

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost; July 21, 2024
Jeremiah 23:1-6
“Faithfulness to the Word is Faithfulness to Jesus”

Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! declares the LORD.

Therefore, this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says about the shepherds who shepherd my people.

**You have scattered my flock.
You have driven them away.
You have not taken care of them,
but I will certainly take care of you,
because of the evil things you have done,
declares the LORD.**

**I will gather what is left of my flock
out of all the countries where I have driven them,
and I will bring them back to their pastures.
They will be fruitful and multiply.
I will raise up shepherds over them
who will shepherd them.
They will no longer be afraid or terrified,
nor will any be missing, declares the LORD.**

**Listen, the days are coming, declares the LORD,
when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch,
who will reign wisely as king
and establish justice and righteousness on earth.
In his days Judah will be saved
and Israel will dwell securely.
This is his name by which he will be called:
The LORD Our Righteousness.**

There are many ways to tell a story. One is to start in the middle; the fancy literary term for this is *in media res*, “in the middle of things.” That’s how Puzo told “The Godfather”, Homer told “The Iliad,” and Gilligan told “Breaking Bad.” This might seem like the best way to tell today’s story, because the prophet Jeremiah does start in the middle of things, and we are in the middle of things: the middle of summer and the middle of the year.

But there’s another way to tell this story that will work even better, and that is to start at the end, the way Garcia-Marquez told “Chronicle of a Death Foretold,” and Shelley told “Frankenstein.” That may be the best way to tell this story, because at the end of these verses from Jeremiah comes a prophecy of the Savior’s arrival, which we celebrate at the end our year. You very likely recognized the closing verses from Christmas Eve and Day services, when we celebrate the Messiah’s arrival: **Listen, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, who will reign wisely as king and establish justice and righteousness on the earth. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will dwell securely. This is his name by which he will be called: The LORD Our Righteousness.**

So, who wants to start with “Christmas in July”? Why not, right? If mattress stores and car dealerships can do it, why can’t we when a Christmas prophecy falls in July? 700 years before the Messiah’s birth, Jeremiah predicts and promises the arrival of the perfect Shepherd-King, a concept that would have had his readers scratching their heads: a shepherd, the lowliest of the world, who is also a king establishing justice and righteousness.

This prophecy can only find fulfillment in Jesus Christ, who came to establish God’s kingdom by his own righteousness. Jesus is perfect, totally righteous. But he’s more than righteous himself; Jeremiah calls him: **the LORD our Righteousness**. Jesus’ righteousness is ours through faith.

Clearly, Jeremiah’s Christmas prophecy sees a divine King, a descendant of David, who comes to rule a divine kingdom. At the same time, he sees a lowly Shepherd who lives righteousness for us and lays down his life to be our righteousness.

That is where Jeremiah words end: at Christmas, and the Messiah’s saving work. But now we work backward from the end, from Christmas, to the middle of things. In the middle of the story, we see another reason that this Messiah will come to shepherd: he will gather the flock of God to faith: **I will gather what is left of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their pastures. They will be fruitful and multiply. I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them. They will no longer be afraid or terrified, nor will any be missing, declares the LORD.**

The Messiah is coming to gather and restore God’s people. We see that promise fulfilled in today’s Gospel, where Jesus sees a crowd and proclaims the saving Word of God to them. **He began to teach them many things**. This is what good spiritual shepherds do: they teach many things about God and his will and his saving love, all that God has chosen to reveal in his Word. In the Second Lesson, St. Paul also emphasizes this work of the Good Shepherd: **He also came to preach peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near**. Jesus comes to bring us peace by saving us from our sins, and then preaches it to all, shepherding them in the saving Word of God.

And Jesus doesn’t do this work alone. He had disciples with him that day when he taught the crowds, disciples he would send out to shepherd with his saving truth. Later, St. Paul became one of them. And you heard him say: **You have been built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the Cornerstone**. Christ, the Cornerstone, raises up prophets and apostles to lay the foundation of truth. And in each following generation, he raises up more and more shepherds to trumpet God’s truth. So already in the day of Jeremiah, we hear about not just the Good Shepherd, the Messiah, who gathers the Lord’s sheep, but other good shepherds under him who do the same: **I [the Messiah] will gather what is left of my flock...I will bring them back to their pastures...I will raise up shepherds over them...**

So, working from the end: we have the arrival of the Messiah, the Good Shepherd, who dies and rises for the sheep. He also shepherds them by proclaiming the Word of God to them. But he doesn’t stop there: he raises up other shepherds to work for him by guiding God’s people in his truth.

