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Grace, River Forest  
New Year's Eve 2022  
Ecclesiastes 3:1-13; Revelation 21:1-6a; Matthew 25:31-46

*Safe in the Shepherd's Future*

I saw this meme that I thought perfectly summed up my feelings as the calendar turns to 2023. It is a picture of a group of people hiding behind a wall peering nervously around the corner-- to the door marked 2023. Everyone is too scared to approach the door themselves to see what is on the other side. So, huddled together, they have a long stick they are using to crack the door open just a tiny bit. Gleaning over for a peak to see what might be hiding there hoping not to be too spooked.

Maybe it is because the shared trauma of 2020 is still vivid in our minds, because the following two years haven't been that much better. Or maybe it is that this century marked by war, recession, pandemic, and attempted insurrection has not been the promised future of continued progress we thought it would be. I don't know about you, but NYE doesn't necessarily feel like a night filled with starry eyed optimism for what could be. And, if there is a place we should be able to name that, it is here.

Then there is our own relationship with time. How it so often seems arbitrary and cruel the way it carries us along in its tide. And, seasons intrude upon us in this broken world. We are greeted by the unwelcome guests of illness, death, disappointment, betrayal, and fracture as the years click by. Our problems haven't been solved and our dreams have not been fulfilled. Life doesn't look how we always imagined it would. And, even if our year has gone pretty well there is still that nagging sense that we did not measure up to our own standards. We could have done better, tried harder, saved more, been more committed to our resolutions. But each of us have failed. And, we are our own worst critic and harshest judge.

It can seem a bit odd or even comical that we find ourselves wrestling with the parable of the sheep and the goats. Especially on a night known for self reflection. Either we have an over inflated sense of our own righteousness and feel vindicated that we have done our part. Clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, visiting the prisoner. Or, more likely, we see this text as a mirror showing us just how much we have failed to care for those around us. Yet, both of those interpretations leave us turned ever inward. Thinking about ourselves. Obsessing over our efforts. Without much hope. And, honestly, left on our own, just with our own standards, we are all just goats. We wander lost, stumbling towards midnight.

Lutheran Pastor David Lose proposes a surprising interpretation. "Could it be that the Son of Man comes in his glory in the crucifixion? Might it be that the place we see Jesus revealed most clearly is in the cross? Could it be that the throne of his glory is the cursed tree on the hill outside the city with all the despised and rejected ones. Flanked by failures, on either side not in the company of royals, but two common criminals. God revealed and enfleshed: accursed, alone, thirsty, and imprisoned by the ways of this world. In his death Jesus has become both the judged one and the judge. There he bears all of our sin and descends into hell itself. In his death, sin and evil have all met their match. And, three days later this crucified judge will rise again greeting us with his wounded hands from the other side of the grave. Surprises abound there-- in that future wrapped in his wounded flesh-- beyond years.

In your baptism and mine-- that death has become our own. Submerged in the only death that needs to be feared. In that water we have passed over to the other side already. We have been faithfully remembered-- and this God will not lose you or forget you. This water does not sweep us away, but holds us forever as a strong and faithful mother protects and shelters her own.

And, from those waters we have washed up onto the shore of God's future. Still walking wet, we are no longer goats, but sheep. Beloved children who belong to our resurrected Shepherd. In this new geography and in his fold we are saved from the bondage of self-obsession and the false idols of relentless self-improvement whatever the calendar says. In Christ, you are enough. In Christ, you are safe. In Christ, you belong.

And the sheep recognize the shepherd's voice. He speaks words of forgiveness in a world of accusation. Words of comfort in a world filled with innumerable things to fear. Words of unconditional love in a world of relentless competition, bootstraps, and expectations. We hear his voice as he speaks to you, this is my body given for you and this is my blood shed for you. As he whispers to you: this is not the end. And, as he proclaims to you: I will get the last word. Not war or violence, greed or despair.

And from this place-- following the cross, that glorious seat of power, out those doors-- we hear his voice in more and less surprising places and bow when we arrive there. Among the hungry, the thirsty, the sick, the stranger, the naked, and the imprisoned. Our ears are attuned to hear the shepherd in the voices that this world drowns out and ignores. The word made flesh again and again. This seventh day of Christmas and beyond. In the ones from whom the world hides their faces and shuts their ears.

And, it's not so much that we have work to do when we arrive there, but that we get to receive the Word from their lips and their testimonies and their hands. It is that in God's wisdom they become evangelists to us. Good news bringers for people like you and me. They (whoever they may be), like the Word himself-- have come to make us free. They are family.

Whose voice do you need to hear? Who has good news for your weary soul? Who is God going to use to take your chains off? How does God want to be made flesh for you this night? What surprising and risky roads does the Word want to lead you down in 2023-- where Life awaits arms outstretched.

Wherever that is, and wherever we find ourselves tomorrow, and a year from now we can trust that around the corner and through the final door of our lives the Shepherd will lead us all the way. There, the alpha and omega will be all in all. In the fullness of time, death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more. On that day all things will be made new. The always reliable voice of the shepherd assures us of it. "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." Then he says to us through John's vision: "It is done!"  
In the name of + Jesus. Amen.