**Opening Prayer**: Sheltered in place but gathered as one body, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

**Sermon:**

If you were to travel to northeast Massachusetts near the Topsfield Fairgrounds and Wenham, you’d come to the Ipswich River Wildlife Sanctuary. Here its namesake river meanders around its nearly 2,800 acres, inviting canoers to paddle down its gentle current. A remarkable number of species of birds, waterfowl, amphibians and deer co-exist along with New England and Japanese Maple, Oak and Birch trees blazing during the fall season with color. There, wherever your eyes rest creation sings her praise. But then:

God is everywhere and in everything

This morning is known as the Reign of Christ Sunday which falls just before Thanksgiving, and is a portal into a new church year. On this day, we acknowledge and celebrate that Christ is the Lord of all Creation. Notes the ecumenical teacher and writer, Richard Rohr, the “cosmic notion of the Christ competes with and excludes no one, but includes everyone and everything”: be it the vast tundra of the Canadian and Alaskan wilderness, the diverse wildlife that roams the Serengeti in Africa, or the vast human family itself.

In this morning’s Gospel passage, Christ is portrayed as the Shepherd King, enthroned in all his glory. Speaks the scripture, “When the King comes in his glory, he will occupy his glorious throne. Then all the peoples will be assembled before him, and he will separate them much as a shepherd separates sheep from goats. He’ll place the sheep to his right and the goats to his left. Then the king will say to the sheep on his right, ‘Come, you who have the blessing of my Father, inherit the domain prepared for you from the foundation of the world. You may remember, I was hungry and you gave me something to eat; I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink; I was a foreigner and you showed me hospitality; I was naked and you clothed me; I was ill and you visited me; I was in prison and you came to see me.’ Then the virtuous will say to him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you or thirsty and give you drink? When did we notice that you were a foreigner and extend hospitality to you? Or naked and clothe you? When did we find you ill or in prison and come to visit you?’ And the king will respond to them, ‘I swear to you, whatever you did for the most inconspicuous members of my family, you did it for me as well.’

Next, he will say to those on his left, ‘You condemned to the everlasting separation! You too may remember I was hungry and you didn’t give me anything to eat; I was thirsty and you refused me drink; I was a foreigner and you failed to extend hospitality to me; naked and you didn’t clothe me; ill and in prison and you didn't visit me.’

Then they will give him a similar reply: ‘Lord, when did we notice that you were hungry or thirsty or a foreigner or naked or weak or in prison and did not attempt to help you?’

He will then respond, ‘I swear to you, whatever you didn’t do for the most inconspicuous members of my family, you didn’t do for me.’ The second group will head for everlasting separation from God, but the virtuous for everlasting life.’

Hearing this scripture, one can’t help but conclude that if you had to choose between being a sheep or goat in this parable – clearly the sheep fared far better. But having once spent time in a barnyard where the sheep were just as demanding and hungry as the goats, it helps to remember that Jesus told this story to illustrate a central reality about God’s realm or kingdom. Which is the Incarnate One of God invariably can be found in persons and places we’d least expect: the inconspicuous, the marginalized, the forgotten, the expendable. Yet it is in those persons and places where the Incarnate One will be found.

But where is the connection between God’s beauty and majesty and wonder and awe as in the lavishness of creation AS compared to what this parable speaks of in terms of acute suffering, loneliness, alienation and even despair?

This may be Reign of Christ Sunday where we acknowledge Christ as Lord of All Creation, but it isn’t lost on any of us that this holiday season is unlike anything we’ve experienced. There are those watching who will be bereft of family this holiday season, and with it the merriment and rituals held dear. And then as if in contrast, even at those tables where a handful of family members will gather it will be difficult as well - because besides being under the cloud of a pandemic, this being an election year has caused tension in many a family.

When reflecting on today’s scripture, it is helpful to understand that when this parable was recounted by Jesus his mission was about to come to a crashing close. He foresaw that his execution would be carried out as if he was a common criminal, discrediting him and his entire movement. He had no wealth or physical possessions to leave behind, no formal education for his followers to legitimize his claims and no biological descendants to carry on his family name.

Jesus knew that days out from his imminent death he was worse than dead, unless, unless the people knew…knew that even when he was gone and seemingly vanquished in the eyes of the world, they, his people would continue to see him.

Yet the Good Shepherd also knew that as far as the sheep and goats in his parable were concerned, there wasn’t that much that separated them in the first place. Perhaps we’re not so unlike those in Jesus’ flock…restless and hungry…yearning to be fed…longing to be cared for…scared because there seems to be so little left. And so, we push and we pull, believing it is only this life that we have before us…forgetting the kingdom prepared for us from the foundation of the world.

From John’s Gospel hear this declaration, “What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (John 1:3b-5). In this vein, the Apostle Paul declared, “For in Christ all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” (Colossians 1:19).

This “fullness” brings to mind the cornucopia of Thanksgiving celebrations, where multi-colored harvest gourds compete with sheaves of grain spilling out in wild profusion from a horn-shaped, rust-colored basket . Yet in God’s realm or kingdom, this seemingly limitless fullness goes even further, expanding far beyond the limits of our imagination even while plummeting the depths of our souls. It steps over and beyond where we’d prefer to keep the Spirit at bay – teaching us that God’s grace is as operative in the forlorn and hurting world – as in what is ascribed as all things religious and majestic and beautiful. As Jesus taught in today’s parable, God’s divine fullness shakes off the dust of our resistance and our fear – stepping into the routinized dimensions of our lives: where the plain, the ordinary, the shameful, the insignificant, the unspoken and unseen are deemed as salvageable and necessary agents in Christ’s vision of wholeness and reconciliation.

In this fullness, the One called Christ rests in the moments of our lives AND in the least of these affirming over and over again that nothing, nothing can separate us from the love of God. When we arise in the morning and see sunlight pouring down as holy manna, by thanking God for a new day (given the limit of our time here on earth) we are ushered once again into this bountiful fullness. All these seemingly insignificant and material facets of creation are given to us, we who were created to hunger for communion with the living God who dwells in fullness. To which Christ declares, ‘I swear to you, whatever you did for the most inconspicuous members of my family, you did it for me as well.’ Thanks be to God. Amen.

**Benediction**: Remembering that God is everywhere and in everything - but in ways we may not expect – grace and equip us, O God, to see Jesus in the sick, in the lonely, in the impoverished and in the foreigner. And in so doing, make each of us a channel of your peace. And to one and all, a blessed Thanksgiving. Amen!