

I was reading a news article the other day. And it was talking about pollution. About a particular kind of pollution that is worse than it has ever been before. But it wasn't air pollution or water pollution or any kind of chemicals that we would normally consider poisonous. No, it was talking about light pollution.

Yes, light can be polluting. Because we, as human beings need darkness in order to get good sleep. And that is becoming increasingly scarce. Over the years, we have gotten very good at making energy efficient light sources. But that's only made us put more and more lights in our homes and communities.

This became vividly apparent to me when we were living in Northern Michigan. Because that is a very, very rural area. And it has some of the darkest skies in the country. So dark, in fact, that there's actually a good-sized observatory located there.

And I'll never forget the first night that I walked outside and looked up and my jaw nearly hit the ground. Because the sky was so dark. And the stars were so bright and so numerous. And sparkling over my head was the great expanse of the Milky Way like I had never seen it before. And I just stood there, looking like an idiot probably, utterly overwhelmed as I gazed into the expanse of the heavens, taking in God's creation.

Those moments of perfect clarity are awe-inspiring. They make you stop and realize that you've been looking at things for years and you've never really seen them. Looked at stars and never really seen how bright they could sparkle. Looked around you and never realized how your vision was obscured.

But those moments of clarity come in God's Word as well. Moments when we look at something that we totally take for granted, and never really see the detail and the beauty in what God is showing us.

Today is Christ the King Sunday. The very last Sunday of the church year. Next week, the chancel will be blue with Advent paraments. Soon after that, the Christmas tree will be lit up and covered in chrismon ornament. But we're not quite there yet. That's the beginning of the church year. Right now we're at the end.

And because we're at the end of the church year it's fitting and traditional that we take a look at the end times. Take a glimpse into our own future when Christ returns.

And there are aspects of it that we know very well. We know that God will judge the living and the dead. We know that those with faith in Christ look forward to eternal life in paradise. And that those without faith can expect punishment in the eternal fire of hell. These are nothing new to most of us.

But there's still more that we miss. Because Christ lays out an especially vivid picture of the end for us in our Gospel lesson, if we take the time to look at it.

The first thing that many people miss is right there in the first line of the first verse of our reading. "*When the Son of Man comes in His glory.*" When He comes. We say it over and over again. The return of Christ. The second-coming of Christ. And yet, when I talk to people about eternal life, I hear something completely different. When I go to be with the Lord. When God takes me to heaven.

But that's not how Jesus talks. What Jesus focuses on is that He's coming here. And He's making Himself at home. He is Christ the King, and He's setting up a glorious throne to sit upon. He's gathering the nations of the earth to Himself.

And He's doing it, not because He couldn't take us to heaven. But because He doesn't want to. This beautiful earth, right here around us, is our inheritance. This is the kingdom prepared for us since the creation of the earth. This is the paradise that God always intended for us.

The devil may try to take it from us. Death may try to destroy it. Sin may pollute it into something we can't even recognize as good. But in the end, it will be remade and restored to the kingdom that God always wanted for us. A perfect kingdom, purified of all sin. The kingdom of the righteous, bought by the Son.

And what of everyone else? Well, that's something else we often miss. Because this world, this inheritance, was planned for us as God's children. It was made by Him, but it was in His will to give it to us. Eden was part of God's plan and it was and it will once again be very, very good.

But hell? Hell was never intended for unbelievers. Sending people there wasn't really even a part of God's plan in the beginning. Though He certainly had complete foreknowledge of what would happen, He didn't create human beings saying, "Yup... I'm gonna have to send most of these people to hell. Oh well."

No, he created us without sin. He created us without fault or defect. And when we sinned, when we mutilated that perfect image He had created, and when we aligned ourselves with the powers of sin, death, and devil, it was as if God said, "Well... what do I do with you now? This isn't what I intended for you. This isn't what I want for you. But, if you're gonna stand on the devil's side. If you're gonna fight in His army. Then I guess I have to send you to His prison."

That's what hell is. It's a prison for the devil and his angels. And now it's also a prison for unbelieving humanity.

But why? Why send those on His left to hell? Why offer paradise to those on His right? Is it merely because of their actions? Is it merely because of their good works?

I mean, that's what this text seems to be saying. Feed the hungry. Invite the lonely. Clothe the naked. Care for the sick. Visit the imprisoned. Do lots of good stuff and God will reward you. Do nothing good for anyone and God will punish you. Easy. Right?

There's just one problem with that. The sheep are rewarded for their good works specifically because Christ chooses to see their actions as done for Him. The goats are punished for their lack of good works specifically because Christ chooses to see their inaction as done against Him.

Both groups are absolutely dumbfounded when Jesus tells them that they have done these things for and against Him. The sheep had no idea they were doing anything for the king. The goats had no idea they were doing anything against the king. Because good works do not get you into heaven. And that surprise just demonstrates all the more that it was never about what they did or how much they did or how good they were that was at stake.

What was at stake was whether or not God chose to give them eternal life. What was at stake was whether the Father chose to consider them "you who are blessed." What was at stake was whether or not the Son of Man chose to put Himself in their lives, in ways they couldn't see or feel or recognize in any way.

So that, yes, they could do these good things. Things that we ourselves should always try to do. But things that matter, not because of well we do them, but because we know by faith that God sees them done as if for Christ Himself.

It's all about perspective. It's all about clarity. It's all about pulling away the pollution of sin and seeing the world through God's eyes. Eyes that in judgment can look upon us as we really are, sinners who would deny the Son of God a cup of water even as He died on a cross. And so are rightly cursed for it.

Or eyes that in love see us through the blood of Christ. As those whom Christ has called the righteous. Eyes that look upon us as the Spirit dwelling within us transforms us into something better than we ever could have been otherwise. Sanctified children of God caring our neighbors in need. Reaching out in faith to a world in needs God's love.

Eyes that see God giving divine grace even to little ones like Dierks. Too young to ever do anything good for his King. Yet, marked by Holy Baptism today as one chosen by God as His child. As one of Jesus' little lambs, who will inherit a kingdom prepared for him since the foundation of the earth.

You see, we don't have to worry about whether we're a sheep or a goat. Whether we are blessed or cursed. That water has already marked us as one redeemed by Christ the crucified. And that means every good thing we have ever done or will ever do is done for our King who saves us.

It's all about perspective and clarity and God's Word showing us not simply what it means to be good. But what it means to be chosen by God as part of His flock. Cared for and forgiven by the hands of our Good Shepherd. What it means to look at us through God's eyes and see us as more than we ever could have been. And yet, as exactly what we are and what we will one day be. Amen.