

**Care for Creation Commentary on the Common lectionary,
24th Pentecost and Christ the King
By Dennis Ormseth
Green Blades Rising, November 2020**

We approach the end of the church year, this time around, in the aftermath of one the most hotly contested election in memory. With final results likely delayed, preachers on this Sunday may well face highly emotional congregations of voters, whether online or in person. Some may be awash in sweeping triumph, others under a cloud of fear, mongered by politicians who warned of the disastrous consequences – chaos!, corruption!, fascism!, socialism!-- of the victory of the other side. The readings for these two Sundays have the potential to stir up these feelings afresh. Special care is warranted for their interpretation, lest these annual “final reports” of God's love for us and all creation be swamped by convictions, on either hand, about what lies ahead for us as a nation.

Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost, November 15

Psalm 90:1-8 [9-11] 12

Zephaniah 1:7; 12-18

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Matthew 25:14-30

Fearful congregants, for instance, might very well resonate with Zephaniah 1:18, which speaks of a time when “in the fire of [the Lord’s] passion the whole earth shall be consumed; for a full, a terrible end he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth.” “Who considers the power of your anger?” the psalmist asks (90:11), and the Gospel parable speaks of “a worthless slave” who is to be thrown “into the outer darkness.” What was his problem? Was it wariness of uncertain financial markets, perhaps, or concern about the impact of strong economic growth on the environment? Who wouldn't be glad to throw their lot in with the strong “growth strategy” of the first two servants of the parable, and leave that fearful, no-growth slacker to his fate? His may be the more “environmentally friendly” choice, but if the whole earth is to be consumed anyway, does it matter?! Let us enjoy the Lord’s bounty while it lasts!

Fortunately this is not the best reading of our texts. The “great day of the Lord” described in our first reading, we should note, is a place- and time-specific day of judgment upon Judah in the “days of King Josiah son of Amon of Judah” (Zephaniah 1:1), due to their idolatry (“I will cut off from this place every remnant of Baal and the name of the idolatrous priest”; 1:4) and their sin “against the Lord” (1:17). The people, it seems, have lost their fear of God and disregarded God’s call for justice: they “rest complacently on their dregs, those who say in their hearts, ‘The Lord will not do good, nor will he do harm.’” Their wealth, though great, will not save them, for “a full, a terrible end he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth.” The passage thus expresses a theme common to the biblical prophets: as Carol Dempsey puts it in commenting on this chapter from Zephaniah, “Breach of the covenant relationship on the part of human beings reaps

repercussions that devastate not only humanity but the natural world as well” (*Hope Amid the Ruins: The Ethics of Israel’s Prophets*, p. 87; cf. Terry Fretheim’s discussion of the same theme in Jeremiah, in *God and World in the Old Testament*, pp. 171-74).

Our first lesson thus reaffirms points of great importance for the care of creation: while the reading does not foresee a final, all-encompassing destruction of the earth, it does say that human sinfulness stemming from faithlessness in relationship to God the Creator results in *both* social injustice *and* eco-injustice. Divine justice is worked out in God’s relationships with both humans and the creation more comprehensively. The reading thus gives us cause to tremble: we may not know the precise times and seasons of the course of destruction, but the news of the day invariably warns us with equal urgency about the growth of poverty and inequality and the catastrophic consequences of such events as climate change and species extinction. Dare we dismiss this “coincidence” with our present national circumstances out of hand? Is it too late to heed this judgement and turn in repentance? Since our second lesson assures us that “God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ,” as “children of light and children of the day,” we can confidently “encourage one another and build up each other” to persevere all the more in the care of creation, both humankind and other kind. And that, we want to suggest, is precisely the good word we can take away from Jesus’ “parable of the talents” in today’s Gospel.

Warren Carter warns us away from the interpretation we provided above. Conventional allegorical interpretation, he cautions, says that this master is Jesus, who challenges his disciples (the slaves) to be ready for his delayed return by setting out for them the possible consequences of their failure to properly prepare. In this view, it would seem that “the gospel has co-opted dominant cultural values in picturing the establishment of God’s empire. God’s empire imitates, rather than provides an alternative to, Rome’s empire, in which the wealthy and powerful become even more so,” at the expense of matters of social and environmental justice. (*Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading*, p. 487-88).

