

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
Reign of Christ
November 20, 2005

Safely Gathered In
Ezekiel 34:11-16; Ephesians 1:15-16, 20-23

As members of the church and as citizens of America,
we are always living out our lives according to two calendars.
The one that begins in January and ends in December,
and celebrates holidays like Memorial Day, Fourth of July,
and Thanksgiving.
And the one that begins, next week, with the First Sunday of Advent,
anticipating the birth of Christ
and ends with the Sunday celebrating the Universal Reign of Christ,
Christ the King Sunday.

If we borrow the vine and branches metaphor,
it's like the national calendar serves as the branches of our life;
it is more mundane and functional;
it marks our time in American and global society.
But weaving in among those functional branches
is a sacred calendar, the church calendar,
a spiritual movement of time, bearing fruit
as the seasons of the Church year emerge
sometimes subtly, as with Lent and Advent,
sometimes brilliantly, as with Christmas and Easter.
Reaching in and around the branches of our ongoing activity,
the movement of this calendar
brings life and grace and purpose
and ultimately, hope.
Hope that in the fullness of *time*,
we will all be safely gathered in to God's presence,
called home to rest in God's *timeless* eternity.

I am always intrigued, sometimes disturbed, and sometimes delighted
by the way these two calendars intersect as the years turn 'round.

During my morning prayer time at home,
I have a few props that help me:
an dancing flame oil lamp which I've used for a while,
and now, recently, an icon of Christ which I picked up
at an Orthodox retreat center.
Each morning I pull these out of the cabinet

and place them on the hearth of our fireplace,
while I sit in my favorite chair,
with a cup of coffee and my journal.
The hearth sits at the center of our home life,
in the room where we easily spend the most time: the kitchen.
And both of these calendars get represented there.
In the days just before and just after Halloween,
Jesus had some company on the hearth:
two pumpkins, one for Langley, one for James
which I had carved with some really goofy-looking faces.
I had to move the pumpkins: I couldn't pray with a straight face
while they were staring at me with their googling eyes.

But for the past couple weeks,
Jesus has had new company on the hearth:
Another pumpkin, but this time with a wooden turkey face and feathers
stuck in the pumpkin for a body.
Like the two Halloween pumpkins,
this turkey looks like he's not the brightest of the flock.
I laughed out loud at the sight.
But the Jesus on the icon seemed OK with it,
like he didn't really mind sitting beside this perky turkey.
And pondering the sight, I thought
if I were to take a picture of this scene,
I would entitle it, "November 20, Christ the King Sunday."
The national calendar and the church calendar intertwine.

So today, like the wheat and tares of the last harvest,
we have been safely gathered into worship
on the Reign of Christ Sunday.
And on our communion table, we find both Christ candle,
and a basket bursting with the makings of a Thanksgiving feast.
Today the secular calendar and the church calendar
resonate with grateful praise:
Christ rules over all: we have good reason to give our thanks.

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In our reading from Ephesians this morning,
Paul tells us his reasons for thanksgiving:
He has heard of the Ephesian Christians faith in the Lord Jesus
and of their love toward all the saints.

Paul gives thanks for the presence and the ministry

of this blessed community of believers.
And his thankfulness for them leads him to ponder
the mystery of God's great power,
which has been shown to the world in Christ,
*when God raised him from the dead
and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places.*

The faith and love of the Ephesian congregation
have served as reminders that Christ has been exalted
*far above all rule and authority and power and dominion,
an above every name that is named, not only in this age
but also in the age to come.*

Paul looks at this church as sees the body of the exalted Christ;
he sees in this congregation the presence of Christ
who is not only the head of the body,
but fills all in all.

If Paul were alive today, I believe he could have written the same words
to the believers of the Presbyterian church in Glenshaw:

*I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus
and your love toward all the saints,
and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you...*

* * * * *

And we, too, could write those words,
especially today as we (will be receiving) (have just received)
newcomers into our fellowship,
as members and friends of our congregation.

Surely, we are thankful with them,
at the way God has been at work in their lives,
bringing them to settle into this family of faith and love.
Each of them has been on a journey,
marked by moments of struggle and blessed by miracles of grace.
Whether beginning the life of retirement in a new city,
or finding refuge during a challenging time of family transition,
or settling into a new community
at the beginning of a new marriage,
or coming full circle to have a child baptized
from the same font of his mother's baptism,
a few decades ago,
these folks have reason to give thanks to God
for this particular expression of the body of Christ

called Glenshaw Presbyterian Church.

Not *only* here, but certainly *here*,
they have found themselves care for, tended and fed,
by the Good Shepherd-King of the flock of God.
They have felt their lives upheld and protected by
the unwavering care of God,
who declares,

*I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out.
As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are...scattered...
I will feed them with good pasture...
they shall lie down in good grazing land...
I will seek the lost, and will bring back the strayed,
and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak...*

We are not lost sheep,
but sheep who have been found by the One who is our refuge,
our safety in this life and for all eternity.

In Jesus Christ, we have been safely gathered in,
into the blessed community where the living water flows,
and the bread of life nourishes,
and the cup of salvation is passed among friends.

Here, we sit together at the banquet table of Christ our King,
Crucified and Risen,
Eternal Sovereign Over Heaven and Earth,
and we enjoy a continual feast in the joy of his presence.
For this reason, we lift our hands to heaven
and from the inner depths of our soul – we give thanks!

For this reason... I wish you all,
and we can wish each other
a very Happy Thanksgiving!