ... these will go away into eternal punishment. These will go away, suggest to me that they have some choice in the matter, they're not being thrown into the fire by the hand of God, but walk away.

Reid goes on to illustrate her point with another of Matthews parables..

“The Parable of Forgiveness Aborted from Matt:(18:23-35) where the first servant who is forgiven a huge amount is expected to understand the king's behavior and to replicate it. Instead, he does the opposite with another slave who is his underling. ...Love and graciousness are freely given by God, but the price tag is to go and do likewise. “

What is your life like when you imitate the graciousness of God and respond with love and grace to the need that is set before you?

Mother Teresa took the directive in this passage to heart and made it the focus of her life's work. She says... “in serving the poor we care for our own souls by imitating the character of God himself. Only in heaven, will we understand how much we owe the poor for helping us to love God like we should”

This is a radically different understanding of serving...

Instead of taking the love of God to others as we serve, it is IN the serving of others that we meet Christ face to face and actively practice loving God.

The new kingdom is unlike the old kingdom. It is a new way of being that calls us to throw out, to throw over, to overthrow the old way of being.

This is a difficult text that comes on the heels of several difficult parables over the past few weeks. We have had to really struggle with these stories and to challenge ourselves to examine how difficult it is to follow Christ.

I think this may be, because the kind of community we are called to be, requires much of us, it is a difficult and at times confusing road that we walk.

This week at St. Paul/Resurreccion during my Spanish class a woman came into the church looking for help. After the class was over, I rushed out the door to make a meeting here at Christ Church, while Deacon Robin Ringland engaged the woman in conversation. She had been kicked out of friendship house and was looking for a place to stay. She was offered a bus ticket to Seattle where there are multiple homeless shelters to choose from, but she declined the offer, whatever Robin suggested, she rejected finally Robin who had 30 kids coming for youth group in the next ten minutes, had to ask the woman to leave. "Are you kicking me out?" the woman said"? Robin had to reply yes. It was a frustrating, difficult decision for her.

Aren't there times in all of our lives when we are confronted with serving the poor, the homeless, the hungry, the sick, the lonely when the work is hard, the answers don't come easily.

On the other hand there are times when it's as simple as looking someone in the eye and simply listening to what they have to say.

Maybe on this day we are invited to remember that the kingdom of God, or the commonwealth of God is as fully available now as it was 2,000 years ago. We are invited to remember that there is a difference between living according to the political power of our day and living according to the rule of Christ.

Is the Second Coming of Christ something that we expect will happen suddenly, without notice, or will the Second Coming happen when we turn away from our human political structures and begin to cooperate with God's divine plan which is founded on the directive to feed the hungry, comfort the dying, welcome the stranger.

On Reign of Christ Sunday we are invited to remember that the Reign of Christ is available now...we bring it into being when we choose to live as if it is God who reigns.

It's not a prediction about what will happen, but a statement about what matters in the end.

What matters is ...Loving our neighbor and recognizing the reflection of God in all who are in need.