

EZEKIEL 34:11-16

PSALM 100

EPHESIANS 1:15-23

MATTHEW 25:31-46

Last Sunday after Pentecost; Last Sunday in Ordinary Time

Reign of Christ (Christ the King)

November 26, 2023; Year A

(The preached portion of the sermon is in bold.)

Scaping the Goat!

A saying oft attributed to the late baseball pitcher Satchel Paige is that **“Somebody always got to scape the goat!”** Sermon tease here! One of the watchwords of the Protestant Reformation emerged and was galvanized in Martin Luther’s profound, life-altering, life-changing, discovery, **“the just shall live by faith,”** a bellwether moment for this studious monk and priest turned accidental reformer. This pivotal awakening was just waiting in the not-so-hidden text for Luther to read, surely perceived as a most foreign idea, appearing as an outlandish notion, changing Luther’s theology forever. What a refreshing biblical revelation yes, considered by this student of the Bible as a most wonderfully radical notion. Indeed, Luther suddenly understood that **“the just shall live by faith,”** was a graciously good gift, one that is not bestowed based on anyone’s own merit or their inherent goodness, that no one can earn it. The phrases **“Faith alone! Grace alone! Scripture alone”** formed a trinitarian baseline, foundational for framing the burgeoning reforms defining sixteenth century medieval Europe. Following the lead of a former Pharisee, Luther came to understand God’s justice to be the equivalent of righteousness, that indeed God is just. **Yes, Luther’s revelation came from his interpretive reading of Paul’s letter to the Romans (1:16-17),** as if for the first time, expounding thusly, **“For I am not ashamed of the gospel. It is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith . . . For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith. As it is written, Paul reciting from the prophet Habakuk of all places, ‘The one who is righteous,’ that is, just, “will live by faith!”** This became a touchstone, a

cornerstone of Pauline theology, a pivotal belief asserted by this recent convert and now apostle formerly known as a Pharisee (See Habakuk 2:4; Galatians 2:16; Hebrews 10:37-38). On the other hand we have the book of James, this letter writer declaring, a book by the way that Luther despised and called that “right strawy epistle,” raises a question for the ages, “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace! Keep warm and eat your fill,’ and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.” After all, it is also James (1:22) who says, “But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves!” And herein lies our struggle, the epic biblical battle between faith and works.

Indeed, this crisis of Christian belief versus action has presented Christendom, including all its faithful adherents, including you and me, with a conundrum that may very well constitute the theological question for the ages. Faith or works! And we thought paper or plastic was tough! Faith or works! Is it one or the other? Is it either/or or is it both/and? Which is it? Enya’s song “Anywhere Is”, captures the essence of the debate, “It’s either this or that way; it’s one way or the other! It should be one direction; it could be on reflection!” And ironically it is the Bible that fails to help us with this dilemma, the “Good Book” only adding to the confusion. The Bible gives us no firm and final answer, granting us no relief, sending us mixed signals, seeming to affirm one viewpoint in one place while affirming the other viewpoint in another, a reminder that these ancient writers were offering their opinions and were not writing verbatim dictations sent directly from the mouth of God, as many naively presume. Nothing new there! As is often the case the biblical narrative seems contradictory at the most, conflicted at the least! Yes, rather confusing and definitely confounding! The writer of the letter of James goes on to say, in great detail, “But someone will say, ‘You have faith and I have works!’ Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith. You believe that God is one! You do well! Even the demons believe—and shudder.” Remember that line! “Do you want to be shown, you senseless person (I am certain he was not talking about us), that faith apart from works is barren? Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?” (I just thought Abraham was sorely mistaken or stupid because child

sacrifice was no longer an acceptable or permissible practice. But I digress; I often do!) James continues, “You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works. Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, ‘Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,’ and he was called the friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. Likewise, was not Rahab the prostitute also justified by works (now there is an image) when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out by another road? For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead.” **While Romans and James were not selected by the lectionary editors as our texts for this day, they are the quintessential scriptures addressing justification and works righteousness, yes, justification, having much to say about our Gospel lection from Matthew this morning as we bring another liturgical cycle, Year A, to a close. Get ready for an exciting Year B, led by the Gospel of Mark! Romans and James offer great commentary, as different as their assertions seem to be. Hint as to where we are going on our homiletical journey in worship, as they say about a loaded burger or pizza, give me the works!**

