

Welcome

A story is told of a wise and good king who was beloved by all his subjects, from the poorest to the most wealthy. The king was fair in all his rulings, merciful in his judgments and kind even to those who disagreed with his policies. The people of his kingdom loved their king fiercely, and it was not uncommon to hear them praising each other by naming a good deed "kingly" or challenge each other to "be more like the king".

So it was with great sadness they received the king's announcement one day that he would be leaving. He had some business across the sea, and he didn't say how long, exactly, he would be gone. In the meantime, he entrusted a group of his closest followers to rule in his absence. He charged them to rule as he ruled, to be wise and gentle and just and kind. They all vowed they would, and with that, the king departed.

Years passed, then decades, and the king did not return.

One day, thousands of miles away, the king set off for home. He had received word that all was not well in his kingdom. His followers had become divided, and injustice was not an uncommon thing. Because the king was wise, he knew he could not simply ride triumphantly back through the gates. He knew that, upon his return, all his followers would swear they had always been loyal. He had to see for himself who had been faithful and who had not.

The wise king disguised himself as a beggar, and sneaked back into his own kingdom. He travelled the length and breadth of his kingdom, visiting every city, noting carefully how he was treated in each place. He experienced firsthand which of his followers truly were faithful, who treated him with dignity and kindness even in his lowly state. And he noted who ignored him, or even worse, trampled him underfoot, spat in his face, degraded and dehumanized him because of what he seemed to be.

With that, the king left his kingdom once again. He washed and exchanged his beggar's rags for royal robes. And he prepared to return to his kingdom.

You can probably guess what happens next, can't you? (If you can't, don't worry, we'll get back to it).

We're going to be talking today about the Second Coming of Jesus. It's also sometimes called the Apocalypse or the End of the World (to be fair, it IS a pretty dramatic event). And I know that for most of us, this topic is one that generates a good bit of fear (there's a reason End of the World movies always do well at the box office).

But I want to suggest today that God's return is somewhat like the king coming back in the story. We want our good and wise God to come back, to put an end to injustice and evil.

And we don't have to be surprised when our king returns... because God told us exactly what we should be doing as we wait.

Message

This summer, we're working through the Apostle's Creed, one of the oldest statements about what Christians believe. These beliefs are not gateways to belonging but invitations to life. When we say, "I believe..." we are acting in faith, trusting the wisdom of the Church across the world and throughout time that has found these words to be the Way of God, the way to life.

We began by confessing God as our creator, insisting that our lives have meaning and purpose. Since then, we've been investigating belief in Jesus - that he is both fully God and fully human. We explored how Jesus' death frees us from sin and then, last week, how his victorious resurrection is a victory for us as well.

Today, we're finishing the Creed's statements on Jesus: **He will come to judge the living and the dead.**

As I mentioned earlier, I know the Second Coming is a scary thing for a lot of us to consider. And frankly, we don't like to talk about Final Judgement, either. My friend Joshua Butler calls the idea of Final Judgment one of the "skeletons in God's closet". We don't like the idea that God sends people to Hell.

But the fact of God's coming has been part of the Good News for thousands of years. Ancient Israel looked forward to the Day of the Lord, when God would put an end to Evil once and for all and establish a kingdom of eternal justice. When Christians today talk about Jesus' return, the Second Coming, this is what we look forward to.

We believe that Jesus will return to Earth, defeat Evil once and for all, and establish an eternal kingdom that is full of peace, justice and mercy. On one level, it's easy to see why this is good news. Our world is filled with violence, injustice and terror. We *do* want God to step in and say, "No more!"

But on a personal level, we have a lot of anxiety. We want to know... when Jesus comes to judge the living and the dead, how will he judge US? Were we good enough? Will we make the cut? How can we be sure Jesus' coming will be good news for *us*?

[Scripture Slide 1] Turn over to Matthew 25 with me. This is the last of a series of parables Jesus tells in the last week of his life. He's in a confrontation with some religious leaders who have - like those in Amos' day - emphasized religious ritual over love of God and neighbor. This is a story of what happens when the king comes back (and you'll recognize echoes of the story we started with).

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit upon his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered in his presence, and he will separate the people as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will place the sheep at his right hand and the goats at his left.

Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world. For I was hungry, and you fed me. I was

thirsty, and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger, and you invited me into your home. I was naked, and you gave me clothing. I was sick, and you cared for me. I was in prison, and you visited me.'

Then these righteous ones will reply, 'Lord, when did we ever see you hungry and feed you? Or thirsty and give you something to drink? Or a stranger and show you hospitality? Or naked and give you clothing? When did we ever see you sick or in prison and visit you?'

And the King will say, 'I tell you the truth, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me!'

Then the King will turn to those on the left and say, 'Away with you, you cursed ones, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his demons. For I was hungry, and you didn't feed me. I was thirsty, and you didn't give me a drink. I was a stranger, and you didn't invite me into your home. I was naked, and you didn't give me clothing. I was sick and in prison, and you didn't visit me.'

