

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Matthew 25:31-46
Reign of Christ and Memorial Sunday

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Gordon Allaby

ON THE WAY TO PARADISE

Today is the last day of the liturgical year. It is called the reign of Christ Sunday. Next Sunday is the first Sunday of Advent, and the beginning of a new church year.
Today is also our Memorial Sunday.

Endings are often measurable points for reflection. That is why Memorial Sunday is today.

The lectionary readings also present points for measuring... that prompt deep reflection.

The Ezekiel text follows a harsh reprimand against unjust political leaders, and ends with God's judgment on the greedy who get fat forcing others to starve.

>Sounds a bit like the rhetoric from the "occupy" movement.
Seems like nothing is new.....

If Jesus were alive today, I don't think he would in a corner office looking down on the remnants of the tent city.

Because God doesn't like it when people use their position or influence to get stronger, so that they can better shove the weaker aside,... making the vulnerable even weaker.

In contrast to the greedy and selfish, using Messianic language, Yahweh presents self as a loving and caring shepherd that cares for, protects and loves the sheep.

In this passage, Yahweh speaks in the first person, "I", over 15 times:
"I will rescue them... I will bring them out".... and so forth.

God takes this *benevolent, serving others first* model..... very seriously.

We humans are basically social creatures, so greed and selfishness must be an acquired trait. Therefore, something must have happened to make some people so fearful and insecure that their lives become destructive to a healthy community, ...and thus to themselves, too..
The trauma could have happened during childhood or later in life.

Regardless of the reason, God keeps telling us that we are loved and cared for,..... andwarns us of the terminally destructive path that the greedy are taking.

The Matthew text presents the same message as presented in Ezekiel.
It is a parable, in the genre of the Jewish apocalyptic tradition.

In those days, they didn't have Grimm's Fairy Tales or Walt Disney, but they still told good stories that often used animals, such as sheep and goats.

In this story, Jesus doesn't allow room for excuses. He clearly, and pointedly presents the lesson that how we live today and every day matters,. because our life choices tell our true story.

Another story:

There was a small city, much like any aspiring small city, except that this city named all its streets after names and places from the Bible.

In a fine, perfectly painted Victorian house, on the corner of Matthew Street and Ezekiel Avenue, lived Ethel. Ethel lived alone, she was a widow.

Ethel kept her place in pristine condition. She had a beautiful, well manicured yard, and there wasn't a weed to be found in her lawn. She spent many hours maintaining her place, and to be sure nothing was bothered, she had a "keep off the grass" sign in the front yard.

A few houses down from hers, on Ezekiel Avenue, lived Pearl. Pearl was also a widow.

Pearl's old house desperately needed to be painted; it was a shade of faded white. Her yard appeared unkempt, too. There wasn't much grass to be seen, and most of the front yard was a big crater, as if a large tree had big dug out. But, no one seems to remember how it got there. The neighbourhood kids loved it because they thought it was a giant sand box, and that's probably why she didn't have much of a lawn. The grass didn't have a chance with all the children trampling it down.

Even though Pearl's place didn't look very nice, she did have a couple of apple trees in her yard, and strawberry plants lined the foundation of her house. Every little stomach knew where to get a free snack of fruit, and sometimes cookies came with it.

Pearl went to the same church where Ethel was a member.

Ethel was active and well respected in her church. She rarely put money in the offering bag, but she did contribute significantly to special causes, especially the popular ones. There is even a brass plaque on the organ with her name on it..... because she was the one who bought it for the church.

Pearl always put a little something in the offering bag, and she helped out some in the church too, but folks didn't know what to think of her. She seemed a bit eccentric, and it was obvious that she didn't manage her money well.

And, there were rumblings that she had been seen going into the local tavern, from time to time, and that she was even spotted driving a man home, with his own car. It doesn't matter if he was too drunk to drive. A respectable woman shouldn't do such a thing, at such a time in the night.

To be sure, the gossip was muffled with the notation that it was a shame that she wasn't coping very well with her losses. Her husband and three children died in a car accident.

People would say that she changed after the tragedy, that she lost control of her life, and that she should be more careful with what she does with what little money she has.

Too often she has given money to those who will just squander it away.

Those people who don't have real jobs, and for a reason....., and everyone understood what that meant.

“Poor old Pearl,” was the mantra, “She’s lost control.”

