SERMON for November 22, 2026, Year A **The Rev. Dr. Susan St.John**

Already Done, Already Here

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Psalm 100; Ephesians 1:15-23; Matthew 25:31-46

Well, we made it. Do you know what today is? It's the last Sunday of the church year. Next Sunday we light the first candle of Advent and start the whole thing over again. But today, before we start over, the church asks us to stand still and answer one question: Who is really in charge here?

Now, I know. In this room, that's a loaded question. We're not big on monarchs. We don't love being told what to do from the top down. We like a seat at the table, a voice in the room, a say in the plan. We like to roll up our sleeves, make a list, and get it done. And that is a gift. It's why this church shows up the way it does. It's why Phoenix Place, Mission Services, and Student Open Circles are not just names on a bulletin insert but places our gifts have gone all year.

So when the calendar hands us a Sunday called Reign of Christ, some of us feel a little itchy. A sovereign? Really?

Hold on to that itch. Because I think today's readings are going to surprise us. Not by asking us to bow to a throne. By showing us the strangest sovereign anyone ever followed. So carry the question with you through these readings, and listen for the answer: Who is really in charge here?

Start with Ezekiel. God's people are in exile. Everything they built is rubble. And they've had kings, plenty of them, and the kings were a disaster. Ezekiel says the shepherds ate well and left the flock scattered. Fat sheep shoving lean sheep out of the way. And then God speaks, and listen to this: "I myself will search for my sheep." I myself. I will seek the lost. I will bring back the strayed. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak.

Not a committee. Not a task force. "I myself", says God.

So who is really in charge here? The One who says, "I myself."

Friends, notice what the Sovereign does first. The Sovereign doesn't rule. The Sovereign searches, binds the injured and strengthens the weak.

Now we have to remember something about these texts. They were written in a world very different from ours. In the first century, and for a thousand years before it, nobody thought of themselves as an individual first. You were somebody's daughter, somebody's son, part of a village, part of a people. Your identity, your safety, your future were all wrapped up in the group. So when Ezekiel says "my flock," the prophet is not talking about a pile of individuals who each have a private arrangement with the shepherd. The prophet is talking about a people. A we.

Psalm 100 also sings it in the plural. "We are God's people, the sheep of God's pasture." Come through the gates, all of us, thankful and loud. And Paul, in Ephesians, prays for a whole community. Paul says Christ has been raised above every ruler and authority and power, and then comes the wildest thing: Christ is head over all things "for the church." For the church. For us. The most powerful presence in the universe is working on behalf of the people who heard the call and came together in 'church'.

And look at what that psalm asks of us. Not a strategy. The Psalm asks for gladness. “Serve with gladness.” Before the psalm asks us to do a single thing, it tells us who we are and whose we are. God made us… we did not make ourselves. We belong. Gladness for this belonging comes first, and the work flows out of it.

So who is in charge here? The One who made us, who holds us, and who is working on our behalf.

Hold on to that answer, because we are about to hear the rest of this with twenty-first-century ears, and it will sound different.

We are individuals, proudly. We hear “sheep” and think me. We hear “judgment” and think my report card. Which brings us to Matthew 25.

Sheep and goats. And if you’re anything like me, your inner project manager sits straight up. Oh good… the test. I love a good test! Welcomed a stranger, check. Fed the hungry … well I ordered in. Clothed the naked, did I log that? This sounds like the ultimate performance review, and want to make sure I hit my numbers.

And notice what has just happened to our question. Who is really in charge here? If this is a performance review, then I am: my numbers, my log, my record. Matthew is about to ask us to rethink that.

In our text, there were those who helped and those who didn’t help. And what does the Sovereign say? Not, “You hit your targets”, or “You need a sensitivity class” The Sovereign simply says, I was hungry. I was a stranger. I was in prison.

And here’s the part that gets me every time: nobody saw it coming.

The ones who helped say, “When did we see you?” They weren’t working for credit. They weren’t trying to pass. They just saw a need and did something. And the ones who didn’t help? They say the exact same words. “When did we see you?” Neither group knew. Nobody knew that the Sovereign was in the room the whole time.

So who was in charge? The One in the room the whole time, whom nobody recognized.

So let me tell you where I find hope in this. I see three signs of hope, and each one is an answer to our question: Who is really in charge here?