Bernard Brandon Scott provides an alternative reading that rescues the parable for care of creation. The first two servants have indeed done well. They have made proper use of the wealth that has been placed in their hands. “These servants,” Scott suggests, “are not slaves but stewards acting in the master’s stead. From the profit they make for their master they will be able to enrich themselves, for they expect to share in his good fortune” (P. 226). Their future, following on their master’s return, is secure, as is the master’s estate. The unfortunate third servant, on the other hand, shows what fear can do: he has an image of his master that, as Scott suggests, “deprives him of a future, for it freezes the servant in fear.” Is this image of the master wrong? There is poignant ambiguity to the parable, Scott notes:

A hearer is asked to choose between two competing images of the master: the explicit image put forward in aphorism by the third servant, and the image implied in the actions of the first two servants. Is the master the hardhearted man of the third servant’s attack, or is he gracious and generous, as he was toward the first two servants? How do we know

which of these two views is correct? (*Hear Then the Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus*, pp. 233-34.)

We know which image is true of God by virtue of attending to the larger narrative in which this story is placed. The Creator sows the Creation richly and graciously and the Creator's servants, followers of Jesus among them, do have incalculable wealth for which they are held responsible.

What emerges from the parable, Scott urges, is “how one goes about claiming the future. Is it claimed by preserving the precious gift? Or is it claimed in the present as freedom of action, liberating the servant from an aphoristic, conventional vision that paralyzes him?” For Scott it is clearly the latter: “The parable as a window onto the kingdom demands that the servant act neither as preserver nor as one afraid; but act boldly he must. If one is to act boldly, then the rules have been changed. They are no longer predictable.” We interpose from the narrative of the Servant of Creation: not desperate preservation, but restoration, healing, and enhancement of a living and dynamic creation is the proper role of the follower of Jesus. And for that, a trusting faith, wide awake to what’s happening with the Creation, is essential. It’s true, terrible in prospect is the “outer darkness” of climate change and ecological devastation which will follow from failure to properly serve and steward the wealth of God’s Creation; if that is truly the future of the earth, there will be all too much “weeping and gnashing of teeth.” Those who trust the Creator, on the other hand, and care faithfully for the Creation, can hope with the psalmist “to be satisfied in the morning with God’s steadfast love, so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days” (Psalm 90:14).

Christ the Servant of All Creation, November 22

Psalm 95:1-7a

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24

Ephesians 1:15-23

Matthew 25:31-46

Readers will note that we have presumed to change the name of this Sunday. Yes, its true, there is reason for great elation here the morning: the texts tell us that the long awaited king comes in glory, accompanied by God’s angels. He comes to judge “all the nations” – which includes “all people, Christian, Jews, and Gentiles.” Indeed, he comes as a shepherd, separating out his sheep from the goats. But that metaphorical division concerns those who follow him in care of the hungry, the thirsty, strangers, the naked, the ill and those imprisoned, and those who don’t, and he comes as “the humble, not conquering, king of the triumph.” He comes as one who identifies himself with “the least of these,” and judges on their behalf according to the purposes and authority of the Creator of all things. It is especially significant that, as Matthew Carter notes, compared with “dominant cultural practices,” the favored actions “are nonreciprocal and are concerned for the needs of the other, not the honor and social credit of the giver” (Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading*, pp. 493-95). Remarkably, Jesus, as the powerful Son of Man, enacts a judgment which surprises the righteous and the unrighteous alike by its strong identification with the poor. Judgment

of the people is based on whether they have taken on his role as their servant. The final verb of the judgment, as Carter notes, translated as “did not take care of,”

literally means “to serve.” It is the verb by which Jesus sums up the mission of the Son of Man in 20:28 (“not to be served but to serve”). It denotes actions by angels (4:11), and by women disciples (8:15, giving him food and drink, welcoming him; 27:55.) Its cognate noun ‘servant’ names the identity of disciples as a marginal, low-status community in 20:26; 23:11 (cf. 24:45-51; 25; 14-30). The condemned have not lived as disciples. They have not recognized Jesus’ authority over their lives, despite calling him Lord (cf. 7:21-23) (Ibid., p. 497).

Disciples of the king who is to be revealed as the suffering servant of God in the remaining chapters of Matthew’s Gospel will follow him in this service, and their service will be vindicated as such in the final judgment. Like those saints identified in our reading from the Sermon on the Mount on All Saints Sunday, they are blessed by Jesus’ Father, and they will inherit the kingdom of God.

Hence our alteration of the name for this concluding Sunday of the church year speaks to the leading theme of the narrative of Matthew’s gospel; indeed, we suggest, of the gospel in the full sense of what the story of Jesus is about. Others have proposed changing the name of this Sunday to “The Reign of Christ,” in order to avoid masculine imagery. In spite of the royal cadance of our second reading, we find this inadequate. Jesus’ mission is finally not about domination. It is not about supremacy. It is about service. His role is that of a one “who did not count equality with God something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness” (Philippians 2:5-8).