"Then they will reply, 'Lord, when did we ever see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and not help you?'

And he will answer, 'I tell you the truth, when you refused to help the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were refusing to help me.'

And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous will go into eternal life." -- Matthew 25:31-46

One of the reasons we're afraid or ashamed of Final Judgment is that we're worried it's arbitrary. Is it fair that those of us fortunate enough to be born where we were able to hear about Jesus get in while millions around the world who never had the chance to hear don't?

And even among Christians, who's right? Is it us? The Catholics? The Baptists? The holy rollers? The non-denominational people? Surely not the snake-handlers. But who's right? Will God really send to hell everyone who doesn't ace the theology exam?

But Jesus' story demonstrates that there's much more going on than we realize in the final judgment. First, it's not about having a right set of beliefs... Jesus doesn't praise the sheep for their good theology or damn the goats for missing some questions. Rather - as we've seen throughout this series, Jesus is concerned with the *kinds of people we are becoming*. The sheep demonstrated by their very actions that they bear God's image. They look like Jesus, even when they don't think Jesus is watching.

The goats, on the other hand, don't bear God's image. They don't care for the world, for their neighbors. You can almost hear them. "That was you?! Why didn't you say something? If we've known it was you we'd have been on our best behavior!"

We have to be careful here not to simply replace beliefs with behaviors as the metric by which God measures us. Insisting that we just be nicer isn't any less legalistic than telling people they have to have all the right beliefs to get in.

What we're seeing in Matthew 25 gets to the heart of Judgment in the biblical worldview. The Greek word for judgment literally means "to cut or divide". To separate. What's happening in the Final Judgement is God finally stepping in to say, "Enough."

No more injustice. No more discrimination. No more oppression. No more abuse. No more insecurity. No more war. No more victims.

No more.

When Jesus returns, he is finishing what he started on Christmas Day, when he became one of us. When Jesus returns, he's finishing what he started in the beginning. Jesus is coming back to take back the Earth he has never abandoned. He will live with all of us who have chosen to receive his rescue, all of us who've chosen to be made fully human.

And those who choose to reject God, God allows them to reject. God gives them what they want, which is life apart from him. God *separates*. Those who choose light from those who choose darkness.

The reality about final judgment is that there's a lot we don't know. What about people whose only exposure to Christianity was really negative (like, say, the Native Americans and African slaves who were killed because they wouldn't convert)? Or people who never had the chance to hear about Jesus? Or - more immediately for many of us - the person who's only know Christians who hurt them deeply?

Here's the truth: the Bible is silent about such matters. We're left to speculate. But for 2,000 years, theologians and thinkers have insisted that what the Bible *is* clear about is God's love and mercy. At every turn, God does more than we could have expected or imagined. So when we come up against these questions in thinking about final judgment, we throw ourselves (and all those people we're asking on behalf of) on God's mercy. We trust that God is bigger and more loving and more merciful than we can imagine and that on the Last Day, we'll be surprised (because it sure seems like *everyone* is surprised).

So we hold our questions lightly, and we cling to God's character.

What does it look like to be a Church that believes in the Second Coming? I can tell you what it *doesn't* look like: it doesn't look like being afraid. I grew up in a Church that talked about the Second Coming as something to fear. I went to these huge teen conferences where they told you everyone was going to die and Jesus coming back actually sounded like really *bad* news.

I can tell you what kind of culture that created: we were all very legalistic, concerned mainly with whether we were going to be on the 'right side' when Jesus came back. (Which, as Matthew 25 illustrates, ironically puts us on the wrong side.)

No, if we are to be a church that confesses that we believe Jesus will return to judge the living and the dead, then we are confessing that we believe this world belongs to God. We're confessing that we believe God has not abandoned this world, but will reclaim it. We believe that we can *right now* be God's people, working so that when God returns, we'll be found already about his business.

It looks like the work we do at Life Message, giving our time so that others in our community can eat. It looks like the contributions we make to our Make Magic Happen fund so we have some money to help when our people need a little extra help. It looks like the astounding work Jina Norberg does for the homeless community in Dallas with Our Daughter's Hands, feeding and clothing those who have nothing. It looks like the work Rachel Reis does with the ChildCareGroup to provide love and support for kids in Dallas. It looks like the dozens and dozens of ways you serve here at Catalyst and outside these walls.

It looks like affirming that every person we meet bears God's image and is worthy of love and dignity and care.

We believe that Jesus will return to judge the living and the dead. To separate out those who follow him from those who won't. And we won't be taken by surprise because we are about Jesus' work now. We are Jesus' body. We are Jesus' hands and feet.

Communion + Creed

[Communion Slide] We come to the communion table at the invitation of our king, who will return to find us faithful. We come to be formed in his image, sent to do his work.

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit
and born of the virgin Mary.
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to hell.

The third day he rose again from the dead.

He ascended to heaven

and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty.

From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic church,

the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.

Assignment/Blessing

Serve + Lectio on Revelation 20-21