

I.

“Christ the King Sunday.” That’s what it says on the front of your bulletin. What is it? Is this just obligatory participation in the church calendar that tells us that this Sunday is the last Sunday of the Church year? Is this polite recognition that we are one small part of a global community who together declare Christ Lord? Does anyone even really know what Christ the King Sunday means? Wouldn’t it be more seasonally appropriate to call this Thanksgiving Sunday or maybe Christ the King of Royal Christmas Deals Sunday, the newest manic shopping spree festival? Are there decorations for this festival? Nope. But there is scripture, really powerful scripture that challenges the very core of what we actually mean when we declare that Jesus Christ, the one we call the Son of God and God with us, is our King.

To make this claim is to declare that there are no other rulers in our lives besides Jesus, especially not the red carpet royalty, false gods of celebrity, political affiliation, technology, consumerism, excess, fear and violence which have such high thrones in our society. Jesus presents the image of a very different King on his throne, inviting those on his right into a kingdom prepared for them at the foundation of the world and sending those on his left off to the place prepared, not for them, but for the devil. This image illustrates a division in our broken world between those who have been living already in the presence of the King, unaware, and those who have not been living with the King, also oblivious. This Sunday we join the flock with the pronouncement that Christ is our true king... but wait, “When did we see him?”

II.

In the text from Matthew’s gospel, we find Jesus wrapping up a lengthy address to his followers on God’s kingdom and life as a disciple. This is a king’s speech: a bold, decisive, unwavering royal edict—a final judgment. Remember that climatic scene in the movie, “A King’s Speech” when King George VI, known for his speech impediment, addressed his people following Great Britain’s declaration of war on Germany in 1939. With great focus and force he spoke: *“In this grave hour, perhaps the most fateful in our history, I send to every household of my peoples, both at home and overseas, this message, spoken with the same depth of feeling for each one of you as if I were able to cross your threshold and speak to you myself.”*

In his royal discourse, Christ the King is reaching across the threshold of time and space to deliver this epic message to us, his children, his flock this important day, with the same depth of feeling for each one of us as if we were gathered with him on the Mount of Olives two days before his arrest and execution. He’s been beckoning us to follow him, to receive the Kingdom of God that is all around us and join him as a disciple. At this moment, the King is on the throne and while God has already taken action to save us, the invitation to enjoy this gift in *this* life is set before us today.

III.

This text certainly worked me over this week. Sheep in, goats out, to the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels, that’s harsh. I think goats are pretty interesting and this scripture had me searching for ways to help ‘em out, and I admit, I love a good

roasted goat as much as the next guy. I have some questions: What's wrong with being a goat? Are we sheep or goats; on the right or the left? If I am a goat, how do I get over with the sheep come judgment time? I can still increase my pledge, right? Is there a mission project I can join? I think it might be helpful to back up and get some context on Jesus' farmyard name calling.

For us city dwellers, the distinction between sheep and goats is easily lost in translation, though goats are making a comeback in the city. I'm told a few of you may have some experience with the weed-eating, rent-a-goat phenomenon. Goats are no longer just a rural sight. Back in September, the Presbyterian Campus Ministry at Emory had our first meeting of the fall semester. One of the student leaders posted some flyers around campus announcing our first meeting but we were grossly out flyer'd by a group inviting students to the Emory Goat Herding Club: no experience, no problem! I posted a picture of the flyer on facebook and Dana Hughes was one of the first to comment asking if you had to be a student to join. The whole thing was a hoax but there was so much interest on campus they actually started a group. I've wondered if the Emory Goat Herding Club and the Presbyterian Campus Ministry are really all that different. Come to think of it, from what we see of the disciples in the Bible, it makes perfect sense that Jesus would compare teaching them to be his disciples to herding livestock.

When I lived in Kenya and just recently traveling in Ethiopia, I saw many flocks of sheep and goats together, all shepherded by 6-10 year old boys with pockets full of pebbles and a strong stick in their hand. And while I can tell the physical difference between sheep and goats I had to do some research this week to try and understand the distinction Jesus might be drawing. Here's what I found out: Sheep like to graze on clover and grass; they need a shepherd to lead them to the good grazing land and rich pasture that we heard about in Ezekiel. Goats, on the other hand—the left hand—are browsers, they'll eat leaves, vines, weeds, garbage. They also have different flock behavior: Goats are more independent and curious—wanderers. Sheep stick together. Another big difference is that while *wild* goats are found in abundance, even hanging out on the sides of cliffs, sheep are entirely domesticated; they need the flock and the shepherd to survive.<sup>ii iii</sup>

There's something about the nature of people that makes Jesus think about the flocks that are likely wandering nearby him, the sheep with their heads down, grazing on the grass, vulnerable, to say the least, but living in the trust of the protection of the shepherd and the presence of the other sheep and the comfort that comes with such trust and community. The goats on the other hand are constantly bouncing off, looking for something far off. The shepherd has to keep bringing them back as they wander off.

What Jesus offers is the invitation to trust the protection of God's grace freely given and live peaceably in the community of our brothers and sisters in this flock called church. It's not something we have to earn or build or even invest in, it's something we inherit. All we have to do it receive this amazing gift and enjoy it, glorifying God and making our whole lives a joyful response to this amazing grace.

Easier said than done right? Life is hard and it is often very painful and certainly not fair. It's not easy to see the alleged pleasant green pastures that are supposedly all around us. So, at this moment, do you find yourself identifying with the goat or the sheep? Honestly, I spent a lot of this week feeling more like a goat than a trusting sheep.