And that brings all the way back to the beginning. In the Gospel, why did the Good Shepherd, physically and emotionally exhausted, teach many things to that crowd? **His heart went out to them because they were like sheep without a shepherd**. To put it mildly, the religious leaders of Israel, who were supposed to be shepherding the people in divine truth, were lousy, controlling, domineering, exploiting shepherds.

There were lousy shepherds in Jeremiah's day, too, abusive and negligent: **Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture...You have scattered my flock. You have driven them away. You have not taken care of them, but I will certainly take care of you, because of the evil things you have done.** In the early Church, too, there were unfaithful shepherds. Paul, who wrote of the sure foundation of the prophets and apostles, warned often and strongly about being on guard for evil, lying, abusive shepherds.

How does the Lord feel about such unfaithful shepherds? **Woe to you...You did not take care of them, but I will certainly take care of you.** Yikes.

Why? Why did Jesus have such compassion on the shepherd-less crowds? Why did Paul emphasize so strongly the truth that all good shepherds must cling to? Why did Jeremiah promise not just the Good Shepherd, but all faithful shepherds under him?

It's time to back up again. "But wait!" you say. We started at the end, then worked back to the middle, and now we're at the beginning. There is nothing before the beginning! But in this case, there is. In this case, there is the beginning before the beginning: the beginning of eternity: **In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning...In him was life, and the life was the light of mankind...But to all who did receive him, to those who believe in his name, he gives the right to become children of God...The Word became flesh and dwelled among us. We have seen his glory, the glory he has the only-begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.**

Jesus Christ, the Son of God and our Savior, is the Word. There are several ways in which this is true, but right now this is the one we need to see most clearly. The written Word of God, the Bible, and all of its content, is all about Jesus Christ. It all connects to him, it all comes back to him, it all proclaims Christ. Some it does so directly, some indirectly. But in the end, Jesus is the center of all Scripture. He's what it's all about.

Jesus says, **"These are the Scriptures that testify about me."** The Word, the Bible, is the Word, Jesus Christ, who also says, **"The Scripture cannot be broken."** Now we find God's reason for insisting on shepherds being faithful to all of his Word: as his Son, the Word is holy and unbreakable, rising even from the grave, so is the written Word. Because it's all about him.

All of God's Word shares this purpose: to show you God's perfect will for your life and his demand that you keep it perfectly. He does this without implying that you're able to keep it perfectly, because the Word also tells you that you can't. You're born in sin and don't stand a chance.

And all of God's Word shares this purpose: to show you God's gift of perfection in Jesus, who came as the Lord our Righteousness. It is the purpose of the Old Testament, where Jeremiah calls the Messiah "Branch of David," where King David lives as one chapter in the story of the salvation promise, carried by the nation of Israel. The New Testament fulfills the Old; the Savior arrives to be our righteousness, to fulfill all the prophecies of a holy life, a sacrificial death to atone for sins, and a resurrection from the grave. The Word, the Bible, is always about God's gift of righteousness and salvation in the Word, the Son of God.

Yet the prevailing attitude in the Christian Church is that some of the written Word is not all that important; some of it is negotiable, even though it speaks clearly and unmistakably; it's called "open to interpretation." Teachings get divided into so-called "essential" and "non-essential" categories. Do we ever think this way? Do we steer clear of Bible studies because we feel the topic is unimportant? Do we

not bother to learn a lot of Bible teaching because we know Jesus died for our sins, and that's good enough? Do I sometimes skip devotion and Bible time because as long as I know more about it than you do, I'll be able to keep my job?

If you heard a preacher or Christian teacher say something that you were sure was out of line with the Word, would you bother to correct it, or just let go? Would you keep listening to someone who you knew was out of line with any part of Scriptures? If we do, what are we saying about God's written Word? And what are we then saying about the Son of God, the Word in the flesh?

So now that we've gone all the way back to the beginning before the beginning, let's quickly work our way back to the end. There are worthless shepherds, faithless shepherds. But God gives his Son to be the Good Shepherd, who proclaims God's message faithfully to gather his flock. God raises up other good shepherds under the Good Shepherd to work toward the same goal: to proclaim the Word, all of the Word, because at the center of the written Word is the Word of God in the flesh, the Branch of David, the Lord our Righteousness.

Treat the Word right. Treat the written Word right. Treat the Word in the flesh right. And this is how our story will end: seeing the Word in the flesh in our own flesh, his righteousness our own. Amen.