**Gospel:** Matthew 25:31-46

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. 32All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, 33and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. 34Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; 35for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 36I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ 37Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? 38And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? 39And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ 40And the king will answer them, ‘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.’ 41Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; 42for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ 44Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ 45Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ 46And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

**Message**: The Least of These

Did you read Zephaniah this past week? Only three chapters! There are vivid descriptions of God’s wrath, the wealthy being plundered, fields laid waste, warrior cries on that great Day of the Lord. We humans have imagined a very angry vengeful God at wit’s end, because, inside all of us, we are violent, vengeful and self-serving. God does not cause the destruction. We do not look too far to see the damage human aggression causes; from school playground bullies to vicious tyrants among nations, humans wreak physical destruction of bodies, emotional destruction of minds, spiritual destruction of soul, devastation of community, earth and environment. As a community of faith, as individual believers, we may turn to the comfort of Psalm 23 relying on a different aspect of the Lord to shepherd us through those dark valleys caught in the shadow of death. We hope for those still waters to stroll beside and green pastures to lie down in, that table prepared for us where we fear no evil for God is with us.

**We** pray, knowing, as believers—people of faith, that God goes with **us** through the Valley of the shadow of death. **We** ask to be comforted by his rod and staff. We intercede for others, and listen for God to say, “I myself will . . .” God will **search** for the lost sheep whom we care about. We see this good shepherd going after our lost sheep, leaving us, the ninety-nine, to bring back those who have strayed from the fold. These poor sheep are rescued from the wolves, and the wolves are being taken out by a well-aimed stone from the sling. The shepherd carries the sheep on his shoulders gently placing it/them back in the fold. The gathered sheep are cared for medically, wounds are bound; they are fed, clothed and strengthened. All is rosy and bright.

The metaphor brings to mind missionaries going into those dark valleys, taking food and medical supplies to remote areas, doctors and nurses crossing borders to offer their medical expertise, teams converging to clean up after natural disasters. We give food, clothing, money to rescue houses. We participate in helping families who are experiencing homelessness find stable housing, retraining for new jobs, a better more sustainable life. We receive the thanks from grateful people who again have been restored. We have contributed to those still waters and green pastures, that table prepared for us, heaped with rich food, encircled by smiling faces sitting around it dining sumptuously, protected from all danger.

Just as we are about to dwell in the house of the Lord forever, because God smote the enemy (And we all like a good smiting. Remember in the first Star Wars movie, how the audience cheered when Luke blew up the Death Star? More realistic, the newsreels of the end of WWII. That was a good smiting.), God shows us another dimension; God broadens the picture revealing the least of these, and the depth of our responsibility in serving God. This is Christ the King Sunday. It is difficult for some modern North American Christians to warm to the image of a king—particularly ancient kings, who historically retained the throne through violence and coercion. Or, try to imagine a shepherd killing those who would attack the flock. At best we think these are outdated images. We 21st Century Christians must consider what type of sovereign our God might turn out to be. The righteous judge, the ruler of creation is also the humble one who, himself was judged—on a cross.

Ezekiel has **implied** a different side of this sovereign from the angry wrathful God. Step aside shepherds and kings; let me show you how to do this. Ezekiel does not portray this king as one blasting with hellfire and brimstone, well-aimed lightening bolts out of the blue. God does say, “I myself will search. I will rescue. I will gather. I will feed. I will save.” God also says, “but the fat and the strong (the bullies who push, shove and take you lunch money, the wealthy who extort, the tyrants of government, the bad guys) I will destroy . . .” Look again at that table set in the in the presence of enemies. Those enemies, those bullies, those street thugs, those wealthy oligarchs, those tyrants are sitting at the table too, next to you, across from you: “and I will feed them with justice.” Like a patient parent who remains calm and consistent, God quietly and firmly corrects the unacceptable behavior. God disciplines rather than punishes. God teaches rather than invokes wrath. The bullies are fed God’s justice, God’s righteousness, which may be a very bitter meal to choke down, but God works to destroy attitudes and behaviors, not people. Opportunity to change, the power to change is always before us. God pursues to that moment of death when all must choose.

God put that power to work in Jesus Christ, the one true human, who saves through transforming lives to the original intention rather than destroying life. Christ searches, Christ rescues, Christ gathers, Christ feeds, Christ restores. Everything is taken up in Christ. Nothing is lost in us or our efforts. What we do for the least of Christ’s family, Christ’s sisters and brothers, we do to him. Do no harm. Do good. Stay in love with God. We are to look for the face of Christ in **everyone**, and everyone is to look for the face of Christ in us. Sitting across the table from our enemies, we look for Christ in the face of the spiritually, morally, ethically hungry and allow God to feed them even when they do not want to be fed. We also hunger and thirst. Although we strive toward perfection, we too must be fed. Our attitudes and behaviors are still falling short of the attitude and the mind of Christ. We must look for Christ in the face of the prisoner to see the value of the human. Prisoners (all are imprisoned by something) are not to be abused or tortured, humiliated or debased. Jesus said he is there with them. Jesus is also with those who abuse, torture and humiliate, at times done by those who think they do so in the name of God. We are at the same time believers and unbelievers, recipients of the gospel as well as witnesses of the gospel. We are lost sheep and also disciples. We are learners, and we are teachers. We are goats as well as sheep.

Jesus continuously calls us to something higher. We can do better, because the power put to work in Jesus Christ, is also working **in** us, transforming us; as the hymn says “till death pursued.” God is not a remote supreme being. God lives and works among us, encouraging us, strengthening us. Whatever you do to and for the least of these, the sick, the hungry, the homeless, the lost, the oppressed, the imprisoned, the one next to you and across the table from you, you do for me, Jesus said. We at some point, in some way, are also the sick, hungry, homeless, lost, oppressed, imprisoned, and, yes, even the bully. We are dependent on others to be Christ to us. We must be open to others to do unto us as we do unto others. God wants to save all of us by touching our hearts with love and persuading us to forget about our obsession of self, to be more concerned for the least of them who just may be the enemy. The Lord be with you. Amen.

**Prayers of the People/the Lord’s Prayer**: God of all mercies, thank you for all those whom you have restored to health. We have asked, and you have heard our plea. We trust you, and you help us. You go before us preparing a way through dark valleys and wilderness. Therefore, we praise your name together. Grant, O God, that the lives you have saved may be more passionately devoted to your service, that we all learn to love you more, trust you more through Jesus the Christ who teaches us to pray, “Our Father.”

**Prayer of Thanksgiving**: Almighty and everlasting God, you have blessed the harvest of our labor and given us the fruits of the earth in season. Give us grace to use the same gifts to your glory, to the relief of the needy, for the comfort of those who suffer, for the restoration of those who have strayed. We give thanks through Christ our Savior who gives life to the world, with all honor and glory now and forever. Amen.

**Benediction**: To God who loves us, Jesus who cleanses us with his own blood, the Holy Spirit who empowers us to live the good news, be glory and dominion forever. Go in God’s peace to love and serve the Lord. Amen.

**Old Testament**: Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24

For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. 12As 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. 13I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. 14I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. 15I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. 16I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.

 20Therefore, thus says the Lord God to them: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. 21Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, 22I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep. 23I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. 24And I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the Lord, have spoken.

**New Testament**: Ephesians 1:15-23

I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason 16I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. 17I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, 18so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, 19and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. 20God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, 21far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. 22And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, 23which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.