

## Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church, Toledo, Ohio

A congregation of the Northwestern Ohio Synod

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

**Sunday, November 22, 2020**

### **Introduction & Welcome**

Welcome to worship today. Some of us are bringing our best selves to this space, and some of us are bringing our struggling selves, including pieces we might be ashamed of. All of us are welcome here, and all of us are loved. Some of us already have open hearts; and some of us aren't quite there yet, because our hearts have gotten a little beat up this week and might have forgotten how to trust and be open. Your heart is welcome here, no matter how bruised. We welcome you among us. All of us are imperfect, but we're here to drop our defenses and trust that what happens in worship is powerful and life-giving. Together, we affirm that this day—and our being together—can make each of us braver, more compassionate, and wiser than when we woke up this morning.

On this final Sunday of the church year our gospel is Jesus' great story of judgment. In the end, the faithful are those who served Christ by ministering to those who are poor, hungry, naked, sick, or estranged. In the first reading God is the shepherd who seeks the lost, weak, and injured and feeds them with justice. We gather this day to celebrate the reign of Christ and his victory over death, yet we await the consummation of all things yet to come. Acknowledging Christ as our merciful ruler, we go forth that his reign may be known in our loving words and deeds.

### **Confession and Forgiveness**

Blessed be the holy Trinity, † one God,  
in whose image we are made,  
who claims us and calls us beloved.

**Amen.**

Silence is kept for reflection.

Holy One,  
**we confess that we are not awake for you.**  
**We are not faithful in using your gifts.**  
**We forget the least of our siblings.**  
**We do not see your beautiful image in one another.**  
**We are infected by sin**  
**that divides your beloved community.**  
**Open our hearts to your coming,**  
**open our eyes to see you in our neighbor,**  
**open our hands to serve your creation. Amen.**

Beloved, we are God's children,  
and Jesus, our Beloved, opens the door to us.

Through † Jesus you are forgiven,  
by Jesus you are welcome,  
in Jesus you are called to rejoice!

Let us live in the promises prepared for us  
from the foundation of the world.

**Amen.**

### **Prayer of the Day**

O God of power and might, your Son shows us the way of service, and in him we inherit the riches of your grace. Give us the wisdom to know what is right and the strength to serve the world you have made, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

**Amen.**

### **First Reading: Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24**

*Because Israel's kings proved to be bad shepherds, Ezekiel declares that the LORD will assume the role of shepherd in Israel. The LORD will also set over them a shepherd-messiah, "my servant David," who will feed and care for the people.*

<sup>11</sup>Thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. <sup>12</sup>As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. <sup>13</sup>I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. <sup>14</sup>I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie

down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. <sup>15</sup>I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD. <sup>16</sup>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 the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.

<sup>20</sup>Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD to them: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. <sup>21</sup>Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, <sup>22</sup>I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep.

<sup>23</sup>I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. <sup>24</sup>And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the LORD, have spoken.

### **Psalm: Psalm 95:1-7a**

We are the people of God's pasture and the sheep of God's hand. (Ps. 95:7)

<sup>1</sup>Come, let us sing to the LORD;

let us shout for joy to the rock of our salvation.

<sup>2</sup>**Let us come before God's presence with thanksgiving and raise a loud shout to the LORD with psalms.**

<sup>3</sup>For you, LORD, are a great God, and a great ruler above all gods.

<sup>4</sup>**In your hand are the caverns of the earth; the heights of the hills are also yours.**

<sup>5</sup>The sea is yours, for you made it, and your hands have molded the dry land.

<sup>6</sup>**Come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the LORD our maker.**

<sup>7a</sup>For the LORD is our God, and we are the people of God's pasture and the sheep of God's hand.

### **Second Reading: Ephesians 1:15-23**

*In this passage, God is praised for revealing ultimate divine power in raising Jesus from the dead. The resurrected, exalted Christ is Lord of both the church and the entire universe, now and in the age to come.*

<sup>15</sup>I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason <sup>16</sup>I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. <sup>17</sup>I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, <sup>18</sup>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, <sup>19</sup>and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. <sup>20</sup>God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, <sup>21</sup>far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. <sup>22</sup>And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, <sup>23</sup>which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

### **Gospel Acclamation**

*Alleluia.* Blessed is the one who comes in the name | of the Lord.\* Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David. *Alleluia.* (Mark 11:9)

### **Gospel: Matthew 25:31-46**

*Jesus compares himself to a king who moves among his subjects to see how he is treated: what is done for the least of those who belong to his family is truly done for him.*

[Jesus said to the disciples:] <sup>31</sup>"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. <sup>32</sup>All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, <sup>33</sup>and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. <sup>34</sup>Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; <sup>35</sup>for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, <sup>36</sup>I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' <sup>37</sup>Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? <sup>38</sup>And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? <sup>39</sup>And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' <sup>40</sup>And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family you did it to me.' <sup>41</sup>Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into

the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; <sup>42</sup>for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, <sup>43</sup>I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' <sup>44</sup>Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' <sup>45</sup>Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' <sup>46</sup>And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

### **Meditation by David O'Brien**

Lord, we thank you for the gift of your Word and as we think on these things, open our hearts and our minds to hear you. **Amen.**

When my children were little, they had a pediatrician whose wife was also a pediatrician in their shared practice. The both took excellent care of the children who were entrusted to them and the families of those children as well. He and his wife were, and I expect still are, Muslim. In the aftermath of 9/11, there was a lot of distrust concerning people of the Islamic faith. This couple, however, had already earned the trust of their patients and continued to demonstrate that they would be worthy of that trust. This Muslim man and his wife took care of all of their patients without any apparent consideration of the faith of those patients. He reminds me of the story of the good Samaritan who cared for the Jewish traveler who was injured, not because he knew him or had any relationship with him. He did it just because it was the right thing to do.

