

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost  
Proper 11  
Year B

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

In the readings today, we see a theme of the shepherd. From the reading in Jeremiah and the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, to the Gospel reading from Mark, the theme of the shepherd weighs heavily. In all of these readings, we see a direct appeal to today's church. What is that appeal?

As one commentator says, any passage that begins with "woe" might make us a little hesitant as we explore what follows. The shepherds Jeremiah is condemning here are the kings of Judah who have allowed the Israelites to be taken captive because of the kings' sinful nature. He is also blasting corrupt leaders in general. Whether they be monarchs or just national leaders of any type, Jeremiah is placing the sorry state of the country clearly at the feet of those who put themselves first at the expense of their people. However, the prophet ends this rant on a high note - looking forward to the day when a righteous king will come to the throne. In that day, the people will be led into safety.

The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm picks up this familiar theme of the Lord leading the people into green pastures and restoring them. Additionally, we see how the good shepherd not only gives the sheep food and rest, he protects them in the time of trial. The good shepherd is one who takes care of all the needs of his sheep, even if that is at the cost of his own life.

In both of these readings from the Hebrew Scriptures, we see the grace of God bestowed on the people through the actions of the shepherd - God's surrogate caretaker. While sheep are not known for being courageous - in fact they are timid and easily led astray - the shepherd is charged with their care and protection. The psalmist also gives the sheep an expression of hope. The time will come when the sheep will be able to lie down in green pastures, have ample water and food. The shepherd also provides abundance - the sheep will want for nothing as the shepherd will supply all their needs. Truly, as Jeremiah states, they will live in safety.

The parallel actions are a little less obvious in the Gospel reading. If we include the portion that is skipped, verses 35-44 especially, the comparison becomes a little more clear. The reading begins with the disciples reporting back in following their first efforts of preaching and healing. Jesus calls on them to go into a secluded place to get some rest. The scene around them has been chaotic with people coming and going, not even giving them a chance to eat. But, even in seeking a quiet place, their plans are foiled by the crowds. When they come ashore, the crowds are waiting. Here, we begin to see the Shepherd in Jesus come forth. Even though He is concerned about His disciples and their need for rest, Jesus is immediately drawn to the needs of the crowd and He has compassion for them.

This compassion is not an attribute many people throughout the history of the world's religions would apply to their God. God is often viewed as vengeful, angry, wrathful, vindictive - anything but approachable and loving. But here, we see Jesus moved with compassion and we see the Good Shepherd arise. Jesus sees this crowd as a flock of sheep without a shepherd - without someone to care for them. In the verses we skip - the feeding of the five thousand - Jesus has the people sit on the green grass as He provides food for them. When we look back to the psalm, we see the parallel. Perhaps, reading between the lines, Jesus also feeds the disciples and gives them an opportunity for rest. Just as God provided for the people of Israel in the wilderness during the exodus, so also Jesus provides for all who follow Him, even in deserted places.

Jesus shows His compassion for the people not only in feeding them and giving them rest, but also through their healing. As we pick the story back up in the last portion of the Gospel reading, Jesus and the disciples land in the region of Gennesaret - an area between Capernaum and Magdala. This area is known for the healing properties of its hot springs where many ill and disabled people gathered. When Jesus arrived, these people flocked to Him, believing that just touching His garments would provide them relief. To them, Jesus possesses the divine power to heal their infirmities.

What does this have to do with us? At the beginning, I stated these readings have a direct appeal to us. What is it?

First, we are to remember that we are called to imitate the Good Shepherd - we are to care for the needs of others, but even more than care, to have compassion for them. We are to provide for their needs as we minister to them. We are to guide them to a place of rest, a place of nourishment, and a place of safety.

Further, we are to introduce them to a God of love, not a God of wrathful vengeance. We are to share the blessings God has given us. Even as the disciples reported their successes in ministry, so we should report our successes as we reflect on all we do for God. God has given us each talents and skills to use for the Kingdom of God here and now, and as we use those abilities, we are called upon to let others know. Why?, because it will lift them up, also.

Finally, God has given us the hope of our salvation - something we are to share with those we meet. As Paul says, if we do not have this hope, our efforts are in vain. But we do have this hope - the hope of eternal life through Christ Jesus. That is our message as we provide food and rest to those we meet. That is the meaning of the Gospel.