

Let us pray... God of wonder, you are holy. Create a space for holiness in our lives. Usher your Spirit in our midst. Infuse your loving presence in our hearts, calm our minds, and bring us peace. So, we may know we are loved by the Creator of the universe... Amen.

I have always loved the night sky. I especially love watching meteor showers or looking for shooting stars. The other night in fact I was surprised to see a shooting star when I just happened to look up as I was walking inside.

It was a pleasant surprise and yet, it reminded me of how tiny we are in the midst of this unfathomable universe.

And even though we are so miniscule in the grand scheme of things... We are also of great importance to the Creator of the universe.

So important in fact, it seems that our every action will be judged or weighed or valued by God...

As we heard in our not so settling Gospel today, there will come a time when the bad goats will be separated from the good sheep.

And while some of us may like this idea...

We are told that judgment is not ours to give, it is God's.

But what does this judgment mean anyway? Especially to a God that offers grace, upon grace, upon grace...

A God we come to know not even by our own works, but by the power of the Holy Spirit.

A God that we are promised eternal life in, not because of our works... But by God's love and grace.

An idea that is central to our Lutheran identity... An idea that Luther himself clung to as it helped him interpret the Word of God.

Which some of you may remember learning in confirmation... Justification by grace through faith.

Which of course is not unique to Luther, but is spoken over and over in Scripture... For example, in Ephesians. "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works."

And while we know this is true... We also have the tension from our Gospel reading today...

So, let's look at this and specifically how the goats and the sheep respond to this judgment.

They both say Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry?

They both react the exact same way...

Both the goats and the sheep were caught by surprise...

The goats do not see themselves as goats, nor do the sheep see themselves as sheep.

Because our identity is central to who we are in Christ. As God works in us so that we can produce good fruit...

It has everything to do with God.

Again, if we turn to Ephesians, we will hear this truth. "For we are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works."

So, let's hear that whole passage from Ephesians together... "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works. For we are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works."

So how do we hold this amazing truth in tension with our gospel reading on judgment?

Well, since we are Lutherans, let's turn again to Luther...

So here we go, another flashback to confirmation class. The first commandment is you shall have no other Gods. Which Luther explains as, "We are to fear, love, and trust God above all things."

Fear is first... Fear meaning, we are to fear our actions... Because our actions can bring harm to others. We are to fear that our actions will disappoint God. You know like when you love someone so much, you do not want to hurt them... That is the kind of fear we are to have toward God.

Meaning we are to fear our actions not because of eternal judgment, but because we love God... Love that we learned from God.

Because love is more powerful than judgment. Love is continuously given by our shepherd who tends to us and does the work.

Just like we heard in our reading from Ezeiel...

"I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out... I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered... I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land... I will feed them with good pasture... And there they shall lie down in good grazing land."

Again, it is all about what God is doing.

And we can start to see what God is doing when we invite God into our lives.

You know like that other commandment, remember the Sabbath and keep it holy.

Because I don't think we do enough of keeping Sabbath in our daily lives.

For example, the past couple of weeks in confirmation we have been working on the commandments.

And so, I asked the confirmation students if they have a day of Sabbath.

But for most of them it is hard... They have school, they have sports, they have activities, they have homework...

They are not able to find time for this sacred commandment.

Which means that it is up to us adults to model this behavior for them, to show them what it really looks like to take Sabbath.

As it is especially during your times of Sabbath, prayer, or doing the things that are most life-giving to you, when God can shine brightest in you.

Allowing God to shepherd you. Allowing God to lead you to streams of water, quench your thirst, and nourish your soul.

Restoring you and giving you purpose.

Because when God is working in you, you will bear good fruit...

And when we allow God to care for us, we open up even more space to care for others how Christ intended. We can see the needs of God's people and discover how we are called to be God's love in the world.

Because our lives fly by so very fast, sometimes it may even seem to the speed of a shooting star...

And yet, there is light left from the trail we leave behind.

And this light is imprinted on God forever.

So, if we don't make the time to be intentional with God, there will never be the time.

And what a better time than now to get into that rhythm.

As next week we will start advent, which is also the start of our church year. And there are free advent devotionals and calendars available for you to take home.

Calendars that play with the image of light and darkness, because advent invites us to sit in God's holy light and God's sacred darkness.

Which makes sense, since most of our days this time of year are spent under the stary sky.

A sky of stillness and wonder... Inviting us to push back on the business of the holiday season. To wait with purpose, anticipation, and reflection.

Till the silent night and holy night is here, when we can hear the story about another star. A star that led to the light of the world... Amen.