First sign for hope: The Sovereign is not waiting at the end of our to-do list. The Sovereign is in the work. Think about that. When this congregation gathered up what was needed for the women and children supported by Phoenix Place, for the ‘sockless’ people at Mission Services, and for the young people of Student Open Circles, and carried it to their doors, Christ was not standing at some finish line with a clipboard. Christ was already there. Christ was already in the person we would never meet, who would open what we sent over. This means that we can put down the tired idea that everything depends on us. The people we serve are one with us. We can give from the security of being held, instead of for approval. The work matters, but the work was never the thing holding up the world. The Sovereign is what holds up the world.

Who is in charge here? Not our lists, and not our numbers. The Sovereign.

This congregation is a most wonderful group of ‘visitors’. Our ‘visiting ministry’ is strong here. We knock, we call, have a cup of tea, chat about health and getting well. But notice how we helped in outreach. We didn’t visit. We didn’t sit and chat. Most of us never saw a single face of those people who were helped by our donations. We gathered what was needed, we dropped it off, and we went home. Most of us will never know who used what we gave. And I wonder if that is its own kind of faith. Because the people in Matthew’s story say, “When did we see you?” They never saw it either. And they gave without seeing.

When we are younger in faith we need to see the results of generosity. We appreciate a 'thank-you, the photograph of smiling recipients, the proof that our gift mattered, the warm feeling of having been good, somebody from the organization coming here to tell us how our gift mattered. There's nothing shameful in that. Most of us started there. But a mature faith can give and let go. It trusts that what's given is received, even when nobody tells us so. It doesn't give to earn a place. It gives because God is in the room.

Second sign for hope: A word for some of us who may be in a place of change. Maybe our faith is being worked on. Maybe we grew up with a faith that was handed to us, by a family, a church, a trusted pastor. Somebody told you what was right and you believed it. And sometime along the way the questions started bubbling. The answers you were given don't hold the way they used to, and you're afraid that if you pull one thread the whole thing comes apart. Hear this gently. The Sovereign in Ezekiel goes looking for the strayed. Not to scold them. To find them. If the Shepherd goes out searching for the ones who've wandered, then the Shepherd is not afraid of our questions. We are not lost to the flock by asking. So we can take time. The Shepherd isn't in a hurry, and the Shepherd knows exactly where we are. So, ask, challenge… it's growth, not death and the Shepherd is NOT afraid of our questions.

Who is in charge of your faith while it is being worked on? Not your fear. Not the answers you were handed. The Shepherd is in charge.

Third, and my final, sign for hope: Ours is a Sovereign who sits among us. Ezekiel says God will set up "my servant David" as prince among them. Among them. Not over them. In this realm, the power runs the opposite direction from every empire we've ever known. The Sovereign takes the lowest seat in the room, the seat of the hungry one, the stranger, the person on the other side of the cell door. Which means that in this community, every voice counts, because the Sovereign is so often the quietest voice in the room. So when the voice is quiet, do not ignore it just because it can be trampled easily, but listen.

Who is really in charge here? The One who sits among us, in the quietest seat in the room.

So how do we carry this into this next week, now that we know who is in charge? Father Richard Rohr's Center for Action and Contemplation shared words from Kaira Jewel Lingo that I think are as good an application as I know. I'll read them slowly, and I invite you to hear them as the shape of a faith that gives.

> To take refuge in ourselves. To see things clearly.
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> To live ethically, not out of shame, but out of love.
>
> To build community. To reconcile as best we can.
>
> To be a manifestation of the planet healing itself.
>
> To be fresh. To be Solid. To be Calm. To be Free.

Hear how that fits what we've been given today.

To <u>take refuge in ourselves</u> is to know, with the psalm, that we belong before we've done a thing.

To <u>see things clearly</u> is to see, as Matthew asks, that a need is never only a need.

To <u>live ethically, not out of shame, but out of love</u>, is the difference between the goats' anxiety and the sheep's surprise.

To <u>build community</u> is to become, even across a distance of differences we never cross, a people with the ones we serve.

And to be fresh, solid, calm, and free is to give from ‘being held’, instead of for approval. That is a faith that gives, lets go, and goes home at peace.

So here is where we land. We began this morning with a question: Who is really in charge here? Next Sunday we start over. A candle in the dark. But we don’t start from zero. Everything we did this year, the gathering and the carrying, the dropping off, the giving without meeting those who received the gifts, was seen. Not so we could earn something, but because Christ the Sovereign was there, with us, all along.

So, who is really in charge here? Christ the Sovereign, still and always searching for the lost. Still and always in the room. Still and always on our side.

Friends, we start the new year knowing this truth: Christ the Sovereign is always with us, always searching for our lost selves and always reigning in love. Amen.