In the story of what is called the “Great Judgment” in the Gospel of Matthew, we find a parable that is not a parable, but rather is an apocalyptic writing with parabolic features. I know, how exciting! As New Testament scholar Eugene Boring notes, “Parables begin with familiar, this-worldly scenes, which then modulate into a new dimension of meaning. This scene, in contrast, begins with an other-worldly depiction of the Parousia (second coming of Jesus) . . . and modulates into affirmations of the ultimate importance of ordinary, this-worldly deeds.”¹ In other words, while it describes last things, illustrating an endtime scenario, Matthew speaks to our current predicaments, our present concerns, specifically forcing us to ask the hard, sobering, question as to what have we done for our neighbor, not only lately but throughout our brief lives. Yes, in this non-parable parable from Matthew we are confronted with a scenario that informs and impacts our thinking when we read these musings from Romans and James, and vice versa! The two epistles, along with this epic Matthean warning, force us to ponder our theological inquiry about the great biblical faceoff between faith and works, a debate of eternal merit that indeed has eternal

¹M. Eugene Boring, “The Gospel of Matthew: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, vol. VIII, edited by Leander E. Keck (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 455.

consequences. The issue becomes unavoidable when we read these words written by Matthew and attributed to Jesus but were more than likely musings from the early Church as Jesus' followers hoped for, prayed for, wished for a second coming complete with rescue and retribution that never came, that simply never happened. Yes, we find here the usual suspects in these judgmental words, images of sheep and goats, left and right, heaven and hell, but there is a whole lot more at stake in these pivotal words than eternal damnation versus salvation.

But first, a little background is in order and just might be helpful. The book of Leviticus gives the reader careful instructions about the goat that will be scaped! Remember the opening line from my introduction! "And Aaron shall cast lots upon the two goats, one lot for the Lord and the other lot for the scapegoat. And Aaron shall bring the goat upon which the Lord's lot fell and offer him for a sin offering." In other words, this goat is the lucky one, sacrificed on the spot! "But the goat, on which the lot fell to be the scapegoat, shall be presented alive before the Lord to make an atonement with him and to let him go for a scapegoat into the wilderness." (16:8-10, King James Version). This goat would be sent away with no protection, exposed to all the perils of the wild as a helpless domesticated animal, a quick but violent death awaiting the unsuspecting goat at the hands of a ravenous predator, or the agony of an excruciatingly slow demise, suffering the result of thirst and starvation, any of it a most probable outcome. Yes, this sacred practice is where the idea of the scapegoat originated, yes, indeed, a biblical term in its etymology. The scapegoat carried the sin of the people far away from them as the helplessly dependent and unsuspecting animal was ushered far into the desert wilderness, an act of cleansing for another year, a ritual practice that took place during the holy season of Yom Kippur, a time of atonement and repentance that is the focal point in the observance of the Jewish new year. It should not come as a surprise to any of us that the idea of Jesus as the lamb of God, the ultimate sacrifice, emerged and evolved out of this ancient custom with some scholars believing that Barabbas was a made-up figure, a literary archetype created out of this long-standing tradition to fulfill the role of a human scapegoat. This archaic belief would have resonated, not in the least have been lost on a predominantly Jewish-oriented audience but now codified, galvanized, by the leadership in the early Church, manifesting an absurd theological image complete with child

sacrifice and a God who needs to be appeased and avenged, Jesus ironically made a scapegoat in his own right, the rabbi used as a scapegoat for human sin. In retrospect, this theological scenario certainly makes complete sense! Perhaps we could call him a lambscape or sheepscape, maybe not, neither word having much of a ring about them!

As we read today's lections from Ezekiel and Matthew it is interesting to note that Ezekiel proclaims that God will judge between sheep and sheep, fat sheep and lean sheep, but all sheep nonetheless. In what Boring calls an "apocalyptic drama" in this parabolic but non-parable tale from the Gospel of Matthew the writer, however, chooses to delineate between sheep and goats, goats suddenly getting a very bad rap, yes, scapegoated as a very undesirable beast—pun intended—the sheep on the right, the goats on the left, a metaphor portraying Christ as judge sitting on a throne as he rules and reigns, hence a text chosen for this liturgical day. The sheep gain eternal reward and life while the goats get eternal damnation and punishment. So why this "parallelism", as Tyler Brown calls it, creating this dichotomy between sheep and goats, left and right. Inquiring minds want to know! Well, we all know the answer. And this takes us full circle, right back to where we started with our debate between justification by faith or by works.

Sermon spoiler! This most intriguing drama from the Gospel of Matthew more than indicates, truly affirming to the reader, a textual proof if you will, that what we do is more important than what we believe. In fact, according to this perspective offered in this story it is the only thing that matters. The concern named here in Matthew is in the here and now, the ongoing realtime circumstances and situations illuminating, marking the pathways guiding our lives. This text reminds us that we are not to spend our time with our heads in the clouds, staring off into space, daydreaming about heavenly reward. We are not to ponder what comes next, wasting our time and energy dwelling on futuristic images about the afterlife, imagining what it will be like. Excitedly anticipating eternity is not something that should concern us right now, never on our radar, yes, as long as we have life and breath. After all, those who seem the most heavenly minded tend to be of no earthly good. After all, as James mindfully poked at his reader, even the demons believe! In fact Matthew's musings strongly suggest that what we believe is inconsequential, irrelevant,

