

"GOOD SHEPHERDS"
Jeremiah 23:1-6 Colossians 1:11-20
November 20, 2022
York Center Church of the Brethren
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Today is the last day of the church year. Next Sunday is the first Sunday of Advent, the first day of the new church year. It is fitting that we bring the old church year to a close by focusing on the Divinity of Christ as we prepare to welcome the baby Jesus.

We are greeted this morning by an Old Testament prophet who is **not** known for his jolly message. Jeremiah is often called the "weeping prophet" because his words from God to the people were filled with God's grief at their disobedience.

The late Eugene Peterson called Jeremiah "*a true, honest, God-revealing companion for the worst of times.*" And it was the worst of times for Jeremiah and for the people of God as he preached a message of doom and gloom preceding the invasion by the Babylonian army.

This invasion would totally destroy the holy city of Jerusalem leaving nothing standing. The enemy would cart the people off to exile in Babylon.

Jeremiah embodies God's tears and God's grief, in what is, without a doubt the worst of times for God's people. And the sad part is that they have no one to blame but themselves and their leaders.

Throughout the book of Jeremiah the prophet's searing words take aim at the kings, the prophets, and the priests who are supposed to be leading the people into a closer relationship with God. But as human beings often do, they took their God-given power and used it for their own benefit. Instead of caring for God's people they were concerned only for themselves and their own wealth and status.

God has had enough, and the words of divine anger come through God's prophet Jeremiah. In those days the word "shepherd" was used to refer to the kings appointed by God. Their job was to care for the people, to bring about a reign of peace, justice, and righteousness.

They were to care for God's flock as God's representatives. But something went terribly wrong.

God has two specific complaints. We find the first in the tenth chapter of Jeremiah, verse 21: "*For the shepherds are stupid, and do not inquire of the Lord; therefore, they have not prospered, and all their flock is scattered.*" The appointed leaders have not turned to God for guidance and wisdom. If the leaders do not receive their wisdom from God, if they do not have a strong relationship with God then you can be sure their people won't either.

We find the second complaint in chapter fifty, verse 6: "*My people have been lost sheep; their shepherds have led them astray, turning them away on the mountains; from mountain to hill they have gone, they have forgotten their fold.*" Instead of leading the

people to God the leaders have abandoned them, left them on their own in dangerous places. The people have scattered, following false gods and going their own way. The kings have led the nation into idolatry, and everyone will pay the price.

When Jeremiah cries out, "*Woe to the shepherds*," it is a cry of outrage against those who have abused their God-given power and positions of leadership. It is a cry against the kings who have allowed their own greed and selfishness to pull them away from the God who called them into power in the first place. Jeremiah places the blame for the impending demise of the nation of Israel right at the feet of the kings. He makes it clear that those who have abused their power will be knocked off their thrones and God will take over, gathering the people back together in a place of safety and prosperity.

God will call new leaders who will do what they are supposed to do- care for the people. The new shepherds will do their jobs so well the people will no longer be afraid, and no one will stray off to worship false gods or put themselves in danger. Along with the words of doom, comes a message of hope, restoration, and promise. The promise is for a new king, a shepherd, who will do God's will with wisdom and justice. This new king will make things right again and will lead the people into a closer relationship with God.

These biblical mandates for good shepherds resonate with me and probably with any of you who care for animals. As many of you know, when I was in high school, we had a flock of Hampshire sheep. My sisters and I were members of the York County 4-H Lamb club. We showed our sheep at the local fairs. We did for our sheep what they couldn't do for themselves. We gave them clean water, good food, and fresh hay. We provided a dry, warm shelter for them and safe pasture with plenty of grass and a tall fence so predators couldn't get in and the sheep couldn't get out and get lost or injured. We trimmed their hooves, sheared their wool once a year and called the vet if they got sick.

My favorite time of year was lambing season. The ewes could usually deliver healthy lambs on their own, but we were often there to ensure all went well. And there is nothing like seeing a wet lamb, just a few minutes old, try to stand on long, wobbly legs and take their first drink of mama's milk.

