

Mount Olive Lutheran Church  
5327 W. Washington Blvd.  
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53208-1798

Last Sunday in the Church Year  
November 23, 2008  
Matthew 25:31-46 (Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24)

*“At the End: The Sheep and the Shepherd”*

by Pastor Mark E. Wangerin

Introduction

This is the end. It's over. Again. In our nervous and uncertain times, some might well be wondering to what I am referring. But for those of us who are aware of the passing of the calendar (especially the church year) we know that this Sunday is the Last Sunday of the Church Year. And the readings in the last weeks and today point our attention to the end—the last things, the scenes of judgment day and the coming again in glory of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Over the last years, there has been a difference in emphasis in the readings for the last Sunday as well—whether to emphasize Christ the king or his glorious return. The closing verses of the Gospel of St. Matthew chapter 25 combine these two thoughts for it is the king sitting on his glorious throne who will return in glory with all the angels.

There are several important emphases in this lesson as well as in the other readings for today, but our theme for this day will emphasize several of the most important: At the End: The Sheep and the Shepherd. May the Holy Spirit bless our meditation on His Word this day.

I. The End

The End—are you ready for it? Over the last weeks that has been the emphasis of the Gospel readings. From the wise and foolish virgins waiting for the bridegroom, to the wise and foolish stewards of the master and how they have used their talents, to today's vivid picture of the Lord's return in glory, we have images and snapshots and pictures of the end. And there will be an end. People might think that things are not going very well at the moment. Our economic troubles seem to multiply. The stock market has been described as somewhere between nervous and panicked. People wonder when will it end? Things have to get better, don't they? That is not necessarily the case. But there is another end as well when the Lord will put an end to this age and time, to this world and its evil, to all the false starts and broken dreams, to all fears and to death itself. As we confess in the creed: He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead. And that is the picture before us today. The Lord will gather before him all the nations and like a shepherd he will separate them as sheep from the goats. Now we could spend time discussing the goats, who are told to depart into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. They are also the foolish virgins who were not ready, who did not have oil for their lamps and who were not permitted entrance to the marriage feast. They are the wicked and slothful servant who did not carry out his master's will and who buried the talent given him who was sent into everlasting darkness. They are the lost. There is a sobering reminder there for those who comfort themselves with the false comfort that it will all be okay at the end. No, it will not, for wide is the way that leads to destruction. It will be a dreadful and terrible day, a day of darkness

and gloom, a day of final judgment.

## II. The Sheep

But let us not dwell on the lost, on the goats, let us instead think of the sheep. On that day, Jesus speaks to the sheep who are on his right hand, who have been gathered from the nations: "Come, you who are blessed by my Father, take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me." (v.34-36)

Now comes the "we did what" response. "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'" (v.37-39)

They cannot understand when these things were done. Perhaps it is that they are taking the words of the King too literally.

But the answer forcefully and graciously reminds them: "And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'" Now this leads us to the heart of understanding this text which often is misinterpreted to teach a salvation by works apart from the work of Christ our Savior. That is a incorrect interpretation first of all because the sheep are called the righteous, and no one is righteous apart from the righteousness of Christ. But there is another subtle explanation. Even though it is not really that subtle. Who are the sheep? In examining the text it is clear that the sheep are the righteous who will be alive on the earth at the last day. They are the remnant church, the faithful. They are the ones described in the Old Testament lesson for today: "As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness." (Ezekiel 34:12) For how many groups are there in the judgment scene in our Gospel lesson? Most people answer two: the sheep and the goats. Quite a few years ago, a fellow pastor who is now a professor at one of our seminaries, pointed out there are three groups there. The sheep, the goats, and "these my brothers." On the last day, the church militant will be there, those faithful to the last, but the church triumphant will be there as well—those whom St. Paul described in the Epistle a few weeks ago, those whom God will bring with him. And so at the end, the sheep will be suprised, that their service to the ministry of the church, to the fellow members of the body of Christ, to those serving in their midst and those who had gone before them, was service to the Lord himself.

We do not know when the end will come. Are we in the last days? Well, since the Lord's ascension, the church has been in waiting. Perhaps things are not bad enough yet. But I

mentioned a while back to a Bible class that if the world would end abruptly would we say to the Lord, "but things did not seem bad enough yet." To which the Lord would reply, "My faithful ones, you have no idea how bad things were." So whether we are of the sheep standing before the Lord at the end or will by his grace be part of the church triumphant as those who have gone before us in faith already are, we are called again by this reading to be ready, to be faithful, to stand secure as the sheep of the shepherd.

### III. The Shepherd.

And that brings us at last to the Shepherd. That brings us to that picture as well—for it is as a shepherd that the Lord will separate the sheep from the goats. And in the Old Testament we have a powerful Messianic picture of this shepherd. For the Lord says at first, "I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down. I 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 then a little in this same reading he says, "I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them; he shall feed them and be their shepherd." The Lord will be their shepherd; David my servant will be their shepherd. Yes, for the son of David, the son of righteousness, the Son of God will be that shepherd. As it is written in the Book of Revelation: "The Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd and he will guide them to streams of living water." A faithful Shepherd is my Lord. In all the talk of the end and the fear and trepidation which it so often brings, we need remember just this one thing, as the sheep of the Good Shepherd we need to keep our hearts and minds and eyes focused on Him. For there is our salvation. The Lord knows His own and He loves His sheep.

The heavens shall ring with an anthem more grand  
Than ever on earth was recorded.  
The blessed of the Lord shall receive at His hand  
The crown to the victors awarded.  
Have mercy upon us, O Jesus!

In Jesus' Name. Amen.