that doing is essential, the only thing that matters. And let us be honest with ourselves as we bask in the glow of another Thanksgiving holiday, if our belief, if what we believe, does not motivate us in the immediacy of every moment, demand from us, require us, spur us to action, to do with and for those whom Jesus called “the least of these”, then our beliefs are merely exercises in opinionated futility, nothing more than intellectual callisthenics. In this Matthean narrative there is no equivocation, no qualifications, no ifs, ands, or buts, but a crystal clear clarion call to action, to do something, yes, to do something to alleviate suffering in its many forms, specifically spelled out, always in this order, as feeding, quenching thirst, yes, with cups of cold water whatever libation it may be, welcoming the stranger—yes, this is a quintessential hospitality text; you knew I would get there—clothing the naked, taking care of the sick, and visiting those who are imprisoned, an an image containing both literal and metaphorical meaning, all the ways that limit, that confine and constrict humanity, all these real but sacramental acts literally serving to make the world a better place. Yes, this text, including all biblical texts that invoke and invite works, is a call for social justice, every time, all the time. I guess we could say that these words say what they mean and mean what they say, a reminder that we should never tempt fate by avoiding, disregarding, or ignoring them, going against them through even the lowest level of benign apathy or indifference, inattention or inactivity. Status quo just will not suffice, simply will not get the job done! Some things really are as simple as they appear! And yet, Christianity has been dominated by dogmatic doctrines demanding a specifically prescribed set of beliefs, in many instances requiring orthodox fundamentals. Protestantism, despite the reforms this groundswell movement initiated, yes, accidentally instigated by Luther back in the day, followed suit, continuing a trend calling for litmus tests assuring fidelity to doctrinal conformity and consistency. If we could recite the formulas, swear allegiance to the words, claiming traditional professions of faith, public, not private, then we were all set, good to go, not a care in the world, “getting saved” being the Teflon, the fire insurance necessary to guarantee that we would receive the bliss of heavenly eternity with God rather than be tossed into the smoking section, subjected to eternal damnation in the perpetual fiery brimstone of hell. **This text reminds the reader, you and me, that faith is indeed active, not passive, that it is about doing, being, i.e., our devotional life, our individual and collective spirituality, the icing on the cake, practices we “do”**

for ourselves, disciplines we engage for our own betterment, our own fulfillment. I do not believe that Paul ever thought that service was a non-essential, that he ever intended to give the hollow, the wrong, idea that works was optional, that belief alone would ever suffice for the committed, cross-carrying, follower of Jesus seeking to live a devoted servant life. Unfortunately, this narrow reading of Paul is the way his words are twisted as they are read in a way that justifies doing nothing, or at least next to it! Heart and mind requires both!

For many of us, for much of our lives, we have been taught that faith, that faithfulness, was the equivalent of what we believe and how much we believe, accepting a specific set of carefully articulated doctrinal beliefs, many of which developed as part of an ongoing hierarchical and patriarchal agenda that came to dictate and dominate as the male clergy consolidated power in the early Church as converts moved away from many of Jesus' bedrock egalitarian principles, cornerstones we call them, coming to embrace a onesided, one dimensional, Christ of faith, an authoritarian ruling and reigning arbiter, a judge, doling out eternal consequences on those labeled as sheep and goats. **We tend to speak of belief in terms of faith and speak of faith in terms of belief, yes, as if they are one in the same. The ultimate nonsequitur! We have been taught to obsess, guilt driven, guilt ridden, rather than basking in grace, grace based in all our endeavors. As we all know, as we believe faithfulness to be, that faith is all about grace, grace upon grace, even the necessary grace that comes when we fail to respond, fail, perhaps even refuse, to meet the biblical standard, the high bar of the calling set by God. Grace my friends, is the fuel that cranks our belief, that revs our faith-filled engine. We never run on empty! But, yes there is a cost for something that is so free, so freely, joyfully and generously, given, and that is our giving of self, becoming as selfless as we have capacity, giving out of the bottomless well of our faithful abundance. Our high calling is to extend grace, to be gracious, and that means doing for others, every time, all the time. We cannot scape the goat, escape our accountability, our responsibility, yes, to God, to neighbor, and to self! We are accountable! We are responsible! To use an image from the story of Abel and Cain, we are our brothers', and we will certainly add, our sisters' keeper, no matter who they are but because they are! To continue our animal imagery this morning, we are the duck, not the decoy! We walk by**

faith and not by sight. There but by the grace of God go us all. As we seek to meet more needs than we could ever address, God grant us grace for the journey and in every endeavor of life. God grant us the grace when we do and the grace when we do not. But, let's do!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains and calls us to feed, quench, welcome, clothe, care, and visit! Amen and amen.