I was talking to a friend about this and he said he doesn't really look at people this way – either all sheep or all goat. He thinks we are all a little sheep *and* a little goat, at times more one than the other. I like that. I think I agree with him and he's a therapist so there's probably something to it. It helped me in my goat wanderings and brought a little of *my* sheep into the pasture, trusting that God is part of all this, even when I feel lost or like a cast off goat. As God spoke through the prophet Ezekiel, "As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness." That's a great comfort, even if our goat selves wander off into darkness and life feels like eternal punishment; when we feel far from God *or* like we don't need God or anybody and then find ourselves clinging onto the side of a cliff, or when we feel like God has cast us off, or we feel cut off from the flock, alone, suffering; the promise of the shepherd in those days of clouds and darkness is to search for the lost and bring them into the good pasture to lie down with the rest of the flock. Rest, heal, and graze.

This is comforting and helpful but not where Jesus leaves us. Jesus leaves us gathered together at the foot of his throne with a final judgment and eternal fire. Ezekiel says, "I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep (and he's not talking body image) because you butted at the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide." Jesus makes the judgment clear as well: those who find themselves in the presence of the Lord are those who were with him all along as they fed the hungry and gave drink to the thirsty and welcomed the stranger and clothed the naked and took care of the sick and visited the prisoners. They didn't do these things so they could get the attention of the king and reap the reward; the presence of the king mattered not to them, they were just being sheep. "When did we even see you?" they ask, with a mouth full of sweet grass while handing a warm meal to a malnourished prodigal goat. If you are part of ministries like these, clearly named and lifted up by Jesus the king himself, then hear these words of King Jesus, reaching across the threshold of time and culture to say to you himself, "as you did it to the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me. Continue to enjoy your place in this flock, in the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."

And if your goat senses are tingling right now and part of you is asking Jesus, "Wait, when did we do these things for you?" The response is implicitly, "You didn't. That's the problem." It's easy in this nation with our privilege to be part of the ones who have butted the weak animals out, sometimes in our somewhat willful ignorance. If we'd have known the king were coming well... If we'd have known Jesus was there among the hungry, the stranger-the immigrant and refugee, the homeless, the bullied, the lonely- if we'd have known he was with the sick and the imprisoned, well maybe we'd have made some different choices. Granted, it's what he's been saying and doing all along. I'm not sure how this caught everyone by surprise, but at any rate, GOOD NEWS fellow sheep and goats, the king has spoken to us today in these texts and had declared that Jesus Christ is the King shepherd and he will save us and gather us into his presence, if you care to join him, guess where you can find him? Come Lord Jesus...

#### IV.

There were **2.5 million** homeless children in our land of opportunity last year. That means **1 in 30** children were homeless in America. In Georgia there are **73,953** homeless children and half of them **are under 6**.<sup>iv</sup> There are **16,000** refugees living in our

city and the UN estimates there are **15 million** people waiting for refuge.<sup>v</sup> “When did we see you a stranger and welcome you?”

**755,400** people in metro Atlanta turn to food pantries to feed their families each year and **164,000** of them are children.<sup>vi</sup> Yesterday the Emory Presbyterian Campus Ministry served guests at the ICM food pantry including a father and his 5 children. And all God’s people say: “When did we see you hungry and feed you?”

**Nearly 2 million** Georgians are uninsured.<sup>vii</sup> “When did we see you sick and take care of you?”

Almost **100,000** Georgians are in prison.<sup>viii</sup> “When did we see you in prison and visit you?”

There are shepherds in our church who hope you will make pledges to support Morningside’s work with the hungry, homeless and refugees, and also show up to build authentic relationships with brothers and sisters who are part of these communities, part of Jesus’ flock.

This is Christ the King Sunday and Jesus Christ is on his throne beaconing us to open our eyes to him in all the places he dwells, in all the faces he knows, and come into the kingdom which has already been prepared for you.

Friends, next Sunday we enter the season of Advent where we wait expectantly and look for Christ to come, Emmanuel. Where will you be looking?

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<sup>i</sup> King George VI, “The King’s Speech” <https://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/George-VI-King-s-Speech-September-3-1939>

<sup>ii</sup> O’Brien, Dr. Anna, “Goats Are From Mars, Sheep Are From Venus,” <http://www.petmd.com/blogs/thedailyvet/aobrien/2013/sept/goats-are-from-mars-sheep-are-from-venus-30886>

<sup>iii</sup> “Difference Between Sheep and Goats,” <http://www.differencebetween.net/science/nature/difference-between-sheep-and-goat/>

<sup>iv</sup> “America’s Shameful Child Homelessness Record,” <http://thinkprogress.org/economy/2014/11/17/3593226/homeless-children-record/>

<sup>v</sup> “Facts About Refugees in Georgia From The Coalition of Refugee Service Agencies,” <http://www.oneregionatlanta.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/20131010FactsAboutRefugeesinGeorgia.pdf>

<sup>vi</sup> Atlanta Community Food Bank “Facts & Stats,” <http://www.acfb.org/facts-stats>

<sup>vii</sup> “Mapping Georgia’s Uninsured,” <http://healthyfuturega.org/resources/mapping-georgias-uninsured>.

<sup>viii</sup> “The Sentencing Project: Research and Advocacy for Reform,” <http://www.sentencingproject.org/map/map.cfm#map>