

Sermon – Matthew 25:31-46
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Grace Lutheran Church
New Year's Eve – Year A
31 December 2025

“Old Goats, New Year”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. When I first saw which cantata would be part of our New Year's Eve worship this evening, I thought, yeah, that's appropriate. I thought Bach, or more to the point, Pastor Neumeister, our librettist, had really tapped into my feelings about the whole thing. But that was because I was misreading it. I thought the cantata was titled, *“Praise God! Now the year comes to an end,”* as in, *“Good riddance, thank God that's over.”* I imagined a litany of misfortune, a droning dirge to march us out of this year. A year in which so much has been fraught, so challenging, so difficult. I was a bit surprised to discover that Bach and Neumeister meant what they said: Praise God! The soprano calls us to think on how much God has done for you over the past year, to delight in how much God will do for you yet. If we, at times, have a hard time looking back and not focusing on the bad, we gather tonight to remind be reminded that our God is faithful and good; that God has not failed us yet. That while there are disasters and disappointments, God is with us even in these things.
2. This does not mean, of course, that we shouldn't also look about with honesty about all that was not well this year. But instead of reflecting upon all ways in which other people fell short, did wrong, or generally weren't too our liking, Jesus holds up a mirror so that we might do some self-reflecting. In his last parable, spoken days before his own death, Jesus tells of the last judgment. All people shall be separated into two groups, sheep and goats, based on how

they have treated Jesus. Not Jesus as he shows up in himself, but Jesus as he is present in others. Specifically, Jesus as he appears in the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the imprisoned. Those who have shown love and care to these least of these shall be welcomed into the eternal Kingdom. Those who didn't? Well, that's what hell is for, and if you didn't care for the least of these, you can look forward to an eternity with the devil and his angels.

3. On first glance, this seems, well, okay, for me? I mean, sometimes I feed the hungry and welcome the stranger. I've even visited people in prison. I mean, I probably do these things more than some of you, you old goats. Won't I be a woolly sheep? But the hard reality of the matter sets in. However many times I have done these things pales in comparison with how many times I haven't. And the same, dear friends, is true for you. Jesus isn't grading on a curve. You have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Full stop. Do you know how I know? Because the last time I checked, we still allow ourselves to live in a world in which there are people who are hungry and thirsty and naked and sick and in prison. We still allow this world's least to stay least. I will make special note of the stranger Jesus mentions. Who are they? The New Testament scholar Mark Allal Powell points out that the word is *xenos*, meaning "foreigner" or "noncitizen." "It is," Powell writes, "the term that today would be used to refer to an 'undocumented immigrant.'" Powell continues, with what I consider a fair amount of understatement, "Modern Americans may take note of this when reflecting on the circumstances of noncitizens in the United States." Indeed. It would be foolish to imagine that Jesus has an exact immigration policy in mind. The matter is complex. But make no mistake: When Jesus speaks of those among whom he is to be found and about whom we should deeply care, Jesus includes people without documentation and status. We don't get to not care about them. We don't get to pretend they are worth less than us. That is the sort of thing that leads to condemnation.

4. So, goats. How are we doing? Perhaps wishing we'd skipped this service and started in on the champaign a bit earlier? Is there no good news at the end of this not-so-good year? As mentioned, Jesus will shortly be crucified. Yes, the Son of Man finds us all wanting. Goats, every last one of us. But the Son is also the Shepherd, and the Shepherd is still good. So Jesus, who actually spent his life welcoming and caring for the least of these, goes to the cross for the sake of those who have fallen short. He takes our sin with him and leaves it in the tomb. When he emerges, alive, the sin remains behind. For the sake of the Good Shepherd who is the Lamb of God, the goats become sheep. We have been *baaaaaptized* into Jesus' death and resurrection, covered with the wooly righteousness of Christ forever. Christ stands in our place, and we receive life, abundant and eternal.

5. It is amazing to think on how far God would go for our salvation. The Episcopal priest and chef Robert Farrar Capon writes, if this "is in one way the heaviest, more fear-inspiring parable of all, it is also the lightest, the last laugh of the mighty act of salvation." It is, he writes, "the Three Stooges working only for laughs. God isn't trying to hurt anyone; [God's] not even mad at anyone. There are no lengths to which [God] won't go to prove there are no restrictions on the joy [God] wants to share with us. If you were never afraid of Curly, Larry, and Moe, you don't need to be afraid of the Trinity either."

6. Of course, Jesus means what he says. If, after finding him here for you in Word and sacrament, you're still looking for Jesus, he tells you where he'll be. In the person and in the needs of the hungry and thirsty, the stranger and naked, the sick and imprisoned. Just because God isn't planning on casting you into the eternal fire doesn't mean God doesn't want you to help people. Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! So, get after it. The sins of this year are forgiven. You are free for the future God intends.

You're not goats anymore; you're sheep. Act like it. And trust God to work it out. After all, as Pastor Neumeister teaches us to pray: "Give us a peaceful year / Spare us from all suffering / And nourish us gently." There is no doubt that the coming year will have both the good and the *baaaaaad*, and so shall it be year after year until this old world gives way to the new heaven and the new earth. The Shepherd will be with you all the way. Praise God for the year that was. Praise God for the year that will be. Amen. Happy New Year!

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