

God is Watching You

Sermon preached by The Rev. Mary Keenan

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There's a lot to consider in Jesus' vision of the final judgment of the nations - this drama that involves a king and angels and, improbably, sheep and goats. There's the separation of the blessed and the accursed, the everyday acts of service that end up being the difference between those two groups. There's the strange notion that neither the blessed nor the accursed had any idea how they ended up where they did. None of them had a clue if they were being holy or cruel until they were told. None of them were actually even trying to get into heaven.

And there's this very familiar, sometimes oppressive idea that all of them - the blessed sheep, the accursed goats, and even the least of these - all of them were being watched. One thing this story tells us is that we are being watched, too! You are being watched. All the time.

It may be the fact that I have a teenager who feels like she is being watched all the time right now, but this image of the final judgment, where everyone's fate is determined by a security camera recording of our best and worst moments feels like we're all about to be grounded.

It is a lot of pressure thinking that every moment of your life, every encounter you have with other people, can lead to such a stark outcome as eternal blessing or damnation. It can kinda take the joy out of feeding the hungry.

At least that is one way to look at it. That we are being watched so that we can be caught doing good or evil, being kind or cruel.

As I pondered this reading from the Gospel and also kept an eye on my adventurous teen, my mind wandered. Perhaps it is because a friend has been posting photos of her adorable grandson or because Father Zac and Anna are expecting a baby soon, but I remembered my own sweet first months of parenthood.

After I had my first child, my son Asher. I remember staring at him when he slept. Nothing was wrong, he wasn't doing anything. He was just THERE. After so many months of being hidden from view, he was really there! And like lots of new parents and aunts and uncles and grandparents, I stared at him.

I wondered at his chest moving up and down with breath. When he gave that baby startle response that babies do, I startled too. He would get really, really still, then make a small movement and I'd think - ridiculously - "Look! He can move!"

It turns out I'm not the only person who does this. Even my friends who don't have children admit to staring at babies. We all remembered that when we do our shoulders seem to relax and our jaws unclench.

I wonder if that is how God sees us?

What if God is not spying on us to keep us out of trouble, what if God is staring at us because we are amazing. Watching us not in judgement but in love. Hoping the best for us, wanting us to find for ourselves the ways we can uniquely express that love with one another.

It is a reassuring idea to think that the God who created everything there is would take the time to wonder at us, to hope for us, to have dreams for us.

Of course, the next logical thought is, "If that is how God is looking at me, it must be how God is looking at everyone else. The sheep, the goats, and the least."

So when God is watching us, what does God see? A sheep, a goat, the least? Or maybe all three?

I like to think of myself as one of the sheep. Someone who has fed the hungry, donated clothes for people who have none, visited those who are sick and hospitalized. I've done those things.

It's important to remember, though, that the sheep in this story had no idea they were serving Christ when they were being kind. They just did it. That means that even though you might see your daily acts of compassion as Christian love (which they are), it is possible that you are showing that love (or not) when you don't even realize it. It's almost as if that kindness is just a part of you and you can't help but act it out when you see another human being. You see other people the way God does, the way we look at a babies.

I'm sure we all prefer to think of ourselves as sheep, but I am betting we can each remember times when we might have been more like the goats. It feels good serving others and I'm sure we all try our best to see Christ in them. But haven't there been times you and I have passed that chance and maybe even thought about someone that they didn't really need or deserve our help anyway? It might be a stranger or an annoying sibling or a suspicious neighbor... maybe they are the goats!

That's not very sheeplike. It is frightening to think any of us might be a goat - especially when we are told what happens to them! But you know what else is kind of unsettling? What if someone we are sure is a goat - someone who is unkind and cruel to people in need - is also one of the least?

What if some of the people we need to serve and see Christ in are the people who don't treat others well?

Which brings us to "the least of these." No one really wants to be in this category, It is comforting to think of the least of these as people other than us. Not everyone has the luxury of thinking that way. Some people in our families, our neighborhoods, our church have less

food, less health, less safety, less freedom. You don't have to drive far from St. Mark's to see people living in tents under the Highway 71 bridge. But you can also look at our own prayer list and see there are people we know who are suffering.

At a time when all of us are more isolated than ever during a worldwide pandemic, it might be easier now to imagine ourselves as among the least. We are lonely, we fear for our health, we don't feel as safe as we used to. Remember that just as you can see the face of Christ in those you serve, someone will see the face of Christ in YOU when they serve you. It isn't a one-way transaction.

Sheep, goat, the least. Which are you? Which are we?
It is possible that we are all of them at one time or another.

It is also possible that we are none of them. Those images are, after all, creative ways to help us think about how to act in the world, how to live our lives.

You can read this story about the final judgment of the nations as a cautionary tale urging each of us to have compassion on others and see Christ in them. That is absolutely important and true.

You can also read in this story a reminder that God is watching you. Not to catch you out, not to keep tabs on your daily behavior.

God is watching you the way we watch babies. Not for what they can do, but because they ARE.

God watches us because we are made in God's image and God is amazed and in love with us. When you can see another person as God sees you, it changes you. When you see Christ in another person, it is a gift to you.

What God hopes for us is that we will see in each other what God sees in us.

What we learn in this vision of the end is that God is not distant from us, but here in the messiness and neediness of our lives and the lives of all made in God's image. The only criterion for salvation here is not what you believe or say, it is in giving yourself away to others and receiving Christ in return. .

God is watching us. Thanks be to God!