Ezekiel was living and prophesying during the first Babylonian exile. In the verses immediately preceding today's first reading, he was warning the leaders of Israel and Judah that they were not being good shepherds of the people entrusted to them. These leaders cared more for themselves than they did for their flocks. In today's first reading, Ezekiel says that God will search for his scattered sheep, perhaps a reference to how the people of Israel and Judah had been exiled to other parts of the Babylonian Empire by Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon. God is saying, through Ezekiel, that he intends to bring his people back to their land and will take care of them. He then looks towards the leaders of the community and, rather than referring to them as shepherds, this time they are the fat sheep that have made sure they had plenty, even at the expense of the other members of the community. God states that he will destroy the fat and strong sheep by feeding them with justice. But he promises to heal the injured and strengthen the weak and to set them up with one shepherd who shall feed them.

It seems to me that God is referring to himself as a good shepherd, one that will take care of His flock. That imagery also shows up in the New Testament when Jesus refers to Himself as the good shepherd who would lay down his life for his sheep. Today's Gospel reading also invokes the image of Jesus as a shepherd of the nations. But who are these nations? In my diakonia class, we have been discussing the notion that we, the Christians, are the people of Israel and the children of Abraham. ("God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham." Luke 3:8) So if we are part of the Nation of Israel, in the Biblical sense, who are these nations being gathered before Christ's throne? The term is used most often in the Bible to refer to an outsider. So, if we, as Christians, are justified by faith and not works, could it be that Christ is bringing the non-believers before his throne and sorting them out as a shepherd sorts his sheep and his goats, according to their works? The sheep are the ones who have done God's will on Earth by taking care of the others from their perspective. Feeding them when they are hungry, or clothing them when they are naked. The good Samaritan sounds like he'd be one of the sheep in this reading of the story. The goats would be those who have treated God's people poorly. The sheep are invited into the kingdom and the goats are ushered into eternal punishment.

I have often struggled with the notion that a good person, such as my kids pediatrician, who leads a good life and takes care of others, would be condemned simply because they did not share my faith. Perhaps the story that Jesus is telling is a hint that God's plan for salvation can reach them as well. If, when Jesus gathers the nations before his throne, a Hindu comes before him who has cared for his fellow man regardless of their beliefs, could this be his path to the Father through Christ, the Son?

### **Prayers of Intercession**

Longing for Christ's reign to come among us, we pray for the outpouring of God's power on the church, the world, and all in need.

A brief silence.

Sovereign of all, train our ears to hear your cry in the needs of those around us. Bless all social ministries of the church and civic organizations, through which we seek to serve others as we ourselves have been served. Hear us, O God.

**Your mercy is great.**

You cause rain to fall on the just and unjust alike. Direct our use of creation to provide for the needs of all people in ways that are sustainable for the earth. Hear us, O God.

**Your mercy is great.**

Bring peace to every place where conflict rages, weather large or small, through war or differences of opinion among the people of Your Church. Grant opportunities for ending divisions among us and usher in your reign of unity and reconciliation. Hear us, O God.

**Your mercy is great.**

Heal the sinful divisions we erect between us and release us from systems of oppression and prejudice. Restore our capacity to see your image in those whose dignity we have stripped away. Hear us, O God.

**Your mercy is great.**

Pour out the gifts of your Spirit on children and youth throughout the church. Sustain those who work in children's ministry, youth ministry, and campus ministry as they nurture the gifts of young people. Hear us, O God.

**Your mercy is great.**

Thank you for saints now departed who fed the hungry, clothed the naked, and tended to the sick. Inspire us by their example, that we may see your presence in those in need around us. Hear us, O God.

**Your mercy is great.**

Receive our prayers in the name of Jesus Christ our Savior, until that day when you gather all creation around your throne where you will reign forever and ever.

**Amen.**

Together, let us profess our faith using the words of the Apostles Creed:

**I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.**

**I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to the dead.\* On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come to judge the living and the dead.**

**I believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the holy catholic church,  
the communion of saints,  
the forgiveness of sins,  
the resurrection of the body,  
and the life everlasting.**

**Amen.**

And now, as our Savior, Christ has taught us, we boldly pray:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever.**

**Amen.**

### **Blessing**

May the God of all creation,  
in whose image we are made,  
who claims us and calls us beloved,  
who strengthens us for service,  
give you reason to rejoice and be glad!  
The blessing of God,  
Sovereign, † Savior, and Spirit,  
be with you today and always.

**Amen.**

### **Dismissal**

Beloved of God,  
go in peace to love and serve the Lord.  
Bless the world and be God's grace!

**Thanks be to God.**