

Sermon – Matthew 25:31-46  
David R. Lyle  
Grace Lutheran Church  
New Year's Eve – Year A  
31 December 2016

“Brand New Year, Brand New Sheep”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

1. I doubt many of you gathered here this evening are sad to see 2016 go. This has been a year marred by ugly political campaigns and warfare throughout the world, by an increase in violence in our city and a new heating up of the old Cold War. It's even been a particularly hard year for celebrities, with many of our nation's favorite movie stars, musicians, and athletes dying. For me, a little piece of my childhood died along with Princess Leia. Things have gotten so bad that someone has even started a GoFundMe campaign to save Betty White from 2016! No, as far as newsworthy things have gone, 2016 has not been a banner year. Then again, we can't exactly go around blaming 2016 for all of this. It's not like the calendar has any real power. The simple fact of the matter is that 2016 has been full of reminders of what the world is like, a place full of sin and brokenness, a fallen creation in which death continues to stalk its prey. And before we're too hard on poor 2016, you have to remember that this is the year that brought the Cubs a World Series championship. If I were 2016, I'd probably be asking, "What more do you people want from me?"
2. But if 2016 has been a mixed bag when it comes to world events, the same is no doubt true in our own lives. I imagine some of you are gearing up for New Year's resolutions, which are only necessary because the old year has not gone the way we wanted. We only resolve to lose that last ten pounds, or to be more patient with our children, or to really start saving for college or

retirement because we have failed to accomplish these feats over the past year. No doubt we have much to celebrate from this past year in our own lives, but any honest accounting will also show forth that we have failed to be the best version of ourselves we can imagine, that we have failed to be the people God created and intended us to be. The turning of the calendar seems as good a time as any to reflect upon these things. And that's exactly where our reading from Matthew points us on this last evening of the year.

3. We hear from Jesus again this night that great and final parable of judgment, of that day when the Son of Man will be seated in glory and the peoples of all nations will be brought before him for judgment. Those who have spent their days caring for the needs of hungry, the thirsty, the estranged, the naked, and the imprisoned will be welcomed to inherit the kingdom that the Father has prepared. But those who have failed to show such love and kindness to their neighbors in need, these will be welcomed to go away into eternal punishment, that eternal fire prepared for the devil and his demonic angels. So shall the sheep be separated from the goats in a judgment that delivers a final, unalterable verdict.
4. Taken at face value, the parable is terrifying. When you dig deeper, it gets even worse. After all, while it is true that you and I have managed to show Christ-like love to the least among us, it is also true that we have failed and fallen short time and again. We have often failed, repeatedly failed, to feed the hungry and give drink to the thirsty, to welcome the stranger and clothe the naked, to visit and care for the prisoner. The problem goes deeper than we initially fear, because we're all a little goat-ish. There simply is no one who measures up, who achieves sheeply stature. Sure, some fail more miserably than others, but if this is the standard to which we will be held, heaven is going to be a lonely, empty place.

5. So on this night when we contemplate our past failings and imagine better success in the New Year, on this night when Jesus shows forth this parable of judgment, where are we to turn? To the only one to whom we can go when the world is falling apart and our lives have fallen short: to Jesus himself. Jesus delivers this parable almost immediately before the passion and death that he knows are waiting for him right around the corner, and he tells this parable so that the world and all its people will know where to look to behold their salvation. And the place to look is not at ourselves, at how well we have done, for in ourselves there is simply no hope. We're goats. We might have managed to dress ourselves up in some nice, fluffy wool, but underneath we're goats all the same. So we turn our eyes instead to the Son of Man, who not only *will* come in glory, but who *has* come in glory: the hidden glory of his own crucifixion.
6. It is striking that Jesus chooses sheep and goats for his parabolic teaching, for Jesus himself was identified early on in just this fashion, when John the Baptist cried out, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" While we cannot become sheep through our own effort or understanding, God chooses to become a sheep for our sake, the very Lamb of God who will die the death deserved by all us goats; the Lamb who will descend into hell for our sake; the Lamb who will be raised and made ruler over all creation and its times and seasons. Jesus declares judgment upon the goats of this world, upon you and me, and then he goes to the cross to take that judgment upon himself so that we can be reborn as sheep, lambs of his own flock and inheritors of the Kingdom of God, the kingdom in which neither death nor mourning, crying nor pain will exist any longer.
7. As we say farewell to one year and welcome another, as we make resolutions to better our lives and the lives of those around us, it seems that the first and best place to start is to be the people Christ has redeemed us to be: not people trying to turn ourselves from goats into sheep but rather those who

are already sheep because the Lamb says that's who we are. If you yearn for a 2017 that is better than 2016, live like sheep. Feed the hungry, give drink to those who thirst, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, and visit the prisoner. Do these things not to earn salvation or avoid hell, but with thanksgiving that all such things have been sorted out. Jesus says that when we care for the least of these, we are caring for him. So focus on Jesus; resolve to live in relationship with the One who gave his life for you, and for goats everywhere. As Robert Farrar Capon notes, "the only ground the Great Judgment gives us for hope is *trust in his presence in the passion of the world*...The only thing we can possibly do is give the world the living witness of our trust in his presence in its passion. We need only to act as if we really believe he meets us in leastness and death. The rest is his business, not ours."

8. So, my friends, as we await the strike of midnight and the dawn of a brand new year, resolve simply to live as who, by grace, you already are: brand new sheep, named and claimed by the Lamb of God. Seek Christ, and seek him in service to your neighbor. The rest is up to God, and God in Christ has already acted for your sake, and for the sake of this whole world. If we can manage to remember this, to live by this, well, who knows what wonderful things 2017 will have in store? You are goats no longer. Happy New Year, beloved sheep. May this New Year see you in the same place you always are: in the hands of the Good Shepherd who will never let you go. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, today and forever. Amen.