Sunday, November 22, 2020
Christ The King Sunday
“Road signs & billboards”
#3 “A Parade of Grace”

Ephesians 1:15-23
Matthew 25:31-46

Well, as you probably know, this week has turned out a bit differently than our family had imagined! For those who have not heard, my wife, Carol, our son, Dean and I have been clawing our way back from the coronavirus. We have all been in quarantine since last week, and will continue to isolate until after Thanksgiving. Dean and I are managed to get only mild symptoms. Unfortunately, Carol’s virus was more severe. She remains in the hospital recovering from pneumonia.

She is getting great care, and is making slow progress. We are grateful for your prayers…but I can safely say that we never saw this coming!

I’ve begun to think that might be a great billboard for the year 2020. I’ve been imagining driving away from this year, getting reading to approach 2021. Suddenly a series of billboards start popping up along the highway. One says “Australian wildfires,” another says, “Stock market crashes,” then comes one that says “Church is cancelled…for most of the year!” Five hundred yards later another one reads, “Toilet Paper Shortage Hits Grocery stores,” followed by another “Murder hornets invade the US!” Then another that says, “Face masks mandatory,” and then another “Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg Dies,” and another “President Gets Covid-19” and then “Rock singer Legend Eddie Van Halen dies.” This goes on and on for miles until we get closer to 2021. Right before we cross into the new year there comes a sign that reads: “2020 – The Year When You Never Saw It Coming!”

None of us saw this coming – with the possible exception of those who study epidemics.

None of us could have anticipated that all our holiday plans would be reshuffled—sometimes even at the last minute. None of my pastor friends ever dreamed they would have to learn how to become video editors on the fly, and none of you ever expected that you’d have to bring your own donut to worship on Sunday mornings.

But here we are. And while hope of a vaccine is truly good news, we are still faced with the reality that infection rates are soaring in every part of the world, and that our hospitals are full. The other day Carol could not get a potentially life-saving treatment because there simply was not enough blood plasma to go around.

None of us could have seen this coming.

That is the message we have seen this year. Time and time again, crisis after crisis, we have said that to ourselves. It is also the message of Jesus’ parable this morning. The parable is the last of Jesus’ teaching in Matthew’s Gospel, and we hear it on the day we call “Christ the King Sunday,” or “Reign of Christ.”

Advent is approaching next week, but this week we hear again about the coming reign of Christ. Like the parables we have read in the past two weeks, this parable is focused on Jesus’ return. But here the focus is not on a master returning from a journey or a bridegroom entering the wedding. This parable pulls out all of the stops and loudly announces the coming of Christ in glory. He comes in glory, with all of the angels, sitting on a regal throne with all of the nations of the world passing by. It is a magnificent parade, even mightier than our Thanks and Giving parade this afternoon!

But who is the Son of man? He is not some sort of robed emperor, nor a mighty warrior…but a shepherd going about the ordinary task of separating the goats and sheep. He comes to sort the willful goats from the dependent sheep. Goats are necessary and important, but sheep were prized and valued. Now the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, with the parable reminding us that the sheep are rewarded while the goats are curses. Jesus, the son of man, the Son of Joseph, the Son of David is once more the shepherd. Once more the church says, “We never saw that coming.”

If that surprises you, then take another look.

At first it seems this is nothing more than a conventional morality tale: those who have done good things and who have shown mercy and compassion are rewarded while those who do have not acted with mercy are punished. But delve into this story and see, as scholars point out, the surprise hidden here. When those at Jesus’ right hand are rewarded for what they have done, they’re shocked! They had no idea that anyone that the strangers they had welcomed into their midst were actually Jesus, or that he was there in the crowds of little ones who were hungry, or that he was one of the faceless prisoners whom they had visited. And when the goats hear that they are judged for not seeing Jesus’ face among the lonely, the sick, the hungry or isolated…they, too wonder: “Lord, when did we see thee?

We never saw this coming.

 Neither group realizes what they had been doing. Neither group knows why they have been either rewarded or punished: neither one ever recalls seeing Jesus hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison.

There’s been a good back and forth among scholars about who are “the least of these.” There’s good evidence within the parable to suggest that Jesus is referring to the entire world. This interpretation reminds us that God calls us to share abundantly and to do works of righteousness without expecting anything in return.

Meanwhile, other scholars believe that the “least of these” mentioned by Matthew are the disciples themselves – the very ones who have risked everything in order to carry out Jesus’ mission. They are the ones who have gone hurting and hungry, who have faced persecution. Jesus says to those who have offered these compassion and mercy, “well done.”

In such an interpretation, the parable becomes a script for the church. It becomes our handbook for how we are to be about the work of God in the world – not seeking places of honor, but offering compassion; not trying to please ourselves with how many people we have fed or sheltered, but by looking into the eyes of individuals so that we might see the face of Christ.

There’s something of this in the words of Paul in Ephesians. Paul prays for the church. It is not a prayer that they would be successful, nor is it a prayer that their pews would be packed or their membership rolls doubled. Instead, Paul prays that God might “give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so 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, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.”

Paul calls us to join that great parade of grace. It is a parade that moves out in joy and service, that collects canned goods and personal care items for those in need, but which also works tirelessly to root out causes of injustice and poverty. It is the parade that welcomes those who are lost and alone, that offers Christ’s healing to the sick, which marches to the rhythms of love and grace. Friends, this is the reason why we have a parade this afternoon – not just to see each other – but to see the astonishing work of compassion that God calls us to do every day.

Several years ago, the BBC television network in England honored a man who had singlehandedly rescued 669 Jewish children from a Nazi death camp. Sir Nicholas Winton had never told anyone about his efforts to save the children, but he had kept a list and a diary. When he was well into his 90s, Winton’s wife found the list and shared it with the BBC. The network worked secretly to find as many of the survivors as possible, and then invited them and Sir Nicholas to a taping of a TV show. One by one the survivors stood, and had a chance some 60 years later to thank the man who had saved their lives.

He never saw it coming.

I believe that is the way God calls us to work in the world. As a friend told me recently, I may not be able to save the world, but I can sure change the three feet in front of me.

Let’s face it: this is a hard moment in history. It is a hard time to be part of the church -- we had slowly been reopening, only to learn that now we must return to virtual worship only. We are struggling with the implications of this virus. I know this is not how my family had planned on celebrating. But what might happen if we listened to this parable. We never saw this moment coming: but it is here, and perhaps our call is to look for those we might have ignored, those we might have bypassed, those we might never have considered. What might happen if instead of seeing them only as strangers, as nameless individuals, we saw them all wearing a name tag that says, “My name is Jesus.” Imagine the goodness and justice that could be released.

Amen.