

## FOCUSED ON FAITH: BE MERCIFUL

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Matthew 25:31-46

How many of you like to be scared? You like to watch horror movies and you squeal with delight when the movie makes you jump with fright. How many of you had the courage as a kid to read Edgar Allan Poe by flashlight? Or maybe you devour the works of Stephen King which consistently teach that there are bad things out there that we cannot see and they are trying to get us. For me, growing up on the Gulf Coast and spending lots of time on the water, the scariest movie of all came out in 1975—Jaws.

Today is the Fourth Sunday of the Season of Advent. Advent, when you wrap your head around it, should terrify you—not in the Stephen King monster-behind-the-door way, but in a way that causes you to reevaluate your entire life.

Today is December 24th—the day before Christmas. And if you came here expecting me to talk about a baby in a manger, and shepherds, and angels, then I'm sorry. I won't be doing that this morning. We will do that tonight at the Christmas Eve service. This morning, however, is still Advent and I want to finish this Advent sermon series I've called "Focused on Faith."

The word Advent is from the Latin *adventus* which means "coming" and refers to the coming of God into this world. Advent is not an idea which originates in scripture. Nowhere in the gospel does Jesus command, "For four weeks before the celebration of my birth, you are to hang greenery and light purple candles on a wheel." No. Advent is a practice developed by the church over centuries as discipline that helps us to better comprehend the notion that we celebrate at Christmas—that our God is here with us.

The origins of Advent are murky. It started as a fasting period between the Feast of St. Martins on November 11 and Christmas. At one point, it was forty days long as a reflection of Lent—the forty days preceding Easter. Eventually, Advent became the four weeks before Christmas as we know it today. No matter how long Advent may be, the spirit of Advent should be found in all 52 weeks of the year. As people of faith, reflecting on God's presence in our lives is what we should be doing every day of the year.

Through this season of Advent, I have been preaching this sermon series, "Focused On Faith," looking at the different ways that Jesus calls us to be ready for God's presence. My first sermon was **Be Awake** and discussed how we should not just be awake but open and present for God. We should not be distant or pre-occupied. Second, in the sermon **Be Hungry**, we looked at the prophesy of Ezekiel and Ezekiel's teaching that to be prepared for God we should not be full and

complacent, rather we should have a hunger for God. Third, in the sermon **Be Dressed**, we looked at what Jesus' parable of the wedding banquet teaches us about God's kingdom—primarily that although God invites us and wants us there is still a responsibility on our part to act appropriately, to be dressed in the manner expected of the occasion. When invited to the wedding then wear a wedding robe. When called into the kingdom then act as one who belongs there. Last week, in the parable of the talents, we learned that we are to **Be Not Afraid**. God can be a harsh judge if that is what we expect, but God can also be gracious and merciful to those who expect that. Trust in God's love and be not afraid.

Today, I am concluding this series with Jesus' command to **Be Merciful**. Our reading is Jesus' Parable of the Sheep and Goats—the final parable in a string of teachings about God's judgment. As Christians at Christmas-time we become so fascinated by the infant in the manger that we forget that it represents God in our world—Emmanuel, *God with us*. The consequence of being in God's presence is judgment. Judgment does not mean we are all guilty, but it does mean that we are judged. The string of parables that we find in Matthew's gospel are part of Jesus' teaching how we will be judged, what we will be judged for, and the consequences, which can be anything from being welcomed into the joy of the master to being cast into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

In the parable of the sheep and the goats, Jesus starts off saying that when the Son of Man arrives, he will do so *in his glory* accompanied by *all the angels* and he will take his place on *the throne of his glory*. *All the nations will be [there] gathered [in front of] him*. Then, the Son of Man will *separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left*. The image is of a pasture in which sheep and goats have been allowed to graze together. At the end of the day, the shepherd needs to separate the animals—the sheep to one paddock and the goats to another.

In the parable, the Son of Man is now a king and as king calls those people that he has put on his right *blessed* and says to them, *inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world;*

*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,  
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.'*

These blessed, righteous people will ask the king, *when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink, [or] a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?'* The king will tell them, *just as you did*

*it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.* That is what the king says to the people on his right.

To the people on his left, the king calls them *accursed*, and says, *depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 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.* This, clearly, is news to the people on the left and they ask, *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?* The king answers by saying, *just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.* The consequences of not showing mercy is *eternal punishment* while the righteous will enjoy *eternal life*.

In this parable, all people are brought before the king for judgment and separated into two groups—the righteous and the unrighteous. The righteous are praised for the acts of mercy to the king that they performed. They are confused because they don't recalling doing anything for the king. The king assures them that when they show mercy on the least they are showing mercy on him.

Likewise, the un-righteous on the right side are accursed because they exhibited no mercy to the king. They too are confused because they don't recall any time that the king required mercy. The king tells them that any time that they failed to show mercy to the least powerful in the world they failed to show mercy to the king.

If you listen to public radio you may have a certain story last week. It was told a part of their StoryCorps project. The teller of this particular story is Dr. William Lynn Weaver. Dr. Weaver is a graduate of Howard University and also Meharry Medical College in Nashville. He's currently a professor of surgery at Morehouse School of Medicine in Atlanta. The story he tells takes place in the Mechanicsville neighborhood of Knoxville. It happened in 1964 when Dr. Weaver was home for Christmas break during his freshman year at college. This is his story:

I remember walking up the street Christmas Eve and I see this kid riding down the street on their bicycle and I say, 'Boy, that looks like my brother's bike.' I get to the house and say, 'Wayne, where's your bike?' And he said, 'It was down on the steps.' I said, 'No it's not. It's gone.'

It's a small neighborhood so we find out where the kid lives who has the bike and it's a shack in an alley. Now, my brother and I, we're going to beat this boy but my father was there and he said, 'Just shut up and let me talk.'

So we knock on the door and this old black guy comes on a cane. The house was cold; the only light he had was a candle. It was his grandson who had stolen the bike, so he calls him out. He was the same age as my brother, about ten

years old. The little boy starts crying and he says, 'I just wanted something for Christmas.' So we get the bike and we leave. We go back to my house.

My father tells my mother and she doesn't say anything. She just starts cutting the turkey in half and all the fixings. She started packing it up. My father went to the coal yard and got a big bag of coal. And then he told my brother, he said, 'You've got another bike, don't you?' My brother said, 'Yeah...'

So we went back with food, coal — so they'd have some heat — and the bike. The little boy is just crying but the thing that moved me the most was the old man. My father gave him \$20, which was a huge deal back then, and said, 'Merry Christmas.' He said, 'Thank you,' and then just broke down in tears.

My father was a chauffeur; my mother was a domestic, so we didn't have a lot of stuff. And that Christmas, I don't even remember what gift I got but I do know that made me feel better than any Christmas I've ever had.<sup>1</sup>

Some would say that it is a great Christmas story, that it proclaims the true meaning of Christmas, that this is what Christmas is about. And, maybe it is. But we also see here the parable of the sheep and the goats. The story tells of Dr. Weaver's family exhibiting mercy and grace to the very least of these. The Weavers weren't seeking accolades by their actions; they didn't focus on helping just the powerful. They responded to a need.

Today is the Fourth and final Sunday of Advent. It is also Christmas Eve. Tonight we will gather here to celebrate the coming of Christ the King into our midst. He may shown up as a humble baby but he is God nonetheless.

Since God is with us, when we discover ourselves in God's presence, will we be found guilty of showing mercy? Will we be awake and alert and hungry for a relationship with our lord? Will we be dressed in the proper attitude? Will we have given our whole life to be with God? I pray that we have. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://storycorps.org/listen/william-lynn-weaver-171215/>