In comparison, people would comment on how well Ethel was doing since her husband passed away. They’d say, “It’s a pity she never had any children, because she’s alone so much. Still, she’s really taking care of herself. She not showing her loss and sorrow at all.” “She’s holding herself together quite well.”, they’d say.

Everyone knew that Ethel had a bit of an edge to her; she was generous with giving out pieces of her mind. Yet, that was understood, considering her loss.

Even her aversion to children made sense.

Because Ethel’s house was on the corner, children couldn’t resist taking a short cut through her yard, in spite of the big “Keep off the grass sign.” They were in hurry to see if the strawberries were ripe at Pearl’s place, and a sign is fun to jump over, anyways.

Ethel would hear them out front, and stomp out her front door and stand on her porch, with folded arms. She just stand there like a statue.

What we do with our arms is very telling. Body language usually tells the truth.

Crossed arms are a sign of self protection, of insecurity, and maybe a little fear. We are unconsciously protecting ourselves when we cross our arms.

Bending the head down, slouching the shoulders is also a defensive gesture.

When we are comfortable, when we are interested in and trusting of those before us, we tend to be more open in our stance..... and with our arms.

Ethel had good reason to be defensive / to protect herself. She was alone, and she knew it. She felt she had to take care of herself and her property—what was hers.

One day, a stranger knocked on her door. He looked a bit tattered and out of place.

In a gentle voice, he asked Ethel, “Do you know where Paradise Street is? I suppose to meet a friend there.”

Ethel had an idea where it was, but she wasn’t about to bother to search for a map for the likes of this guy. A strange man on her doorstep made her nervous.

So, she said, “I really don’t know where Paradise Street is, but I think it may be down that road”, pointing to Ezekiel Avenue.

The stranger thanked her and left. He walked down Ezekiel, and couldn’t help but notice the children digging in the front yard of Pearl’s home. Pearl had just come out with a plate of fresh cookies.

She saw the man standing on the sidewalk in front of her house. She noticed that he looked perplexed, and a bit forlorn.

She called to him, "I have an extra cookie for you. Do you want one?"

A smiling nod and a chocolate chip cookie later, Pearl asked the stranger, "How can I help you?"

The stranger replied, "I'm looking for Paradise....., and before he could finish,..... Pearl interrupted, "Paradise, I'm heading there, too, today. Let's go there together."

All of us, will feel pain. All of us will be wounded and hurt.

Sometimes it happens at a young age. If we're lucky,... we'll get our licks later in life,... and the intensity of the assaults can vary tremendously.

And, the consequences of getting older is that we gather more losses, more hits with the passing of time.

Today is memorial Sunday. We are not only remembering those who have died, but we are also revisiting our losses.

There are other things that take a toll on us, in addition to death.

Divorce, physical losses, aging, failures and bad luck and can all hit us hard.

No doubt, it takes time to reconcile any assault to our well-being.

Yet, how we respond / how we carry on... beyond the shock is critical.

It is tempting to reel back into a defensive stance with folded arms, because no one wants to feel "that" pain again.

It is tempting to siege control in an attempt to build a fortress against assault,and from that lonely enclave grows greed and selfishness..... and that isolationism is the process of dying, and destruction..... because others will suffer, too, as today's passages point out.

Instead, our anguish and pain can grant us empathy and compassion that will help bring healing to others,..... and ourselves.

Yet, it takes love and open arms to melt the fear and self preservation reflex away.

We need to be loved to carry on.

We need to be received with open arms to feel safe to trust and to love again.

We need each other, and..... the healing begins with the Good Shepherd, who lovingly reaches out with open arms.....to rescue us, to defend us, protect us and to heal us.

This is the message in Ezekiel and it is also the Gospel message:

God loves us..... and is showing us the way to live.....on beyond the pain.

What we invest in reflects what we believe in... and who we are.
The judgment of the goats is choosing to believe in the power of self, the power of our money and our own resources,..... and that way of being leaves one very much isolated and alone.

Risking with open arms to let go of control / to reach out and receive love and open arms is the journey to paradise.

Moreover, I do not believe that eternal life is interrupted by death.
It is silly to think that we will change once we die.

We are heading to our destiny now, today,.....

So, may we,..... with heavy hearts..... remember loved ones who are no longer with us,..... and may we honour that love and those lives by vowing to love and live.

By the grace and love of God,..... we live.

Let us pause in prayer.

Amen.

{ We remember - candle lighting }