

The Sorting
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Matthew 25: 31-46
Christ the King Sunday, Year A
November 22, 2020

At this time of year, we like to picture the coming of Christ as a little child, surrounded by cuddly animals and loving parents and doting shepherds; a great star overhead marking the one who is God's Son. But before we get to that, the lectionary passages remind us of who that little child grows up to be. A leader who challenges the status quo, who asks his people to do what is hard but also what is right, to follow a call to righteousness.

We think so much about Christ's first coming, we tell the story in Christmas pageants, in song, in movies for kids. But we don't too often think about his second coming, which is what he is talking about here.

What will that look like, the disciples are desperate to know. He talks about it all the time. Well, on the surface, it doesn't seem that it will look too different from the world we live in today. Our nation is sorted into camps, into groups, not unlike what Jesus is talking about.

Sorting has been a part of human experience forever, hasn't it? We divide ourselves into nations, tribes, races; often those roles are designed to make sure that people stay in a certain lane. -JD

But God doesn't sort like that. The word "nations" that Jesus uses here is simply a synonym for the whole inhabited earth, New Testament Professor Anna Case-Winters says. People from every race and nation, every culture and religion are gathered. All are included in this universal judgement, and the judge doesn't ask where they're from or who their parents are, or even whether they believe in Jesus. The issue at hand is whether they have shown compassion. Do they practice love of neighbor, which is the heart of the law as Jesus has taught¹? Our response to the face of Christ in the sick, the prisoner, the outcast, the immigrant, the oppressed, that is the only test question we will have to answer correctly, and not with our words, but with our lives. (Jill Duffield, "Looking into the Lectionary")²

¹ Case-Winters, Anna. *Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible, Matthew*. Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2015; 278.

² <https://pres-outlook.org/category/ministry-resources/looking-into-the-lectionary/>

Every year during Advent I re-read the Harry Potter series, but this year I started a few weeks ago, a little early, but you know, 2020. In the first book, as soon as the young witches and wizards arrive at Hogwarts, they are sorted into four different houses, Gryffindor: brave and daring; Hufflepuff: just, loyal and patient; Ravenclaw: wise and witty; and Slytherin where the cunning will use any means to their end³.

(I'm a Hufflepuff by the way)

Even if you haven't read the books you can guess, Gryffindor's reputation is the best, and Slytherins are to be avoided at all costs. But when Harry sits down to be sorted, the magic hat that does the sorting starts to whisper to him, "you could be great and Slytherin could help you on the way to greatness." But all Harry knows is how the people on the train looked at the Slytherins, with fear and disgust, so he repeats, "not Slytherin, not Slytherin," and the hat puts him in Gryffindor!

As I was reading and contemplating this passage from Matthew, I was reminded of one of my favorite scenes from the fifth book, the Order of the Phoenix. In this book, Harry Potter, now 15 years old, is confused by all the dark and angry feelings he's been having. Harry worries what he might be capable of, and confides in his godfather, Sirius Black. Sirius, who comes from a family chock-full of bad guys, of death eaters, tells Harry this:

You're not a bad person. You're a very good person who bad things have happened to. Besides, he says, the world isn't split into good people and death eaters. We've all got both light and dark inside of us. What matters is the part we choose to act on. That's who we really are⁴.

If you've read the books (or seen the movies) you know that this is true. It's the choices of each character that make the difference. At the end of the story we come to find that one of the greatest, and most unexpected, heroes of the story is a Slytherin, one who chose to put others before himself, to act on the impulse for good, rather than evil.

This year has been an exceptionally dark one.

The daylight is getting shorter, the nights are getting longer, and we are isolated in our homes without our usual routines and comforts. We've seen the failings of leaders and the staggering consequences of those failings as the death toll from Covid-19 continues to climb at an astounding rate. The deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and countless more Black lives lost have laid bare the systemic injustice that plagues our country.

³ Sorcerer's Stone

⁴ Order of the Phoenix

These failings in human history must be exposed and must be judged. As Christians, we trust that in judgment, there can also be transformation. Evil-doers themselves must be transformed by God's grace so that they can be freed from evil and reconciled to one another. Such a vision requires both judgment and redemption, and that is what Jesus promises in this vision of his return.

We think so often about Jesus' first coming, as a baby in a manger, and the idea of Jesus' second coming is one that's difficult to wrap our minds around. It kind of makes me think of the very shouty "preacher" who used to march around Turlington Plaza on University of Florida's campus, carrying a sign listing out everyone who was going to go to hell.

We don't know what Jesus' second coming will look like, but there are opportunities to share Jesus' presence all around us. Each time we advocate for the poor, befriend the friendless, work for justice or labor to make this world that God loves a better place, we testify to the presence of the risen Christ.

This call to care for the least of these is not just about donating a coat or some canned food. It must permeate every part of our life: how we spend our money, how we vote, what we advocate for, how we treat the check out clerk at the grocery store, the person bringing our curbside order to our car. Jesus is telling us something in this passage: each and every person we meet has the image of God in them. How we treat them is how we are treating God.

What did I do to further the kingdom of God? How will I prepare myself for Christ's coming?

We like to sort ourselves into sheep and goats, left and right, good and bad. But the truth is that we have all got both inside of us. We're all a little bit Gryffindor (or Hufflepuff) and a little bit Slytherin. Sometimes we are sheep and sometimes we are goats. Jesus tells us that what matters is the part we choose to act on. That is who we really are.