

THE JUDGE ADVOCATE GENERAL

Sermon, November 21, 2021

Christ the King Sunday / Thanksgiving

Texts: Daniel 7:7-9, 13-14 (Acts 7:54-58)

I always like to point out the month of November has a holiday which calls for a count and often a recount and maybe another recount ... but I'm not referring to Election Day! THANKSGIVING is the holiday we are called to count and recount our **blessings!** As we just sang, *"Count your blessings, name them one by one, Count your blessings, see what God has done! Count your blessings, name them one by one, Count your many blessings, see what God has done."*

There is one more short Scripture reading I'd like to add: Acts 7:54-58, which is at the end of Stephen's trial before the Sanhedrin, the highest court of Israel ... incidentally, Stephen's defense recorded in the entirety of Chapter 7 is an excellent summary of the **entire** Bible ... if you want to better understand the whole history of redemption, read this chapter! It was after he finished his defense, we read (*emphases added*): *"When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus **standing** at the right hand of God. "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the **Son of Man** **STANDING** at the right hand of God." At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul."*

Throughout the Bible there are various titles used to identify Jesus. Far and away the most common title given to Jesus is CHRIST. So often is that title used for Jesus that many have come to think of it as His last name. No, Jesus' might have been called Jesus Bar-Joseph (*or, "Josephson"*), or Jesus of Nazareth, but His name was not Jesus Christ. Jesus is the name, **Christ** is the title. (*Sort of like "Clark" is my name, "Pastor" is my title.*) The meaning of the title "Christ" is the Anointed One, which is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew word "Messiah." Whenever one says Jesus Christ, he or she is making a theological assertion, whether he or she recognizes it or not! By saying Jesus Christ, one is asserting Jesus **IS** the Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed One of God. Next time you hear someone mutter, *"Oh, Jesus Christ,"* you should reply, *"Amen! That's RIGHT! I couldn't agree more! Jesus is indeed the Christ, the Messiah!"* See what kind of reaction you get.

Again, Christ is the number one title of Jesus in terms of frequency in the New Testament. The second most frequently used title used to identify Jesus is the title "Lord." In third place, way behind the other two, eighty-four times in the New Testament, Jesus is called the "Son of Man." Interestingly enough, eighty times Jesus is called the Son of Man by Jesus Himself (*the other four times: Hebrews 2:6; Revelation 1:13, Revelation 14:14, and what I just read from Acts 7:56*). So, "Christ" is the most common title for Jesus in the Bible, "Lord" comes in second, and "Son of Man" comes in a distant third. However, the title Son of Man is first in frequency on the lips of Jesus Himself. It is far and away His favorite self-designation. Why?

Well, He's referring to a figure who would have been very familiar to the Jews of His day, the *"one like a son of man"* who appears in our assigned lectionary Old Testament text from Daniel this morning for this Christ the King Sunday. In Daniel's vision, he sees what might be called the *supreme* Supreme Court, the highest court in the universe, the heavenly courtroom of God, and in that courtroom an appointment is about to take place. As Daniel looks on, the Ancient of Days, God Himself, takes His seat on this fiery, mobile throne, attended by a million attendants and one hundred thousand more standing before Him. The court is convened, all one million one hundred thousand are seated, and we then see coming into the presence of the Ancient of Days *"one like a son of man."* God then appoints this Son of Man as chief Justice (*actually, as sole supreme judge*) in this Supreme Supreme Court; needless to say, no Senate subcommittee is needed to approve this nomination. To this Son of Man is given all authority, dominion, glory, kingdom and power. The Son of Man, therefore, is the figure of the Heavenly Supreme Judge appointed by the Ancient of Days; and as we affirm in the Apostles' Creed, this is the One now seated *"... at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, and from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead."*

Just as a bit of an aside, nowadays it seems nobody tends to like the word "judgment." After all, who wants to be judged? We say to others, *"Don't judge me."* Many are quick to quote the words of Jesus, *"Judge not lest ye be judged."* But you know, Jesus is THE judge; it is, in fact, His favorite self-designation, and a judge makes judgments. This is not a bad thing. Isn't there a good sense of the word judgment? Don't we want to raise our children to have good judgment? Don't we try to teach them in our homes, our Sunday School, our youth fellowships, our Vacation Bible School, the basics of good judgment? Don't we want them to know right from wrong, good from bad? Of course we do! We know they are going to have to make judgment calls throughout their lives, and we hope they will make good ones. There really is a good, positive sense of the word judgment. Even if we don't like the word judgment, we all might admit this word sounds much better if we are judged well. When you are in school, and you have studied hard, and it comes judgment time on your studies via the written

test, and you get an "A", then you kind of like the idea of judgement. So many things are much more entertaining and fulfilling when there's some judgement involved. Take sports: I mean, who wants to watch "pass/fail" football? What if the referee came out at the end of the Super Bowl and announced, *"Well, all these players out here worked so hard. I think everyone wins!"* No, we want score; we want judgment! And if you are called to the courtroom, you hope to get a favorable judgment from an unbiased judge, an unintimidated and fair jury, especially if you're unjustly accused. That's a good thing. Without judgment, it's hard ... no, it's impossible ... to have a functioning society. There is right, and there is wrong. Judgment isn't necessarily a bad word.

