

“I Will Raise Up Shepherds Over Them”

Jeremiah 23:1-6 • Psalm 23 • Ephesians 2:11-22 • Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

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July 21, 2024

9th Sunday after Pentecost

Most of our readings this morning are about shepherds. Mark tells us about Jesus, the Good Shepherd, the one to whom people flocked from all around. “When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was.” Jesus is so revered, so legendary, and in such high demand that he and his disciples can hardly find a moment to rest. “And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak.”

The twenty-third psalm depicts a quieter scene: one faithful person describing their relationship with God. “The Lord is my shepherd.” You know this Psalm; I’ve talked about it in depth in the past.

I want to focus most of our attention this morning on the *other* passage about shepherds in today’s readings, from the book of Jeremiah. Jeremiah was a prophet, like Amos and like Ezekiel. His job was to speak on behalf of almighty God to the people, and especially to their leaders. He did this for a long time – about 40 years! – from about 626 BC to 587 BC. He carried out this ministry during the reigns of the last five kings of Judah, the southern kingdom that contained the cities of Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Hebron, and other towns. Jeremiah was often not well received: he was the target of an assassination plot; he was beaten and put in stocks; he was thrown into a muddy cistern; he was imprisoned; eventually he was hauled off to Egypt. Faithful Jews preserved his writings. The book that bears his name and contains his writings is 52 chapters long; it’s one of the longest books in the Bible.

This passage is about shepherds. “Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the Lord. Therefore thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the Lord.” (Jeremiah 23:1-2) Jeremiah was talking about Judah’s last four kings. There were twenty kings who ruled Judah from the 10th to the 6th century BC – actually, nineteen kings and one queen. Most of them weren’t good. The last good king was number 16, King Josiah, who ruled for 31 years in the 7th century BC. The Bible says he was a righteous king who “did what was right in the sight of the Lord and walked in all the way of his father David; he did not turn aside to the right or to the left.” (2 Kings 22:2) He initiated a series of reforms, including removing idols from the temple, returning the Ark of the Covenant to the temple, and reinstating the celebration of the Passover festival, which had been neglected for generations.

When Josiah died, his son Jehoahaz succeeded him. Jehoahaz did not last long – only three months! – but the Bible remembers him as a bad king: “he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord” (2

Kings 23:32). Jeremiah said this about him: “Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness and his upper rooms by injustice, who makes his neighbors work for nothing and does not give them their wages.... Your eyes and heart are only on your dishonest gain, for shedding innocent blood, and for practicing oppression and violence.” (Jeremiah 22:13, 17) Jehoahaz was dethroned by the king of Egypt.

He was replaced by his brother, Jehoakim, the 18th king. Jehoakim reigned for eleven years. Jewish literature describes Jehoakim as a “godless tyrant, committing the most atrocious sins and crimes. He lived in incestuous relations with his mother, daughter-in-law, and stepmother, and was in the habit of murdering men, whose wives he then violated and whose property he seized.” To keep Egypt at bay, he paid tribute, levying heavy taxes: “he taxed the land in order to meet Pharaoh’s demand for money. He exacted the silver and the gold from the people of the land” (2 Kings 23:35). Jeremiah spoke against him; when some of Jeremiah’s words reached Jehoakim on a scroll, Jehoakim burned the scroll, and tried to arrest Jeremiah. Another prophet, Uriah, also spoke out against Jehoakim. Jehoakim “struck him down with the sword and threw his dead body into the burial place of the common people.” (Jeremiah 26:23). When Jehoakim died, Jeremiah did not mourn: “They shall not lament for him, saying, ‘Alas, lord!’ or ‘Alas, his majesty!’ ... I spoke to you in your prosperity, but you said, ‘I will not listen.’ This has been your way from your youth, for you have not obeyed my voice.” (Jeremiah 22:18, 21)

Jehoakim’s son Jeconiah succeeded him, becoming Judah’s 19th king. He lasted three months and ten days. The Bible says “he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, just as his father had done.” (2 Kings 24:9) Not long after his reign began, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon laid siege to Jerusalem. Jeconiah surrendered. Nebuchadnezzar took him prisoner, then stripped both the temple and the royal palace of all their treasures, and took thousands of Jewish captives to Babylon. Jeremiah called Jeconiah “a despised broken pot, a vessel no one wants.... O land, land, land, hear the word of the Lord! Thus says the Lord: Record this man as childless, a man who shall not succeed in his days, for none of his offspring shall succeed in sitting on the throne of David and ruling again in Judah.” (Jeremiah 22:28-30)

