

The King of All Shepherds

Jeremiah 23:1-6

November 25, 2007, Christ the King Sunday

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If there had been such a thing as “Want Ads” back in biblical times, one of the most common notices would have read something like this:

Wanted: Good Shepherds to manage flocks of sheep. Considerable patience, understanding and experience working with this easily led astray breed of animal is absolutely required. Only applicants with the following skills need apply: 1. Must be able to use staff to make the sheep lie down in green pastures; 2. Must be able to use staff to lead the sheep beside still waters; 3. Must be able to use staff to lead the sheep along the right pathways and through deep valleys. 4. Must be able to use staff to both protect and give comfort to sheep when confronted with darkness, danger and death. 5. Must be willing to make a life long commitment to this field. If you consider yourself eligible to be a Good Shepherd, contact us at The Overflowing Cup Company for an interview.

This job description should sound familiar to you. It’s drawn straight from the twenty-third Psalm! Hearing this beloved passage of Scripture as a job description rather than as a poetic piece of pastoral care may be new to you, but it’s a helpful way to understand what sorts of folks were *not* good shepherds. In sum, any individual with a tendency to scatter flocks instead of keep them firmly and safely in the fold needn’t have applied.

Given how common sheep and shepherds were to the agricultural society of the ancient Near East, it’s not surprising that kings came to be viewed as shepherds and their subjects as sheep. And therefore it’s not surprising that prophets such as Jeremiah would equate bad kingship with bad shepherding.

One clear example of this is found in Jeremiah 23:13-17, just a few verses following our stated reading this morning. There it describes King Jehoiakim (*Jeh-hoy-a-qim*) who ruled some three-hundred and fifty years after David, the great Shepherd King, and only about a decade before Jerusalem fell into the hands of the Babylonians, forcing the Israelites into exile. His reign, as Jeremiah made clear, was marked by religious decay. He was, according to biblical scholars, “an oppressive and covetous ruler” who shed innocent blood that opposed him and who used forced labor to

build costly royal buildings. Oh, and to top it all off, he imposed very heavy land taxes. Never a popular political move. Perhaps the best description of Jehoiakim comes from the revered Jewish historian Josephus, who wrote that this king was “unjust and wicked by nature, and was neither reverent toward God nor kind to man.” (Josephus, *Ant.* 10.83)

This is *not* someone to whom you would entrust the care of your sheep. This was not the sort to lead to safety and serenity any easily misled creatures and their God-hewn souls. So he was *not* the sort of king of the flock known as Israel that God was even the slightest bit content to leave in power. God’s extreme discontent with Jehoiakim’s blatant idolatry is what we hear of in our passage this morning. Jeremiah gives a voice to it by shouting, “Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of *my* pasture! It is you who have scattered *my* flock, and have driven them away and have not attended to them. So I will attend to *you* for your evil doings.” (Jer. 23:1-2, emphasis mine)

Most important to note in this oracle, this prophetic utterance on behalf of God, is not what God was planning on doing to do to punish the likes of Jehoiakim. Much more significant to our spiritual journeys is to pay close, prayerful attention to the oft repeated two letter word “*my*.” This word makes the clear claim that the sheep, that is, the people, supposedly in this self-preoccupied king’s care, more so belong to God. We hear it declared again and again – *my pasture, my flock*. This language refers us back to the steadfast covenant promise between God and the Hebrews. They will not be forgotten. They will not be forsaken. They *will* be delivered from evil and led through the valley of the shadow of death to still waters and green pastures. And so Jeremiah continued his prophecy by making an astounding personal claim on behalf of God which said, “I myself will gather the remnant of my flock, I will bring them back their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply ... and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing.” (Jer. 3-4)

Then Jeremiah uttered the really big part of his prophecy, the part we are poised to very gratefully acknowledge and celebrate together today. God had had enough of false shepherds. The true Good Shepherd was to be raised up. Jeremiah 23:5 promises “The days are surely coming ... 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.” Though no mention of Messiah is explicitly stated here as in Isaiah, this clearly points in the same direction, toward the same forthcoming Good Shepherd. This is the One in whom there would be a shepherding home of souls to

God's safe, heavenly haven. This is the One who was to very truly be the King of All Shepherds, the King of All Kings.

Before the homecoming, though, before the birth of this Good Shepherd, there was no avoiding the reality of an exile. This is different from an *exodus* in that it's a forced military march out of a nation's homeland to reside in a foreign land, under an enemies thumb. The evil deeds of injustice done by the self-centered, people oppressing bad shepherd who was King Jehoiakim brought about the sacking of Jerusalem in 587 by the Babylonian Empire. Did God use Babylonia to make this happen, to punish Johiakim and all who fell astray from God under his influence? That's certainly one way to look at it. Can't say the guy didn't deserve to get overthrown! But I can't say with full certainty Babylonia was an instrument in God's hand. I'm not God, haven't spoken directly with God about it. So I don't know. What I do know, however, is that when you scatter your sheep, when you fail to keep them together and protect them and lead them in the paths of righteousness and peace, goodness and mercy are not likely to come about. Jehoiakim reaped what he sowed -- and so economic oppression and the perpetuation of injustice came hard upon him and the flock -- the nation -- in his care. Exile, however, was not the final word for Israel. Babylonia itself was overthrown by the Persian Empire about forty years later and about 40,000 Jews were freed to return to their native land. A new temple was then built in Jerusalem. And though there were years more of slipping into old idolatries, and years more of bad shepherding being called out by good prophets, the promised and true homecoming back to being God's chosen and fully redeemed flock through a Shepherd King from the line of King David eventually happened. I'll remind you about the details of this great event when the thirty shopping days left are up!

Today is the last day of the year. Well, the last day of the official church year. It's the day we celebrate Christ the King, the day we put a joyful exclamation point on the great story of our salvation. Next week, then, is when we begin the new church year. We will return to lessons about what it means to prepare for the arrival of Emmanuel, God-with-us, the Good Shepherd. Yet we've really begun today by our examining the bad shepherding of historic kings like Jehoiakim, and the consequences of oppression, injustice and exile that befell Israel as a result of his idolatry.

Having done so, we can certainly appreciate all the more the kind of Shepherd King we have in Jesus. In Him we have the evergreen example of what true justice and righteousness look like for all human beings. In Him not one sheep is left to wander in danger and get lost. In Him we are led through the valley of the shadow of death to rest

beside still, peaceful waters. As the dawn of Advent rises, may we thus strive to be shepherds ourselves in His Light. Amen.