

Isaiah 2:1-5
Romans 13:11-14
Matthew 24:36-44

In gospel passages like this one, it's hard to say "Thanks be to God" afterward, isn't it? Our text calls upon so many of our concerns or our fears. Jesus describes the ultimate final exam of our lives, which is enough to make many of us sweat. What exactly does this passage mean? In which group would I be counted? What should I hope for – to be taken or to stay? Is this God, or the Son of Man, one whom I can trust with these kinds of choices?

Last week we celebrated Christ the King Sunday, finishing off our church year. There is a long tradition in both the Jewish and Christian prophetic scriptures about the Day of the Lord. It is a day when the Son of Man, whom Christians understand to be Jesus, comes to judge all people, before God brings transformation and recreation to the earth. The Jewish and Christian prophetic texts explore what will happen when God comes and holds people accountable for their faith and how they lived it. The section before today's gospel passage describes how the Son of Man will come. As mentioned in the Hebrew prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel, he will arrive with the clouds. His triumph and glory and power will be clear.



Our text then explains further what this day would be like. Our passage itself might not be so confusing on its own terms. The problem is that we hear our passage with the *Left Behind* book or movie series in mind. Knowing the fictional account of people being swept by God into heaven and leaving others behind shapes

how we hear our text. Today we will dive into what is before us, and then compare it to what the writers of *Left Behind* say.

The gospel writer compares judgment at the coming of the Son of Man to the judgment that happened in Genesis, with the flood and Noah. We may prefer to think of the Noah story as one of salvation and promise with the sign of the rainbow. My son Peter has a really cleaned up, kind version of it for toddlers. But the whole predicament of the flood began with a terrible sense of God's judgment. *Genesis 6* says, "The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts and their hearts was only evil continually... So the Lord said, 'I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created – people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them.'" (6:5, 7) In the flood, God judged many people of the time as unrighteous and wicked and they were swept away. Noah and his family, and a pair of each kind of animal, remained safe on the ark that Noah had built, following God's command.

Similarly, in this gospel text, the people who will remain – in the field or grinding meal – are the ones whom God declares to be faithful. The others, the unrighteous, are taken away to somewhere unknown. So it's the exact opposite of the *Left Behind* fiction series, where the faithful are whisked away to somewhere else, and others remain.

Just as for most people in the flood of *Genesis*, we won't have a clue what will happen when. In *Genesis*, the people of the earth did not expect God's judgment to occur when it did then, and the coming of the Son of Man will be that way, too. In that, we are called to take our lives of faith seriously. God asks us to be attentive, as if the Son of Man could show up at any time.



Another question that we bring to this text is one of concern. Who are God's favorites? How do we know whether we're in that collection? How scared should we be about this day of judgment?

Throughout the gospels, it's clear that God's "favorites" are people who are poor or oppressed – or the people who welcome and care for the needy. Our gospel passage is one of the first in a section of texts that focus on the coming of the Son of Man. This continues through *Matthew's* chapter 25. The last passage from chapter 25 is also the last of this series, and it serves like a closing bookend.

The Son of Man will come and separate the sheep from the goats. He will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." (*Mt 25:34-36*) The faith that we receive through Christ, makes us aware of the generous grace and love that God showers upon us and all creation. The faith that we receive inspires us to respond to our neighbors with love and care.

We may not sit around, wondering or agonizing about whether or not we are saved on a normal day. With this kind of text, it's still hard not to wonder. Have we been as faithful as God would have us be? This is precisely the kind of question that Martin Luther spent a lot of time praying about. The answer that he came to is that any anxieties we have are answered with God's word and promise, given to us at baptism. Scripture says, and the church teaches, that in baptism we are brought into Christ's kingdom, and given the promise of salvation and eternal life through the

waters. We read scripture and trust in God's faithfulness to the promises made, to Israel and to believers in Christ. It is not a situation to agonize about. In faith, we can trust God's promise.



The other gift for us is that we do not need to serve as judge of the world. It is not our place to proclaim who is righteous and who is not. God has it covered! That corrects every one of us who has ever uncharitably gossiped about a brother or sister – or who has wagged a finger or clucked our tongues at another's behavior. Our primary tasks as Christians are to be faithful with how we witness to, serve, and teach our neighbors in the name of Christ. That is more than enough responsibility for us, as individuals, and families, and congregations.

As Christians, when we get caught up in blaming and judging, we are distracted from what our vocation actually is – to live our faith by loving God and our neighbor.

Our text is a reminder of the importance, or weight, of our ministry as Christians, from God's perspective. We are about valuable ministry in our lives, even if it seems small to us. Our text is also a call for us to stay awake when it comes to our faith. We're to center our lives on our faith in Christ, to pay attention to how our faith guides us, and to know that our God is trustworthy and true. Thanks be to God.