Nebuchadnezzar installed Jeconiah’s uncle Zedekiah as the next ruler of Judah – the 20th, and last. Nebuchadnezzar wanted Zedekiah to do his bidding. But Zedekiah wanted to fight. Jeremiah strongly advised him not to; he knew deep in his bones that if Zedekiah rebelled, Judah was doomed. He urged Zedekiah to be a good king: “Thus says the Lord: Act with justice and righteousness and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place. For if you will indeed obey this word, then through the gates of this house shall enter kings who sit on the throne of David, riding in chariots and on horses—they, their servants, and their people. But if you will not heed these words, I swear by myself, says the Lord, that this house shall become a desolation.” (Jeremiah 22:3-5) Zedekiah refused to listen to Jeremiah and rebelled against Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar invaded Judah and besieged Jerusalem for a second time. People starved; Jeconiah tried to flee; he was captured; his young children were slaughtered; he was blinded, and spent the rest of his life in prison. Jerusalem was plundered and razed to the ground – and the temple along with it. Jeremiah had been right.

So Jeremiah says: “Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! ... Therefore thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings....” (Jeremiah 23:1-2) Jeremiah blames these kings for Judah’s fall.

Fundamentally, Jeremiah's message was about *ethics*. Jeremiah's basic message – God's basic message – was that the rise and fall of the nation was inextricably linked to the *ethics* of the people at the top.

One of my professors in seminary, Nancy Duff, taught Christian Ethics. Her courses covered the Ten Commandments, medical ethics, the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer (who was writing a book on ethics when he was executed by the Nazis), the Black liberation theologian James Cone, and more. What I remember most was how much she stressed the importance of *understanding* different points of view. She assigned papers in which we had to describe a position with which we disagreed. We had to do it *thoroughly, clearly, and fairly*. She would tell us, "You have to *understand* what the other person is saying *before* you disagree." She insisted: until you can articulate your opponent's position in a way that your opponent would say, "yes, that's what I mean," you *do not have the right* to critique their position. How I wish we had more people like her speaking up in these fractured times! Misrepresenting what the other party or candidate stands for – that's not ethical. Claiming something to be true when all the evidence says otherwise – that's not ethical. Saying that something happened when it really didn't – that's not ethical. Saying that something *didn't* happen when it really *did* – that's not ethical. Saying that something is *causing* something else to happen, when the trained specialists who study those issues for a living say there's no such link – that's not ethical. Saying that something's *not* causing something to happen, when 97% of scientists says that it *is* – that's not ethical. If our society has a prayer of becoming "civil" again, it's going to start with a whole lot of people – and leaders! – acting a whole lot more ethically. Let's stop calling things "fake" that are *true*, and let's stop calling things "true" that are patently false. Let's stop "bearing false witness" and start living more *ethically*.

The good news, according to Jeremiah, is that *better days are coming*. Speaking for God, Jeremiah declares: "I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall no longer fear or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the Lord." (Jeremiah 23:3-4) He's talking about the *restoration* that would occur seventy years after the fall of Jerusalem, when the Jewish people would be allowed to return and rebuild. New shepherds would arise, *better* shepherds, who would lead the people in more *faithful* ways.

But Jeremiah doesn't stop there. God also gave Jeremiah insight into the *farther* future: "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.... This is the name by which he will be called: "The Lord is our righteousness." Christians have long seen this as a prophecy about Jesus. Descended from David, ruling the whole world with *wisdom* and *justice* and *righteousness* ... *this* is the Lord whom we worship and serve. This is the Lord whom many people came from far and wide came to find: "they hurried there on foot from all the towns People at once recognized him and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was...." (Mark 6:33, 54-55) "As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd, and he began to teach them many things." (Mark 6:34)

We need good shepherds. We *desperately* need good shepherds. Shepherds who will govern us with *wisdom* and *justice* and *righteousness*. We have Jesus, of course ... but we need more than that. We need *people*, flesh-and-blood humans, leaders with *ethics*. We need *shepherds* who are truly *good*.

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