

Lectionary 16 B 2021

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

July 18, 2021

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56; Jeremiah 23:1-6

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

He had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. Our evangelist, Mark, makes this statement about Jesus in today's gospel. And from this statement by the evangelist, the churches chose to accompany today's gospel with a reading from Jeremiah about sheep and shepherds. And with a psalm— the cherished Psalm 23— which is also about sheep and shepherds. *He had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.* The evangelist Matthew repeats Mark's words in his own gospel, but adds the words "harassed and helpless." *He had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.* [Matt 9:36]

In the Bible, and especially in the Old Testament, the kings and rulers of the people were described as shepherds. A shepherd has control of the sheep, and the sheep may even be the property of the shepherd. But the shepherd also has responsibilities for the sheep and to the sheep. To protect them, to lead them to food and drink, to green pastures and still waters. And so, in the view of the Old Testament, a proper king or queen or ruler will provide for their subjects, and protect their subjects. Their sheep. And in today's first reading, the prophet Jeremiah brings God's judgment on bad rulers. And promises to replace them with a good ruler. And the God of Jeremiah is talking about kings and monarchs when he uses the image of a shepherd.

And so whenever the claim is made that God is our shepherd, or that Jesus is our good shepherd, a judgment is being made about the rulers of this world. In Psalm 23, the Old Testament says that "The Lord is my shepherd." In the gospel of John, the New Testament says that Jesus claims to be our "good shepherd." Our church and many others read both of those scriptures on the fourth Sunday of Easter each year, the so-called Sunday of the Good Shepherd. These statements mean that our rulership, our ownership is with an authority that is superior to the rulers of this world. Even the good rulers. But most especially the bad rulers.

Because of the claims of the Old Testament, made by prophets like Jeremiah and by poems such as the 23rd psalm, many of the people of Jesus' time were awaiting a messiah, a good king, who would replace the corrupt and incompetent rulers of their own time. And although you and I complain about our own rulers and politicians, whom we often describe as corrupt and incompetent, with reason, the leaders of Jesus' society were spectacularly corrupt and incompetent. If you listened to last Sunday's sermon, we were talking about Herod Antipas, and

his decadent birthday party, and his conniving and incestuous marriage, and his murder of John the Baptizer. That was last Sunday's gospel, and today's gospel is the verses which immediately follow last Sunday's gospel. And so, if you read today's gospel in its precise context, the wicked actions of a wicked king have just been described in gory detail. And Jesus is being pursued by a desperate crowd. And the evangelists Mark and Matthew describe this crowd as sheep without a shepherd, helpless and harassed.

Our gospel reading today skips over the feeding of the five thousand. The churches have decided to spend the next five weeks reading from the sixth chapter of John's gospel, which involves the feeding of the five thousand, and the things that Jesus teaches about the bread of life. And so for liturgical and theological reasons, the feeding of the five thousand is cut out of our gospel readings, as I have indicated in the service folder [for those of you who have access to it.] But I think that you should see Jesus' response in three ways: teaching, feeding, and healing. Our edited gospel reading has the first part, teaching the crowds, and the third part, healing the crowds but the second part, feeding the crowds, was excised and reserved for another Sunday. But these are the things that spring from Jesus' compassion. *He had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.*

In other gospels, Jesus seems to have a plan, a master plan which he is following. But in this gospel of Mark, Jesus sometimes seems to be responding to circumstances as they arise. In this particular reading today, the twelve followers whom Jesus sent out in pairs a chapter earlier have returned from their mission. And they are tired, and he proposes a retreat, a sabbath, a period of rest and recuperation. And so they board the boat, and cross the giant lake to another shore, another beach. They are seeking seclusion and privacy and rest. But the need of the crowds intervenes. And so Jesus and the twelve, exhausted though they may be, have compassion for the crowd, and begin to provide teaching, food, and healing. And all of this is immediately adjacent to the corrupt ruler Herod Antipas. These are his people, his responsibility, flocking to the shore of the Sea of Galilee, desperately seeking guidance and care from Jesus of Nazareth. And he has been in his palace far away, having a birthday party, gorging at a banquet, and decadently bringing John the Baptizer's head on a platter for the final dish of that banquet. And so, men and women, when Mark says "sheep without a shepherd," and shows us how Jesus and his overwhelmed disciples respond, Mark is implicitly contrasting bad shepherds with the Good Shepherd. He is illustrating the dereliction of duty by rulers and kings and other leaders. God's people are flawed and weak and sheep-like. But they deserve wise and compassionate leadership. And it must come through Jesus and his heavenly father and through the hands of the disciples. We must read these stories with Herod's corruption and incompetence in mind. Because that is an important background for Jesus' actions, and for his followers' exhaustion, and for the general metaphor of the shepherd and the sheep.

I believe that our society— the United States of America— has a lot of bad shepherds. I'm not just talking about politicians, although I definitely mean them. They are easy to criticize, and deserving of criticism. But I include business leaders, the medical establishment, universities and academia, the cultural elites, the mass media, and of course, the churches and the clergy. The

people who have the authority, and the knowledge, and the credibility to guide, to lead, to teach, to feed, to heal. To shepherd the people. I think it is demonstrable fact that the United State of America is afflicted by incredible problems– personal problems and social problems. We see this in our divided and slow response to the Covid pandemic. We, who prior to Covid, were considered to the most resilient and smart nation on earth in that particular regard: pandemics. But we do not have time to discuss the other epidemics. Opioids. Loneliness. White supremacy. Pornography. Delusion. Disasters caused by the humankind’s abuse and destruction of creation. Financial debt. We do not have good leadership in our civic and collective life. We do not have leadership. We have endless chatter. But the people are sheep without shepherds. Harassed and helpless.

I am not telling you anything that you do not already know. Except that the need for the Church is vast. The mission field extends beyond the horizon of what we can possibly see. The growth opportunity for Christianity and for the spread of the Gospel is immeasurable. Not that the Church has the answers for the environmental crisis. Or for the Delta variant of Covid. Or for heroin and fentanyl. But the rot and the despair and the pain. The hunger and the thirst for love and for understanding. We have that capacity for healing and wholeness. And if we think that the Herods of the world are going to leave their palaces and leave their chatter and their indecisive hand wringing and become good shepherds, we are sadly deluded. And perhaps we are not heeding the words and actions of Jesus.

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. And he fed them. And he healed them. The world always has bad shepherds. It always has a few good shepherds. And it has a lot of shepherds who just don’t do anything. If the Lord is my shepherd, if the Lord is our shepherd, then we don’t look to those others so much. We look to our Lord. And we join him in teaching. In feeding. And in healing. Amen.