

St. Matthew's Lutheran Church & School – Oconomowoc, WI  
Last Judgment Sunday – Year A  
Matthew 25:31-46  
November 8, 2020

**Sermon: Matthew 25:31-46**  
**“Be Absolutely Mindful of the Absolute Judgment”**

George Washington led a group of tired, worn out, shoeless, demoralized troops in a retreat across New Jersey. His army fought battle after battle and suffered defeat after defeat. The only way he was able to extend the Revolutionary War was through the artful tactic of retreat. Washington's strategy found its brilliance in its simplicity of striking strategically when the odds were found in your favor and only when you absolutely had to at other times.

Utilizing the strategy of retreat, they came to a geographical feature that threatened the plan; the Delaware River. It would be a December to remember, and not because Washington got a new Lexus. On Christmas Day, 1776 the troops under Washington's command were to implement the daring plan to cross the river at night to go undetected by the British army. They would cross the river in boats cautiously navigating chunks of ice flowing down the river as they struggle to see through dense fog and snow in their faces. When the British forces finally realized in the daylight that Washington's army had crossed the Delaware River, they attempted a hot pursuit of attack, but by now the jagged ice piled up enough in the river to make navigation impossible, yet the ice wasn't stable enough to walk across. Washington attacked the small force of British in the Battle of Trenton and the British realized they were badly outnumbered and surrendered as the rest of the British army could only watch on the other side of the river covered in jagged ice. If the British forces didn't procrastinate in crossing the Delaware, the outcome of the Revolutionary War could have been much different.

Lessons in procrastination are sprinkled throughout history. If only someone had taken action sooner the result would have been different and altered the course of history. But then the procrastinator bellows his battle cry, “Why do today what you can put off until tomorrow.” That's a lighthearted statement and Washington crossing the Delaware gave an example of what that means in history. Now shift to something a little more serious. What about our faith? What about being right with God through our Savior Jesus Christ? Why do today what you can put off until tomorrow? Because tomorrow may never come.

Why do we set aside an entire Sunday of the church year with the theme “Last Judgment”? It really seems gloom and doom doesn't it? We are reminded that the world isn't going to last forever. We are reminded that we are not going to last forever. When God says, “When,” that's our time. Our immediate reaction might be, “I don't really want to think about that. I don't want to dwell on my mortality. I don't want to be forced to come to grips with the fact of facing my mortality any sooner than I need to.” And it's not only that but judgment sounds so absolute. It sounds so final. It sounds so serious. It sounds like there are no “do overs”. Maybe that doesn't sit well with our 21<sup>st</sup> Century way of thinking. We don't like to deal in absolutes. We like to consider different ways of thinking about something, or different angles, or different perspectives and points of view. We hear words like, “absolute, final, and judgment,” and it just kind of makes us bristle a little bit and makes us uneasy. If that's the case, then buckle up and get ready for a workout because Jesus is going to make us wrestle with some things today.

This is part of Jesus' answer to his disciples when they asked him the question, “Tell us, when will these things happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” Jesus basically has a Bible class with the disciples over the next two chapters answering that question in a few different ways. First, he identifies the signs of the end times. There will be wars and rumors of wars. There will be false prophets trying to deceive many spiritually. Christians will be persecuted. There will be famines and earthquakes. Now that they knew the signs to look for then he continues by addressing the question when. When will the end come? No one knows when that day will come. It will come like a thief in the night. Since you don't know when the end will come be ready and be watchful. How are we to be ready and watchful? Be faithful with the blessings and the mission God has given us by living our faith and this is where our lesson picks up with Jesus' answer.

Now as Jesus answers that question of what and when will be the signs of the end he takes us right to Judgment Day itself. So, you don't know when it's happening, be ready, be faithful, and now here's what will happen on that day. First, notice how he will come on that day. The first time Jesus came to earth, which we will celebrate in about seven weeks, no one took much notice except for some shepherds watching their flocks at night. There was no parade down Main St. in Jerusalem. There was no "Extra, extra, read all about it! The Savior is born in Bethlehem," headline in the Jerusalem Journal that day. There was just a worn-out Mary and Joseph and some shepherds. No one else took much notice of who was sleeping in that manger in Bethlehem. The next time Jesus comes to earth is going to be a bit different. This time everyone will know. This time no one will overlook him. He will come, and he's not coming alone, he's coming with armies of angels flanking him. He will be seated on the throne not to enjoy his kingdom, but to do the work he came to do; to judge. It is stated so matter-of-factly. *"All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left"* (Matthew 25:32, 33). Notice what Jesus doesn't say nor does he say it anywhere else in Scripture. There are no "do overs" for Judgment Day. There are no second chances. There will be no, "Well, I really didn't take you seriously the first time around so now I will because now I recognize you weren't fooling around God." Judgment Day is absolute. Judgment Day is final, and it is just. You are either with the sheep on the right or the goats on the left. There is no gray area. There is no middle ground.

Do we struggle with the absolute nature of Judgment Day? Do absolutes make us a bit uneasy? We like understanding. Sometimes we like the, "I'm ok and you're ok," mentality. Is the thought of absolute judgment a little bit appalling to us? And not just because we want some understanding or to write our own rules or that we want to have life our own way like Burger King tells us. It's because deep down my sinful nature and yours wants to deny any source of truth except for itself. If I acknowledge that I have to answer to something beyond myself that means I'm also accountable to them. If I'm accountable to them, then that places limitations on me and what I can do and what I think is right. Judgment Day is the ultimate accountability. There's no escaping it like the kid in the back of class keeping their head down and not making eye contact with the teacher hoping they never get called on. You will stand before the throne and you will be judged. It is absolute.

Since it is absolute you and I better be absolutely mindful of the coming judgment, whenever that might be. Listen to the words spoken from the throne. To those on the right he says, *"I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me"* (Matthew 25:35, 36). And then he says the exact opposite to those on his left. You didn't give me something to eat, drink, didn't invite me in, didn't clothe me, etc. It's interesting that the reaction of both those on the right and on the left is the same. Both are surprised. But why? They express surprise for very different reasons. Those on the right express surprise because they did these things with no expectation of reward or compensation. They did these things not because they had a sense of obligation, but because they were living their faith. There is no mention of great and grand deeds done that everyone notices, but simply faithful Christians living Christ and showing Christ to others in their lives. Those on the left are surprised because if only they had known that's what they had to do then they would have done it. They would have fulfilled the obligation. They would have done the works of the law to satisfy the requirements to pass the test on Judgment Day. There is just one huge problem. They can't. They are sentenced to punishment not because they failed to do these small requirements, but because they were not living in faith in Christ. Again, notice there is no mention of what we would classify as horrible and grievous sins, just very simple everyday things because they weren't done from a heart of faith.

Therefore, live mindful of the coming judgment. Live ready because we don't know when that day will come. Live faithfully prepared for that day. How can we be confident on that day we will hear him say to us, *"Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world"* (Matthew 25:34). Because Christ has cleansed us. He has washed you and I clean in his blood shed for us. We stand ready for judgment because of him and his work for us on the cross and resurrection from the grave. So, live mindful of that. Live ready for whenever that day will come, because despite what the procrastinators say, it just might be tomorrow. Amen.