Given the finality of this vision and this strong emphasis on the role of the servant, we could wish that care for the non-human creation was also listed among the six actions in which his service is to be encountered. The focus here, we lament, seems instead to be exclusively on human need. This focus is probably unavoidable, however, since the emphasis here is on Jesus: the *human* Jesus will be present in and among the representative *human* needy. And in any case these needy do have real social, political, and even ecological context. As Carter points out, the actions Jesus calls for are directed to meet the very real practical needs of people who were likely to be found

among the majority (nonelite) population of a city such as Antioch, the likely place of Matthew’s audience. Among the unsanitary and overcrowded living conditions, the uneven and inadequate food and water supply, limited sewage disposal, the epidemics and infections fed by urine, feces, trash, corpses, decay, and insects, and the general misery of poverty, lack, and debt, disciples are to use their limited resources to meet these basic human needs of the poor (Ibid., p. 495).

Among those needs, in short, are conditions that we would indeed describe today as “environmental,” conditions that impact in every way the quality of the people’s life. Yes, the servanthood of Jesus recognized by the righteous

encompasses care for neighborhood as well as neighbor, to draw on another metaphor we have encountered in recent readings, and finally, for all creation.

Listeners who are attentive to the first lesson read this Sunday will be prepared to receive this more inclusive, ecological understanding of Christ's work. This human Jesus, servant king of the poor, our reading of Ezekiel 34 asserts, is also a shepherd, and indeed, not just any shepherd, but God, the true shepherd who addresses the need of his sheep in comprehensive scope:

As 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. I 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. I 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 (34:12-14).

In this vision of the prophet Ezekiel, the preeminent need of the sheep, we note, is land: fertile, well-watered mountainsides where they can rest and feed “on rich pasture.” The inclusion of this image here as part of the church’s eschatological conviction underscores the importance of care of creation in the future witness of the church; if Jesus the Good Shepherd is properly part of the vision of how God will bring all things to conclusion, not only his sheep, but also the pasture in which his sheep graze, namely the Earth, belongs to that vision.

Including verses 17 through 19 in the first reading will help support this view. The problem between the sheep, these verses make clear, is that not only do the fat sheep refuse to give place to the lean sheep (“you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide” [v. 20]), but they harm the pasture as well: “Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, but you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture?” And they foul the water: “When you drink of clear water, must you foul the rest with your feet?” (v. 18) The point is repeated, for emphasis: “And must my sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet, and drink what you have fouled with your feet?” (v. 19). This is vivid metaphor and very much to the ecological point: there are those who make place for others in which to live; and there are those who don’t, who indeed on the contrary lay waste the space that others need for life. Social justice and ecological justice are again clearly coupled together in this picture.

To help bring this insight forward even more, the reader would do well to extend the lection further to include the remarkable verses 25-31; the preacher might even end the sermon with them:

I will make with them a covenant of peace and banish wild animals from the land, so that they may live in the wild and sleep in the woods secure. I

will make them and the region around my hill a blessing; and I will send down the showers in their season; they shall be showers of blessing. The trees of the field shall yield their fruit, and the earth shall yield its increase. They shall be secure on their soil; and they shall know that I am the Lord, when I break the bars of their yoke and save them from the hands of those who enslaved them. They shall no more be plunder for the nations, nor shall the animals of the land devour them; they shall live in safety, and no one shall make them afraid. I will provide for them a splendid vegetation so that they shall no more be consumed with hunger in the land, and no longer suffer the insults of the nations. They shall know that I, the Lord their God, am with them, and that they, the house of Israel, are my people, says the Lord God. You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture, and I am your God, says the Lord God.

These verses show why the servants of God do what they do; quite simply, they do what God does, serve and keep the garden of earth. Allowing that in biblical ecology the banishment of wild animals does not mean their extermination, but rather their restoration to a place in which they also can live in peace, this covenanting God promises to restore all creatures to their appointed place in the creation. God will sustain them there, in accordance with God's purposes, in the kingdom prepared "from the foundation of the world"(Matthew 25:34).

There is ample reason, we conclude, for appropriate elation this Sunday, irrespective of the political struggle we have lived through in recent months. In the end, the people of God will join the angels of God in the hymn of praise appointed as the psalm for this Sunday –a truly ecologically sensitive hymn, in the view of one commentator (see Arthur Walker-Jones, *The Green Psalter: Resources for an Ecological Spirituality*, pp. 135-36). Thus does the Anno Domini 2020 end with all God's creatures, saints and servants, joining in praise of their Creator and the Servant of all Creation: "O come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker! For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand. O that today you would listen to his voice! (Psalm 95:6-7).