Sermon
November 22, 2026

Chris Micklewright
rector@old-swedes.org

Sermon – Last Sunday After Pentecost (Proper 29A) – Christ the King!

Scripture Texts: Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Psalm 95:1-7a; Ephesians 1:15-23; Matthew 25:31-46
Sermon preached at Gloria Dei (Old Swedes') Episcopal Church

Focus Statement: *As we look for God's calling and guidance in the year ahead, may we remember that God's presence is especially marked by care for those in need around us.*

Loving God: May my spoken words be faithful to your written Word, and lead us all to better know the living WORD, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Outline:

1. The challenge of ending well
    a. What to do on the last day of class?
        i. Last Friday morning, while getting ready for school, Des observed that this was to be the last day before Thanksgiving break. He wondered aloud what the day would be like, and Heather noted that teachers are often just trying to survive these "last days," and that they often end up being a bit silly.
        ii. I certainly know the challenge from my time teaching. I had to be aware that many students would skip the last class before a break (getting on the road early), and it was often a challenge to figure out what to do with the last day of a semester long course.
        iii. Do we focus on questions from the last assignment? Do we spend it reviewing and preparing for a final exam (I would sometimes turn it into a game, using Kahoot to quiz the class on major topics and kinds of problems we'd covered)? Do we cover some new material and give a sense of how the subject continues to develop from here (this was my favorite, but I'm weird)?
    b. Similar challenge today:
        i. End of the stewardship campaign – "Unless God goes with us…"
        ii. End of a loose sermon series, in which we've been focusing on the Old Testament stories from the first few books of the Bible
        iii. End of the liturgical year, which has been focused on the Gospel of Matthew.
        iv. I was half tempted to put together a quiz game…
    c. This is also a challenge for Jesus in our Gospel passage today – a heavy passage!
        i. Matthew's gospel presents Jesus as a teacher, and there are five major blocks of teaching throughout the Gospel (starting with the Sermon on the Mount).
        ii. Today's passage comes from the fifth and final block of teaching. Moreover, it is the end of that lesson, and it takes place immediately before the events of Holy Week. If you read a bit further, we see that the chief priests are plotting, and Jesus knows he will be crucified within less than two days.
        iii. Recognizing this context, it seems like this is a somewhat dark and challenging way to end his teaching. I tried something like this the first time I taught Calculus III, creating a final exam that I jokingly referred to as the "Final Exam of Doom" and focusing the end of the class on that exam; it did not go over well with my students (to put it mildly!).

2. Who is the God we worship?
    a. The God revealed throughout the stories of the Old Testament
        i. Recall that these have been stories of becoming. They are stories about a people figuring out who they are, and even more figuring out who God is. There have been plenty of missteps and misinterpretations along the way, but I think there is also a clear picture that we can discern.
        ii. This is a God who shows up where we might least expect, and especially in the moments of challenge and pain and vulnerability! We see this with Rahab being the first to name God, in God stopping Abraham from sacrificing Isaac, with the women who shelter baby Moses, with Moses encountering God in the cleft of the rock, with the triumph of Deborah and Jael, and so on.
        iii. This is a God whose blessings are never for just a chosen few. While the stories have focused on the family of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – and their descendants, the story is never meant to stop with them. Even from God's first covenant with Abraham, this people is blessed so that they may be a blessing to all people – indeed, to all of God's creation.
        iv. This is a God of deliverance. There is a repeated contrast to the ways of empire, especially as represented by Egypt. The empires of this world treat people as resources to be used and exploited; they place power above all else, arguing that we can control the world and achieve security if only we have enough power. So many people in these stories (as well as in our present day!) define themselves by this logic of empire, but the God of the Bible rejects this logic and seeks to deliver people from its domineering ways.
        v. This is further reinforced in our last OT passage of the year, as God speaks of rescue and healing and provision for the needy, of putting a stop to exploitation, and of the establishment of justice.
    b. Reinterpreting Matthew 25
        i. We hold to this vision of God if we are to rightly understand Jesus' final teaching in Matthew 25. Otherwise, it is all too easy to fall back into imperial thinking, and to understand Jesus as a domineering lord, saving those who please him and eternally tormenting those who do not.
        ii. Jesus does use harsh and disturbing language here, and it has troubled people of faith throughout the past 2000 years; how can it be just for someone to face eternal punishment for something they didn't even mean to do? I would argue that it is not just, and that there are other ways of reading this language.
        iii. Without getting too deeply into the Greek, I think this teaching of Jesus is about the choice that we all face, about what kind of God we worship and follow. On the one hand is a God who cares deeply for those who are most vulnerable, who counts service to them as divine service, who welcomes those who align themselves with mercy and justice, even when they didn't realize they were doing so (I love that some of those who are praised here are surprised by being so honored!). On the other is a careless embrace of the ways of empire, a willingness to neglect and exploit those in need, and the blasphemy of dressing that exploitation in religious language and imagery. The choice is real, and the reality that we see over and over again, in the pages of Scripture and of history, is that these ways of empire lead to death for those who ultimately embrace them.

iv. If you want to dig more deeply into this, I have some resources that I'd be glad to recommend! Ultimately, if our reading of this text leaves us fearful, I think that we are reading it wrong, because perfect love drives out fear. But, for today, I think our call is to choose who we will serve. Do we worship the gods of empire, or the God of Jesus?

3. What does it mean for God to go with us in the year ahead?
    a. Throughout the past few weeks, we've been asking what it looks like for God to go with us in the coming year.
        i. There is so much that we can say about that. It means that we face challenges and vulnerability with hope, looking for where God will show up. It means valuing and learning from those who have gone before us. It means continually choosing the ways of justice and mercy over the ways of empire. It means breaking the cycles of violence and retribution and domination.
        ii. But, as we close out the year, our passages today also emphasize that the presence of God is especially marked by care for those in need. "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."
    b. The good news at GDOS
        i. I am proud that this is a community which values beauty, that welcomes all, that honors and preserves the past, that strives to present a Gospel that is truly good news to the world around us.
        ii. But, most of all, I am proud that we are ever seeking to grow in love for God, for each other, and especially for those in need around us. As we close out one church year and move toward the next, may we continually commit ourselves to this way of faith and hope and love.

Amen.

<u>Summary of Stewardship Campaign (up to this point):</u> *"Unless God goes with us…"*

1. Oct 18 – Moses in the Cleft of the Rock: The life of faith is one of vulnerability, in which we often don't get to see God's leading in advance. Yet, God does join us in the vulnerability, and makes ways forward where none seem possible.
2. Oct 25 – Death of Moses: We are not the center of God's story; it started long before us and will go on long after us. Our role is to be faithful in and with the time we are given.
3. Nov 1 – Crossing the Jordan: To move forward and discern the new things that God is doing in the world, we must remember, value, and learn from those who have gone before us in the life of faith.
4. Nov 8 – Joshua's Final Address: "Choose this day who you will serve." We must choose between two visions of God (and, thus, of creation and faithful life) – a god of violence and conquest and greed, or the God revealed in Jesus' love and mercy and justice.
5. Nov 15 – Deborah and Jael: God includes and works through those we might least expect to establish a kingdom in which justice and mercy triumph over violence and domination.