

## “The Blessing that Makes Love Possible”

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November 26, 2023

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Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24

Matthew 25:31-46

Gather round, you sheep and goats, and we will prepare to enter the gates of eternal life, or eternal judgment. Wait, what? You're not sure if you are a sheep or a goat? Hmmm. Let's see what our scriptures tell us. But first, I will offer you a brief liturgical map of where we are in our story with God and with Jesus Christ.

Today, we celebrate New Year's Eve: Church Edition! We close out the year of liturgical rhythms with Reign of Christ Sunday, and next Sunday, it will become a new year of seasons and of readings that mark our faith. In case you're keeping track, it will be Year B of our three-year lectionary cycle, and you may find, when you talk about worship and the sermon with your other Christian friends as you are likely prone to do, you may discover you read the same texts. Usually we pick from 2 texts from the Hebrew scriptures, a gospel text and an epistle from the New Testament, plus one or two Psalms. Not every church follows the lectionary, and nothing requires a Presbyterian pastor to follow one— indeed, sometimes I stray from it— but I do like the unity it offers with a wider Christian community much bigger than me and my headspace, and it also provides a discipline and structure that this wandering sheep sometimes needs.

Next week, Advent One, starts the New Year in the church. You likely know about this Advent season. It marks time as we journey toward Bethlehem, for the birth of Jesus Christ. To show the time is different from ordinary, we mark it: with readings from the prophets, with music, with lighting of candles... even the hanging of the greens which will happen next week after worship marks physically a sign of the time changing; simultaneously, we are working inwardly on spiritual changes to make ready for Christ to be born again, in us.

Bernard of Clairvaux— a Christian mystic and Benedictine monk who lived in France in the early 1100's— spoke actually of three Advents. The word Advent means coming, arrival, the birth or start of something. As Bernard said, “Our Lord's first coming is in the flesh and in weakness; another coming is hidden as souls see within themselves, receive rest and consolation, and are saved. His last coming will be in glory and majesty, and *all* flesh shall see the salvation of our God” (Sermo 5, In Adventu Domini, 1-3).

There is the Advent of Christ's birth, of which I just spoke: the anticipation and welcome of the incarnational presence of God, who chose to put on human skin and be birthed into our world: to know our vulnerabilities: having a body, being dependent on others, risking love and pain and loss, delighting in the joy of a belly full of mother's milk, or a table full of friends to share a meal. Knowing suffering and death as a human knows suffering and death. As God, bridging the gap between human understanding and divine knowledge. As Savior, showing us the experience of those worlds does not have to be split.

Bernard also talked about Advent at the end of the age: Jesus ushering in a new era, when we will finally enter the heavenly gates and know how we measure up with God's intentions for us in setting us among creation. At the throne sits Jesus Christ himself. Paul wrote a lot about the end of times— he believed, as we saw in many of his letters— that it would happen in his lifetime. This is one of the reasons he gave for not marrying: there simply wouldn't be time to enjoy a spouse, because Jesus could show up with a moment's notice. Better to spend your energy getting ready for this return. Some churches today still talk about Jesus' coming back in glory, and try to guess the time it will happen. But as for most Christians, nearly 2,000 years after Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension, we've become bored of waiting. There has also been a more intentional movement to see our work as Christians as not to prepare for some heaven light years away, but to consider our work as partners in Christ, to usher in the kind of world he told us about here, on *this* earth, now, in *these* times.

Finally, Bernard wrote about a middle kind of Advent: what happens between the birth of Christ, and Jesus' second coming. That is, the everyday arrival of Jesus. This kind of Advent means that in your day-to-day, ordinary lives, you have an openness to experiencing Jesus embodied in you, and in the lives of those you meet. This recognition impacts how you live your life. It is a blessing.

"Come, you that are blessed." Jesus ushers this invitation in our gospel passage today, which seems like a mash-up between the everyday Advent, and the third kind of Advent. It certainly speaks of a new kind of time, when Jesus returns in glory and sits upon a throne. So you may think that it is about the end times. But Jesus' concern during this end time is of the middle kind of Advent— what we have been doing between the Advent of Jesus' birth, and the Advent of the end of the age:

Did you see me hungry, and feed me?  
Did you see me thirsty, and give me something to eat?  
When I was a stranger, did you welcome me?

Did you clothe me when I was naked?  
When I was sick, when I was in prison, did you visit me?

Jesus makes it very clear that a Christian life necessitates showing compassion and justice for the poor and downtrodden. And Jesus does this kind of sorting thing, into sheep and goats. The sheep are the blessed ones who were able to live into the middle kind of Advent. They recognize the holy in their midst, and they welcome her. They see the broken body of Christ, and they tend to his wounds. They witness who gets put on the margins, and they step out of their privilege, and into the margins, too. These are the people who get invited into eternal life. But those who did not see get ushered into eternal punishment.