The Old Testament law was not given to be "judgment" in the sense of condemnation. Its original purpose was this good sense of the word judgement. The Law was given for direction and order, to help the people of God make good choices and right decisions. It was early in their wilderness journey after fleeing slavery in Egypt that God brought the Hebrews to Mt. Sinai where they received the Ten Commandments, because He wanted the people to *keep* their new freedom. The commandments are not just about obedience; they are about deliverance and direction and salvation and preservation of freedom and making good judgments. We may even think of the Commandments as ten signposts that guide our journey through the wilderness of this life, signposts keeping us from getting lost or hurt or worse. When the Hebrews received the law they received it as a grace, as a blessing. They were made a distinctive and prosperous and unique people by this wonderfully gracious gift of God. The Law was a means of knowing God and a means of knowing how to determine right and good in this universe that God created, and making good judgments accordingly. When you count your blessings, thank God for judgment! Good judgment; judgment, by the way, that is a gracious gift from, and is embodied by, the Supreme Judge, the Son of Man.

Most of you know John 3:16, *"For God so loved the world the He sent His only Son that whosoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life."* But listen to John 3:17 – *"For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him."* You see, the central irony of the Gospel is that the Heavenly Judge, the Son of Man and the Son of God, was not only sent by God to judge and condemn, but He also comes to both give us good judgment (*showing us the Way, the Truth and the Life*) AND to **be** judged. He comes to **bear the judgment** for those who are His! The central irony of the Gospel is that He who is the Judge of sinful humanity also undertakes the judgment of redeemed humanity on the cross. As Isaiah so eloquently put it *"... He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; upon Him was the chastisement that made us whole."*

With all that in mind, let's come back to Stephen's vision. In this wild mob scene, these people gnash their teeth and scream to drown Stephen out; they plug up their ears and pick up stones to execute him. In the midst of all this chaos, and moments before he succumbs to death from the stoning, Stephen, *like the prophet Daniel centuries earlier*, is given a glimpse into the real Supreme Court. In his words describing his vision, Stephen sees God, and he also sees the Son of Man. Please note...what is the Son of Man doing? He is **standing** at the right hand of God! In just about every other biblical reference (*and included in the Apostles and Nicene Creeds*), where is Jesus? He is **seated** at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. This is the ONLY reference to Jesus standing at God's right hand. While Stephen is undergoing earthly judgment in this kangaroo court, he is allowed a glimpse into the only courtroom that really matters, the court of God. And he sees the Son of Man getting out of His chair, and He now is **standing** at the right hand of God. What does that mean?

Who **stands** in our earthly courtrooms? Only two people: The prosecuting attorney, and the defense attorney ... who is the **ADVOCATE** for the accused ... the one who is there to plead the case of the accused. The presiding judge stays seated on the bench. You see, the Son of Man is indeed the presiding judge, sitting at the right hand of the Ancient of Days in the heavenly court ... and when He sees Stephen, this faithful and devoted child of His about to enter the eternal courtroom, He **gets up** from His chair! He is about to come around the bench, and say to the Ancient of Days, *"He is one of mine. I have paid all his debts."* You can't have it any better than that, to have the Judge as your Advocate, your defense attorney! The analogy is not perfect, but I'm sure many of you saw young Mr. Rittenhouse tearfully embrace his advocate after the verdict was read Friday and he was declared innocent on all counts. Well, I can just imagine the embrace Stephen gave his advocate, Who is also his judge, Who paid it all for him. In anticipation of that embrace, I don't know if Stephen even felt the stones.

And that's an embrace all who are in Christ can look forward to receiving. That is a sure and certain hope we have through the grace of the Ancient of Days and His appointed Judge, the Son of Man. It's an embrace dear Mr. Koldyk received a week ago Monday as he departed this life so unexpectedly ... and may I add, it is so good to see his loving family here in the front pew this morning in the house of worship in this season of Thanksgiving. Just last week we talked about how in just about every worship service of worship we have a mixture of celebration and lament, joy and sadness among those who gather here. But we are all here to *"Count our blessings, count them one by one ...* and this hope, this sure and certain hope of our Supreme Judge/Advocate's embrace, is perhaps the greatest blessing of all. It is the promise of the Gospel for those who believe.