St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church
Sermon: The Lord as Shepherd and Judge
Scripture: Ezekiel 34:11-16, Matthew 25:31-46
Rev. Steve Filyk
November 22, 2026
Opening Hymn: Crown Him With Many Crowns #274
Choruses: The Servant King, Revelation Song,
Hymn after sermon: Brother, sister, let me serve you #635
Closing Hymn: Jesus shall reign where're the sun 275 (tune: Duke Street if Warrington isn't familiar)
Christ the King Sunday

We live in a world filled with injustice.
Our economic systems allow unprecedented wealth
To accumulate among a small group of individuals
While millions struggle to find enough to eat.
Our political systems allow nations to attack others with impunity,
And ordinary people to be pressed into service
To keep the war machine going.
We live in a world where governments sometimes lack the willingness
To confront diseases that afflict the vulnerable,
Or to protect those who are exploited by people seeking to profit from them.

I'm thinking of Elon Musk spending half a billion dollars
to influence the American midterms.
I'm thinking about the economically disadvantaged
being deceived or coerced to serve in the Russian army.
I'm thinking about our own misguided efforts
to respond to the devastation of addiction,
and the vulnerability of people caught up in it.

When we hear stories like these,
we are rightly appalled by the injustice.
But what does Jesus ask of the rest of us?

Today we've listened to two different readings,
One from the Old Testament and the other from the New.
Both speak of justice, of judgment and hope.
The background to our reading from Ezekiel
Is that the shepherds of Israel have exploited the flock
rather than cared for it.
In light of their failures, God promises that he himself
will come to shepherd his people:
searching for the lost, bringing back the strays,
binding up the injured, strengthening the weak.
But also notice the final words: "I will shepherd the flock with justice."

In the Gospel of Matthew
Jesus picks up the image of a shepherd
And uses it to disclose God's rule over the world.

Very few of us have ranching experience
So a little background is helpful.

"In the Middle East, to this day,
sheep and goats regularly graze together,
but need to be separated at night so that the goats,
being less hardy, can be kept warm.
[NT Wright Matthew for Everyone: Part II 141-142]

Jesus uses this image of dividing the flock at night
To describe a future judgment.
A dividing of people into two groups:
Those who are blessed and invited into the joys of God's kingdom,
And those who are cursed and sent off to an eternal punishment
Prepared for the devil and his angels.
The stakes are pretty high.
You are either in or out.

What makes this story so striking
is not simply the image of a shepherd king,
but the unexpected standard of the king's judgment.
And his identification with the poor.

We tend to think of judgment as being about transgressions,
That is, breaking particular commandments.
But this king judges the people
For how they treated those on the margins:
Those without adequate provisions of food or clothing,
The sick, the imprisoned, and the alone.

They are welcomed into paradise or sent to hell
based on their treatment of people in these situations. Why?
And here's where it gets interesting.
It is because the king identifies himself with those in need.

It may seem obvious to you who those needy people are
That the king identifies with.
But you should know that there are at least two well-established opinions
of who Jesus is referring to here.
One is that he is speaking particularly about his disciples,
His followers who find themselves in need.

The other is that he is speaking more broadly
about anyone who finds themselves in need,
regardless of their faith or lack of faith.
Both interpretations have good biblical support.
[see Arland J. Hultgren "Matthew 25:31-46" The Lectionary Commentary: the Gospels 151,152]

Whichever interpretation you find worthy,
This parable argues that our eternal destinies
Are bound up with how we treat those who are vulnerable.

That judgment would hinge on something
as seemingly ordinary as how we treat people in need
Is, I think, intentionally shocking.
Those who neglect the vulnerable
Receive the same punishment
that we might reserve for those who exploit the vulnerable.

Let me say that again.
Those who neglect the vulnerable
Receive the same punishment
As those we judge for exploiting the vulnerable.

When it comes to the vulnerable
there is no morally neutral position.

But there is something else surprising about this story.
Neither group recognizes the King
In the people they encounter.

Those who cared for the vulnerable
Weren't doing it to impress anyone,
Or to gain access to paradise.
They weren't even aware
That in caring for these people
They were caring for the King himself.

PAUSE

So what is Jesus telling us?

Some people have read this story
As instructions for securing a better eternal future.
As if caring for the vulnerable
was simply a way of earning our way into heaven.

But look at the people Jesus describes.
They weren't calculating the spiritual benefits
Of their actions.
Their compassion was genuine.
It flowed naturally from who they were.

This is consistent with what the rest of Scripture teaches us about grace.
"It is by grace you have been saved
through faith—

and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—
not by works, so that no one can boast." [Ephesians 2:8-9]

What Jesus seems to be telling us
Is that the grace that saves us is a grace that transforms us.
Those who have experienced Christ's love
Will increasingly reflect that love in how they treat others.
As Jesus says, "If you love me, keep my commands." [see John 14:15]

I think this story is telling us that God's future
includes accountability and justice.
We listen to the news,
And hear stories about our own city
And places far away
And we ask ourselves:
Why does the way of the wicked prosper?
Why do all the faithless live at ease?

This parable tells us that all will be called to account…

This is good news for those of us
Who love Christ and care about what he cares about.
There will be a day of judgment.
There will be a day when the Shepherd himself
Will shepherd his flock with justice.
God's will will one day be done.
There will be no exploitation,
No neglect,
No injustice in that kingdom.

This is also good news for those
Who recognize that the good they do
Isn't always flowing from a heart of compassion or gratitude.
And it is good news for those
Who recognise that their hearts are hard
Even closed to the needs of those around them.

The Good News is that when we welcome Christ into our lives
Our hearts can be changed,
Our character transformed,
So that good flows naturally.
Even more than our treatment of the poor,
This transformation is at the heart of the Gospel.

This morning I came across a quote
From an Anglican Bishop who reminds us that:
"The gospel is not primarily a program for restructuring society.
It is the good news that sinful humanity
can be reconciled to a holy God through the life,
death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Social transformation may follow genuine conversion,
but it cannot replace it."
[Bishop Robert Todd Giffin on Facebook November 20, 2026]

That there are any sheep to be welcomed into paradise
Is the grace of God at work in the hearts of humankind.

Amen.

Thanks to all who supported the recent drive
To provide the Sola Shelter
[The new Mustard Seed Shelter
Set up below us on Peterson Creek]
with games and blankets.
These are small comforts for those trying to rebuild their lives.
They have a winter wishlist, which I will distribute
But in addition to the items on the Wishlist,
They would greatly appreciate Christmas-specific donations such as:

Handwritten cards with encouraging or inspirational messages
Candy and treats, Coffee gift cards, Baked goods

The latter must be prepared in a kitchen that meets provincial standards and FOODSAFE requirements.
I wonder if someone might be interested in organizing that!