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Last Sunday of the Church Year
23 November 2014
Grace and Trinity Lutheran Churches, Wichita
Matthew 25:31-46

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit

Psalm 1 begins:

*“Blessed is the man
who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
nor stands in the way of sinners,
nor sits in the seat of scoffers;
but his delight is in the law of the Lord,
and on his law he meditates day and night.
He is like a tree
planted by streams of water
that yields its fruit in its season,
and its leaf does not wither.
In all that he does, he prospers.” (Ps 1:1-3)*

That’s what life’s supposed to be like.
That’s Adam before the Fall.
That’s paradise, a glimpse of heaven.

But that’s not how it is for us.

It’s too easy to listen to the wicked advice of others.
Or to just stand there, while a friend bad-mouths her spouse.
How often are we silent while reputations are ruined?

And once we’ve sat down, there’s no getting up.
When no one’s home we pour another drink, or visit another porn site, or sneak another hit.

The reality is that we’re angry and depressed and lonely and afraid.
We say we’d like to do something about it, but it seems we’re paralyzed.
We can’t shake out of it, or pull ourselves together, and it never seems to lighten up!

Things start to fall apart.
The family fights or just ignores each other.
Work suffers, mainly because you’re tired.
You’re in a rut and it seems every day’s the same.

And you’re a Christian!

But when you look around, everyone else seems to hold it together.
Your pagan neighbor always smiles.
Your Muslim coworker seems bright and cheery, even in the morning!
While you struggle to make ends meet, the atheist thrives and even gives charitably.

What's the point?

Why come to Church if it doesn't seem to make much difference?

Because on this Last Sunday of the Church Year we find that things aren't always as they seem.

Today Psalm 1 has its fulfillment in sight;

but you've got to go through Psalm 73 to get there!

Here's from Ps 73:

*"But when I thought how to understand this,
it seemed to me a wearisome task,
until I went into the sanctuary of God;
then I discerned their end."* (Ps 73:16-17)

Only here, *in the sanctuary of God*, do we, too, discern their end.

Here we're told of the Last Day,

"When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him." (Mt 25:31)

Today we hear of the righteous and the wicked,

those *"blessed by the Father"* (25:34),

and those *"cursed...into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels"* (25:41).

Here the blessed finally get what they've had coming to them *since the foundation of the world*.

And here too, the wicked finally get what they deserve: *eternal punishment*.

None of that seems to play out in our daily lives;

in fact, it's just the opposite out there.

That's where the wicked get fat and rich,
while the righteous suffer.

Outside of this sanctuary, we're haunted by Psalm 1's *"Blessed is the man;"*

for we know the life described isn't our own.

Our conscience is burdened because we know our sin;

and so that day seems frightening.

We're easily tempted to hear today's Gospel as if it's about what I've got to do.

But I'll warn you now:

If you look at the list the King brings forth as a check-list for you to do,
you're in for a sorry reunion with the goats of hell.

"I was hungry...I was thirsty...

I was a stranger...I was naked...

I was sick...and I was in prison..."

The point of this list isn't for you to pull out your calendar and schedule a visit to
the jail, and the Lord's diner, and the homeless shelter, and so forth.

That's not it at all!

If the sheep were sheep because they crossed off all the items on their list, then why—
 after hearing all that they did—do they say,
*“Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink?
 And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you?
 And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?”* (25:37-39)

And, if it were just as simple as knowing what needed to be on the list and doing it,
 then don't you think the goats would've done it?

What separates the sheep from the goats isn't something within them,
 as if we could dissect each and find out why one was saved and the other not.

What separates them isn't a what, but a *Who*.
 It's nothing inside of them, but outside—a hand and a mouth that says this one here, that there.
 The *King* separates them.
 But rather than some arbitrary tyrant, when He raises His hand to divide one from the other,
 we see He's the King with holes in His hands.

And He simply places each where they want to go:
 the sheep hear His voice and know Him to be their shepherd;
 the goats have hated Him all along, and are just thrilled to finally be rid of Him.

You get the God and Lord you desire.

And so the greater question is why we might desire to be among the sheep,
 when in this life, it's the goats who have all the fun!

The sheep moved from one side to the other are those marked with His blood—
 they share in His suffering, His rejection, His pain, His loss.
 They're branded with His Name;
 so what goes for Him, goes for them.

But what makes a sheep a sheep isn't to be found inside the sheep, but outside.
 Sheep get called by the Shepherd.
 They're clothed woolly white by their maker and redeemer.
 The desire to follow comes from Him too.

So, the King who sits on His glorious throne is none other than the King crowned with thorns,
 who wore the purple robe and mounted the cross of Calvary.
 It's the same King, the same Lord, the same Shepherd.
 And His face is just as gentle as when blood rolled down from His brow.

The difference, then, between the sheep and the goats isn't so much about them—
 what they've done or thought or said—
 but whether they're marked with His blood and His name, or not.

And so it is with you.

The difference between you and your happy-go-lucky, unbelieving neighbor isn't in you or him,
but in what God has said of you.

The *Blessed* aren't that way because of who they are or what they've done—
and neither are you—

but they are those *blessed by My Father*;
and they're *blessed* because of what this King has done for them!
He is Psalm 1's Blessed Man!

And you are in Him.

But Psalm 1 goes on:

*"The wicked are not so,
but are like chaff that the wind drives away.
Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;
for the Lord knows the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish."* (Ps 1:4-6)

It's in these last days, with our eyes fixed on the promise of Christ's return,
that we make it through the pain and the suffering,
the broken families, and drug addictions,
the same habitual sins, and the depression that weighs us down.

It's in sight of this judgment—
where the righteous are given their reward,
and the wicked finally get what's coming to them—
that the sheep can go on being sheep, and not try to get with the goats.

The end is soon.

Keep fighting against your sin.

Don't trust your eyes, or how things seem, but your ears, and what the Lord has done.

And then pray:

Come quickly, Lord Jesus. Amen.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit