

“The Day with Two Surprises”

Based on Matt. 25:31-46

Preached on Nov. 22, 2020

“And He will come again with glory to judge the living and the dead, whose kingdom will have no end.”

We believe and confess this - that Jesus Christ, whom we do not now see, who reigns over all things at the right hand of the Father, will reappear on the Last Day in great glory to judge the living and the dead. The Last Day is a day of judgment.

We have come to the end of the church year. The last Sunday. Next week, should Jesus not appear in glory, we will start it all over again with Advent and the preparations for Christmas and Epiphany. Today, judgment. But first, a surprise. That’s right. The Last Day is a Day of Two Surprises. And the first one comes before the judgment. It’s called the Resurrection. The Last Day is, first of all, a day of life. If Jesus is to judge the living and the dead, he must raise the dead and change the living so that the mortal would put on the immortal. You can’t have a judgment without a resurrection.

But what surprises us – what really gets us – is that this will be a resurrection of all the dead. Not just a chosen few – No - all. Every last one. You might think about the Last Day as a Sunday where no one sleeps in – where all rise as the judge enters the courtroom. That includes the unbelieving dead, the agnostic dead, the atheist dead and every other sort of dead. “As in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.” And what a surprise that will be! Surprising to those who thought this Jesus thing was a bunch of fairy tale nonsense. Now they stand before Him with newly resurrected bodies, all in the power of His own resurrection. The Lord gets the last laugh. Even those who have spent a lifetime refusing and rejecting Him and encouraging others to do the same will rise from the dead.

The Last Day brings to light who Jesus actually is – He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He’s not simply the Savior of some but the Savior of the world. He is not simply the Good Shepherd of a select few but of the inclusive many. In His flesh, He embodies all, just as Adam embodied all into disobedience and death. When Adam fell, we all fell, and were born fallen in Adam’s fall. But Christ in His humanity is the second Adam, Adam 2.0, the new humanity, the One set right before God. In the first Adam, you die, in the second Adam you live. In the first Adam you are condemned, in the second Adam you are justified and forgiven.

And so this death on the cross of Jesus, the second Adam, is really the death of all of humanity in one Man. “Christ died for all, and therefore all died.” If that’s the case, then it’s also the case with Jesus’ resurrection. It is the resurrection of all humanity. “For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ will all be made alive.” Christ is the first harvest of the resurrection with the promise of more to come. And the more to come is all of humanity on the Last Day. In this way everyone is the beneficiary of Jesus’ victory over sin and death, whether they believed it or not, wanted or not, received it or not.

It’s like having that million dollars sitting in the bank with your name on it. You can trust it and live accordingly, or you can deny it and live in that denial. But on the Last Day, when the accounts are opened, everyone gets to see the victory over death Jesus has won for them in the resurrection of their bodies.

And then comes the judgment and the second surprise of the day. Yes, and perhaps this is the biggest one, if the resurrection of all the dead wasn't enough? Because you expect the judgment to be about works, the things you've done that you shouldn't have done and the things you should have done that you failed to do. Sins of commission and sins of omission. Sins of thought, word, and deed. Whenever anyone talks about judgment, it's always in those terms, isn't it? "He'll get his in the end." "I'll have to answer for this on the last day." All the ways we have of saying that when the Lord comes to judge the living and the dead, He's going to judge us on the basis of what we've done.

Here we need to listen to the parable of the sheep and the goats carefully. First there is a sorting, a separation. Only then is there a discussion of what they did. First the sheep and the goats are separated. Sheep on the right, goats on the left. During the day, the sheep and goats grazed together as one flock under one shepherd. Now, as we speak, the whole world grazes together as one flock under the reign of Good Shepherd Jesus, who shepherds the world from God's right hand.

But at the end of the day, as the sun is setting, the shepherd sorts the sheep and the goats into their respective pens. Sheep to the honorable right; goats to the dishonorable left. It's not what they did or didn't do, but what they are. What they did or didn't do merely reflects what they are. "Make a tree good, and the fruit will be good," Jesus said.

Sheep and goats. They grow up together. They pasture together. They're even interchangeable in the old testament sacrifices. They have the same shepherd. But the sheep go to an eternal kingdom prepared for them from before the foundations of the world. The goats, on the other hand, they go to an eternal fire prepared not for them (!) but for the devil and his angels. Not on account of what they did or didn't do, but on account of what they are – and so we want to know more. Teach us Jesus. Explain this.

The sheep are the "righteous," that is, the justified, those who are accounted righteous by grace through faith for Christ's sake alone. Faith. Receivers. The difference between "sheep" and "goat" is simply the difference between faith and unbelief. Without faith it is impossible to please God, no matter how much good you do. But the faithful receive what has always been theirs since the foundation of the cosmos – the kingdom. They are blessed by the Father.

And their works are praised. "I was hungry and you gave me something to eat; thirsty and you gave me something to drink. A stranger and you welcomed me. Sick and you visited me. Imprisoned and you came to me." The surprise is not that they did these things. Of course they did! What surprises us is that these things were done to Jesus. You saw only a poor man, a lonely woman, the least, the lost, the lowly, the despised. But hidden "in, with, and under" the least of these, is the Lord of all. And that's the great surprise.

He is the broken man in the ditch who fell among the thieves. He is the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the poor, the imprisoned, the persecuted, the sick. He is all these things and He endured all these things in order to save you.

Christ is always hidden. The glorious Lord of all, the Shepherd of the world enthroned at the right hand of the Father is always hidden in this world. He is hidden in the Word, in the water of Baptism, in the Supper, there to save you, to be your Savior, to rescue you from your sin and death. And

He is hidden in your neighbor, in the least and lost and lowly and despised of this world, not to save you but for you to serve. Only faith can see that.

The goats, the unbelieving, are also surprised. "I was hungry and you gave me no food; thirsty and you gave me no drink; a stranger and you gave me no welcome, naked and you didn't clothe me, sick and you didn't visit me, imprisoned and you didn't come me." "When," they say, seeking to justify themselves. When did we see you hungry, thirsty, naked, imprisoned, sick and did not serve you? Oh, you can be sure that they would have waited on Jesus hand and foot had they known it was Jesus. It doesn't take any faith to do that. If you see Jesus walking down the street, and you know for a fact that it's Jesus, and He asks you for a dollar, you wouldn't hesitate to give Him a dollar! In fact, you'd give Him the entire contents of your wallet, if you knew it was Jesus.

And there's the rub. That's how you live when you live by the Law. You do - only when you know it counts - like the bridesmaids who didn't bother to bring extra oil; like the servant who buried his talent in fear. Who would have known that the King and Lord of all would come as a naked and thirsty beggar?

So which one are you? Sheep or goat? You won't find that answer in the mirror of the Law. The Law will only reflect the face of a goat back to you, because that's what you are in fallen old Adam. No. You must look to the cross, to that naked, hungry, thirsting, imprisoned Stranger who is your Shepherd, King and Savior. Look into the water of your Baptism and the Word that speaks there. For there in the reflection of those still, deep waters, you will see who you are - a sheep of the Good Shepherd's flock. One who has the Name of God and His Lamb etched upon your forehead and upon your heart. Marking you. Sorting you. Declaring you His own precious lamb that belongs in His arms, and in the arms of no other.

Beloved, you are sheep of the good Shepherd-King Jesus- baptized, forgiven, fed, and free. The Word declares it to be so; believe it. And even as you've been scattered from here into your callings, your priesthood, the liturgy of your life, see it all through the cross of Jesus, and you will see something marvelous - Jesus in the least and the lowly with a promise: "As you did it to the least of these my brothers, you did to me."

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.