

## Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe, Cycle A

Ezekiel 34:11-12, 15-17; 1Corinthians 15:20-26, 28; and Matthew 25:31-46

Before 2020, talk about the end of the world may have seemed irrelevant at best and crazy at worst. However, as we end this liturgical year with the Feast of Christ the King, the end of the world is a much more relatable concept. It is not only possible for our neatly ordered worlds to end; they already have.

Our response? Cynicism is one option. An oft' sung chorus in my family is "It's the end of the world as we know it and I feel fine." This song by REM is a stream of hard statements that create the pretense that all is okay, but the haunting "I can't survive alone" repeatedly floats above it all. For, cynicism is just a veil covering despair – and many people today are deeply despairing. Exhaustion accompanies despair: "I am too overwhelmed to do anything." All of these feelings are real and valid.

In these vulnerable times, God invites us into something new. E.g. Ezekiel 34 prophesies that God will replace the self-serving leaders of Israel. Prior to our passage, God called out the Israelite leaders: "Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves!" God described how they have eaten their own sheep and dressed themselves in their wool. The shepherds have neglected to feed their sheep and allowed them to be scattered "all over the face of the earth, with no one to search or seek for them." God rescues the sheep "from [the shepherds'] mouths" and, in our verses, takes over their care: "I myself will look after them... I myself will pasture my sheep; I myself will give them rest... I will seek out... I will bring back... I will bind up... I will heal." Today, as we are overwhelmed by whatever or whoever has eaten us alive, used us for their own comfort or failed to keep us from danger, we can find here a God who does the opposite. God uses an image to tell us this because imagination is the part of us that can heave us out of despair and exhaustion. We need another foundation on which to build our lives. God, our imagination partner, gives us ideas for thinking our way out and our way home.

1Corinthians 15 lays out our situation vis-à-vis death, perhaps the most relevant part of the end of the world. Believing in Jesus Christ as the one who died and was raised from the dead has significant consequences. Because Jesus was God, he could actually overcome death and because he was human, this overcoming applies to all humans. The present life is not all there is for us; we will live forever. Paul delineates a sequence that ends with everyone being subjected to God. We are part of this larger movement toward fulfillment. The phrase, "so that God may be all in all," reminds me of theologian Ed Hahnenburg's comparison of God to a grocery store in which we are all the items for sale or to a white board on which everything, including us, is written. It is this way already; the goal toward which we move is our full understanding of this fact. This belief allows us to see our present suffering against a bigger backdrop. What grinds at us now is not all that is going on, nor will it last.

Who is this utterly different, yet intimately close God? The imaginative story of the Final Judgement indicates that God is the almighty Jesus Christ whose power is expressed by angels and extends over all people who stand before him on his throne. Yet this authoritative force identifies himself with the weakest and most vulnerable: "whatever you did for the least member of my family you did for me." God *is* the weak and vulnerable, not just *cares for* or *watches over*. We may wish for God to be the rescuer, but God is the hungry, the imprisoned, the stranger, the sick. (Note there is no qualifier regarding deserving or undeserving.) To anything in us that says, "Care for the poor is not an essential quality of my spirituality," God says, "I am the poor." What's more, attending to God as God appears in the needy is the only criterion for admittance to heaven.

As we flounder in our own suffering, renewed by the rise in pandemic infections, this feast invites us to tend the suffering of others. Why? Love rescues us. It begins with the warm feeling of helping. Then, if we keep going deeper in our service, we make friends. The loving keeps changing us. We move toward seeing God in everyone. We move toward recognizing that God is all in all.

- ❖ In prayer, imagine God as the shepherd who saves us. What arises in you?
- ❖ Find a way to spend time with someone in need. Afterwards, reflect on how God was present in that person.

11/17/2020, Bernadette Rudolph