

**Sermon - November 22, 2020**  
**The Rev. Canon Dr. Lorne Mitchell**

Loving God,  
May our reflections on scripture this day, inspire us to be strong followers of Jesus in both word and deed. Amen.

With today's worship, we come to the end of the Church's Liturgical year... and what a year it's been. This time last year, everything seemed normal... We were getting ready for our usual Advent and Christmas celebrations. Restaurants were filled and shops were bustling with Christmas shoppers. Choirs and musicians were getting ready for the ever-popular Christmas concerts and carol singing.

People were getting ready to travel and have their annual holiday get together with family and friends... What a difference a year makes... at the time, tucked away in the corner of the news, was a report that a virus was spreading in China... We didn't really pay much attention.. after all, it was half a world away...

Well, since then, over 1,300,000 people around the world have died from this virus... over 11,000 people in Canada have died... 9 of them here in Stratford.

Something that was half a world away has reached into every aspect of our lives and brought the usual human activity of the world to a grinding halt. Here in Ontario, we are now right in the midst of the second wave of the virus.

Unfortunately, the health professionals were right... the second wave is worse than the first... hospitals in cities are getting dangerously close to full capacity. As most of us know, tomorrow, the Province is imposing greater restrictions on our activities.

This happening one month before Christmas is a difficult pill to swallow... but I think we all know it's necessary. Toronto and Peel region is moving into full lockdown for at least 28 days. What this means to me personally is that it is highly unlikely I will get to see my mum and dad before Christmas. I'm sure many of you will be affected in similar ways.

Here in Stratford, tomorrow we will move into the Orange category. What this means for us at the church is that the wardens and I will need to have tough conversations about how we continue our in person worship. We will certainly keep all of you updated by email and our phone tree.

As the Church calendar draws to a close, today we are presented with two powerful readings. One from the prophet Ezekiel, and the other from Jesus, in the gospel of Matthew. In both of these passages, there's no getting around the fact that there is a strong element of God's judgement.

Now, there are plenty of people who would prefer to kinda gloss over the idea of God's judgement. It's true, it would feel warm and cozy to set that aside and just focus on God's love and forgiveness. But there's a problem with that.

If we over emphasize God's love and forgiveness, then we are not paying enough attention to whether our own actions are being just and fair to others. If we are not paying attention to how our actions are affecting others, then we better be prepared to receive some judgement.

Ezekiel was a prophet who lived to see his home of Jerusalem fall, and the land of Judah taken by the Babylonians. Ezekiel was among the group of Hebrews who were sent into exile and made to live in Babylon. While he was there, he was given visions. The passage we heard this morning is one of these visions.

God speaks to Ezekiel,

*I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.*

*Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD to them: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep.*

*Ezekiel 34:15-22*

Ezekiel has seen the life of the Hebrew people be turned upside down. The Temple has been destroyed, Jerusalem is in rubble,

and their land, wealth and pride has been taken away from them. The message that comes from God to Ezekiel is a mixture of both judgement and comfort.

The strong and fat sheep have have *“pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide”*

Ezekiel sees that God is passing judgement on the strong, proud, fat leaders of Israel... but God will save his flock and feed them with Justice.

In our gospel reading there is a powerful parallel. Jesus says to his disciples,

*“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats...”*

Like the passage from Ezekiel, there is no getting around the fact that we have to face God’s judgement. Now this might make us feel uncomfortable, because no one looks forward to being judged. But we need to face a basic truth. Our actions have consequences...

When we are selfish... there are consequences...

When we hurt others... there are consequences...

When we are greedy... there are consequences...

When we are overly impressed with our own importance...there are consequences

When we put our trust in things other than God... there are consequences...

When we ignore those who are in need... there are consequences

When we recklessly grab and consume the resources of God's creation... there are consequences

When we prop up and enable selfish leaders... there are consequences

As our church year comes to a close, we give thanks and praise to God for the enormous love that has been revealed to us through Jesus. But in this gospel passage, Jesus is reminding us that our choices have consequences. We need to actually walk the path.

When all is said and done... When Jesus stands before us... He is not going to ask how many songs of praise we sang to him...

He is not going to ask how many hallelujahs you shouted...

Jesus is going to ask if you cared for the vulnerable in your midst.

Amen.