If we didn't feel like going out in the cold or rain or snow to feed them- too bad- they depended on us. If we got lazy our flock would suffer --- and we would too when our parents found out!

If something went wrong and the flock was endangered it was generally not their fault, but ours. I loved those sheep- some more than others- and wanted to do everything I could to keep them healthy. They were dependent on us. They were our responsibility, and we did not take it lightly.

Can you see how God's word of condemnation of the shepherds comes out of compassion for the sheep? The ones who were entrusted with taking care of God's people were the ones who were actually harming them, and God was holding them accountable.

Jeremiah then speaks of a new shepherd God will raise up to care for and lead the people. This new shepherd will be from the family of the legendary King David, who himself was a shepherd as a boy.

This Shepherd will bring God's justice and righteousness back to the people of God. This one will not be just any leader. He will be the great Shepherd. And who might that be you may ask?

As Christians, our thoughts turn immediately to the One we know as God's righteous King, the greatest Shepherd of all, Jesus Christ. It is fitting that we end this church year with a vision of the full divinity of Jesus Christ. To do so we turn to the letter written to the persecuted Christian in Colossae to find what has become known as the "Christ hymn."

The Apostle Paul was writing to a group of mostly Gentile Christians who lived in what we now know as Turkey. These new Christians were trying to figure out how to live their lives as followers of Christ. They were having some difficulty in understanding the importance of making Christ the center of their lives. Other gods and beliefs were getting equal time with the Risen Christ, so Paul writes to set them straight.

He is doing his work as a good shepherd, sharing wisdom and understanding. He makes it clear that Christ always has first place in our lives. No one and nothing should come before our devotion to the Son of God.

Try to listen to this hymn as though you are the ones to whom it was originally written. Imagine that you are people trying to live faithfully but are confused about Christ's rightful place in your lives.

"We look at this Son and see the God who cannot be seen. We look at this Son and see God's original purpose in everything created. For everything, absolutely everything, above and below, visible and invisible, rank after rank after rank of angels—everything got started in him and finds its purpose in him. He was there before any of it came into existence and holds it all together right up to this moment. And when it comes to the church, he organizes and holds it together, like a head does a body.

He was supreme in the beginning and—leading the resurrection parade—he is supreme in the end. From beginning to end he's there, towering far above everything, everyone.

So spacious is he, so roomy, that everything of God finds its proper place in him without crowding. Not only that, but all the broken and dislocated pieces of the universe—people and things, animals and atoms—get properly fixed and fit together in the vibrant harmonies, all because of his death, his life poured down from the cross. (The Message)

Quite a vision, isn't it? Paul is saying that this is what the true King looks like. He looks like God. He comes from God. He is the very image of God. We don't just try to fit Jesus into our worldview. We change our worldview to conform to who Jesus is and who he calls us to be. When we follow the True Shepherd, we will find our whole selves transformed. And as transformed children of God we will do all we can to transform the systems and structures of this world, so they resemble the grace, mercy, and compassion we find in Christ.

The True Shepherd comes not just to lead a few specially chosen sheep to safety, but to make the whole world a place of rest and security for every single sheep.

The line in this text from the New Revised Standard Version I keep coming back to is this: *"For in Christ all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell."* All of who God is, was, and ever will be found a home in Jesus Christ. Nothing of God is left out or held back. When we see Jesus, we know we are looking at the God who created us in God's own image. The helpless babe in the manger is the Cosmic Christ, the One who defeated death; the One who lives forever.

Thomas Troeger once wrote, *"When we look at Jesus and see him feeding the hungry, we see the image of God in action. When we look at Jesus and see Him healing the broken, we see the image of God in action."*

When others look at us and see us helping, healing, and praying, they see Jesus in action for we too carry the image of God in our being.

In a few weeks we will hear about the birth of Jesus. The very first people to hear the good news of this miraculous event will be shepherds out in the fields taking care of their sheep. I don't think this is a coincidence.

As we come to the end of this church year and look ahead to the anticipation and joy of Advent we celebrate the Christ, the true Shepherd, the embodiment of our God.

We give thanks for God's gracious invasion into human life; into **our** lives.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.