Now I know you, and most of you do not come to church to hear about judgment. God knows how much our world is divided. We hear enough about Democrats vs. Republicans. Israel vs. Hamas. Ukraine vs. Russia. Maybe you even bear these divisions in your body. Doesn't Jesus offer something different? You want to hear of God's love and share it. You want to hear of the good things following Jesus will bring about. You want to welcome *anyone*.

But welcoming anyone doesn't mean that our church doesn't stand for *anything*. As Anna Case-Winters argues, "without judgment, there is no justice. Judgment is finally about setting things right: establishing justice." "Justice happens when wrongs are made right, when brokenness is made well, and when that which was lost is restored. God's judgment identifies the necessity of repair." (Cheryl Lindsey, "Sermon Seeds: Care" on <https://www.ucc.org/sermon-seeds/sermon-seeds-care/>)

The eternal punishment Jesus reserves for the goats does not come through acts of violence, manipulation of power, lying about the truth, or any other overt sin. Rather, it is the apocalypse of doing nothing. And doing nothing can be really easy to do. As the saying goes, The only thing needed for the triumph of evil is for good people to do nothing.<sup>1</sup>

But we are called to blessing. Come, you that are blessed. Jesus names the blessing, *before* the righteous action. This implies that the action comes as a result of the blessing, rather than the righteous action earning the blessing. Because we are blessed by Jesus, it makes us open to acting with love.

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<sup>1</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, sermon preached in Barcelona, 1928, reprinted in *the Living Pulpit*, Oct. 1, 1997.

This kind of blessing is actually available to anyone— sheep, or goat. So we can forget about distinctions for now, and instead try to get in touch with this blessing. Allow me to guide you into a little reflection.

If it helps you to focus, please close your eyes. The rules to this journey is to do what helps your body and your spirit participate together in a reflection. So if that means getting more comfortable in your seat, do it. If it means taking some slower, deeper breaths, do that.

Come, you that are blessed. We are going to approach the throne of Jesus himself. You come before him, and you can at the same time feel his extreme otherness, something so holy that it is even beyond your perception or definition. But at the same time, you feel a close familiarity, like he can be as near to you as your very breath.

Jesus beckons you closer, inviting you, saying, “Come, you that are blessed.”

Blessed? *Am* I blessed? You consider the troubles you have been working with. You weigh the burdens that you are bearing. You name how these feel in your arms, in your gut. Can I still be blessed, when I am holding all of this?

“Come, you who are blessed.” How will you approach this throne? Will you lay your burdens beside you, so that you can get closer? Will you curtsy, bow? Will you kiss Jesus’ hand? Will you tremble? Will you let glory wash over you? What does glory even look like, feel like?

“Come, you who are blessed.” Blessed. You think of what has been a blessing in recent times. Where have you felt safe? Who has looked at you with warmth on their face? What foods have you eaten that have given you sustenance? When did you feel laughter bubble up within you? When, and where, have you felt accepted for who you are? You get this sense that Jesus knows you. You do not have to prove yourself to him. Jesus knows you, in all your goodness, *and* in all your failings. You have nothing to hide. Nothing at all to hide.

If your hands can feel the velvet, red pew cushions beneath you, allow them to fall onto these cushions. Is it worthy of this king we honor? Though the fabric may be a bit worn, it is only because of the years after years that others have sat in this place, to worship and seek blessing from this king. The beauty of the incarnation is that Jesus can be born into any body. Jesus has been born into the bodies that have sat here before you. Jesus has been born into the bodies of people this church has served: the

hungry, the homeless, the stranger. Is there any reason Jesus cannot be born into your body, too? There is no reason Jesus cannot be born into your body, too.

You know that love and grace of Christ being born into your body, and so you start to know the blessing of how Jesus shows up into other bodies, too. Even broken bodies. Even marginalized bodies. Even lonely bodies. Even hungry bodies. Especially these bodies. And the blessing in you starts to awaken when the Christ in you recognizes the Christ in someone else. You cannot help but to respond.

So let me leave you with a blessing. This blessing is written by Jan Richardson, and is called "You Who Bless."

You  
who are  
yourselves  
a blessing  
  
who know  
that to feed  
the hungering  
is to bless  
  
and to give drink  
to those who thirst  
is to bless  
  
who know  
the blessing  
in welcoming  
the stranger  
  
and giving clothes  
to those  
who have none

who know  
to care  
for the sick  
is blessing  
  
and blessing  
to visit  
the prisoner:  
  
may the blessing  
you have offered  
now turn itself  
toward you  
  
to welcome  
and to embrace you  
at the feast  
of the blessed.

