

Eighth Weekend After Pentecost (RCL/B): "Healer, Shepherd, King"
Jeremiah 23:1-6, Psalm 23, Mark 6:30-34, 53-56
July 17-18, 2021
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

The last time you called for a doctor's appointment, how long were you told you'd have to wait? How many of us have opted to go to Urgent Care rather than even try to get an appointment with our regular doc? Healers are in big demand ☺. Primary physicians, specialists, you name it: there seems to be more business than they can handle!

Healers were in big demand in Jesus' day, too, two thousand years ago. I don't think people made appointments; I'm guessing they just showed up, hoping to be seen, and waited as long as necessary. There's a lot of that going on in today's Gospel. The apostles have been out and about, preaching and teaching and curing the sick, and they return to Jesus, exhilarated but exhausted and hungry. Jesus tells them to step back and take a break:

"Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." (Mark 6:31)

Jesus and His friends don't just put a shingle out front that says, "Closed." They row away to some uninhabited shore. They're not good enough Ninja sneaks, though, because,

...many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. (Mark 6:33)

Drat! No rest for the weary! If I were one of the disciples, I **definitely** would have **begged** to have a bite before jumping back into work. Thankfully, though, Jesus has a much larger heart than that. St. Mark tells us:

As he went ashore he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd...

(Mark 6:34)

I doubt many of us have first-hand knowledge of sheep or shepherds. We've heard Psalm 23 often enough, though, that we know what sheep need **most** from their shepherd:

- Green pastures to graze and rest in
- Still waters to drink from
- Protection (*"Your rod and your staff, they comfort me."*)
- And those faithful companions, sheepdogs Shirley, Mercy, and Goodness, who follow the sheep wherever they go!

Seriously, though: Jesus is the Good Shepherd who loves the flock, who washes us with living water and anoints our heads with oil in Holy Baptism, who sets a Table before us and pours the cup to overflowing that we may be in Holy Communion with Him, with each other, with our loved ones who have gone ahead.

If you look at the Scripture citation for today's Gospel you'll see that it leapfrogs from verse 34 to verse 52 of Mark, chapter 6. What's skipped is the feeding of the 5,000. Some Bible scholars say the point of that "sign," the loaves and fishes miracle, is that **Jesus is the true Shepherd of the people of Israel**¹, nourishing them both body and soul, tending to their hunger no matter how hungry He and His disciples might be.

That definitely puts Jesus in direct contrast with those "bad shepherds" in our first lesson from the prophet Jeremiah: bad shepherds whose lackadaisical care and poor oversight results in the scattering of the sheep, bad shepherds who stand for the unfaithful kings under whose unwise rule the people of Judah will be carried off into captivity by the Babylonians. Remember, last week we talked about Amos who prophesied in the Northern Kingdom of Israel before the Assyrians marched in and hauled off the leaders of the people into captivity. Likewise, Jeremiah preached before the Babylonians attacked the Southern Kingdom of Judah, before they destroyed the Temple and carried off the elite into exile. (Maybe you've seen the movie *The Killing Fields* with Sam Waterston and Haing Ngor, the

story of the Khmer Rouge's genocide in Cambodia. The Khmer Rouge had little to fear from the illiterate. They intentionally rooted out the people with education: the teachers, the doctors, professionals of all kinds. It's a tragic and predictable pattern of destruction that's been duplicated many times throughout history.)

The Good News in the midst of the bad news and judgment that Jeremiah delivers on behalf of the Lord is that God takes all of this very personally and God Himself will tend to God's flock:

...I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the LORD. (Jeremiah 23:3-4)

The Lord promises to send a king, a descendant of David, who will love the people, who will love justice, who will rule as God would rule, with goodness and mercy, as if Heaven had come to earth. And that king will be a good shepherd. That King will be **the** Good Shepherd, who has unswerving divine compassion, who gives His life for the sheep.

This passage from Jeremiah is also the assigned first reading for Christ the King Sunday in Cycle C of our three-year lectionary. The Gospel that year is St. Luke's account of Jesus hanging on the cross, being taunted, being told, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" (Luke 23: 37) At this point, the Good Shepherd is the Lamb of God who is taking away the sins of the world through His suffering and death.... Other than His mother, and Mary Magdalene, and the other women who stand at the foot of the cross, the one who realizes there is a King enthroned on the cross is one of those who hangs beside Him, reprimanding the other fellow who mocks our Lord, and imploring Him:

Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom." (Luke 23:42)

Our King reigns from the cross.

Our Jesus, the Good Shepherd, invites us to join Him in shepherding the flock. We all know folks, friends, family, neighbors, co-workers, who are like sheep without a shepherd, longing for direction, longing for love, longing for firm footing in this world, longing for forgiveness, longing for community, yearning for a place at the table, for a soul friend. We might even say, they are longing for a Savior, whom they do not realize exists. We know He **does** exist. We know **Him**.

He calls us by name, we recognize His voice and we at least attempt to follow Him on paths of righteousness for His name's sake. Through Jeremiah (23:6c) the Lord says the loving King and devoted Shepherd-on-the-way *"will be called: 'The LORD is our righteousness.'"* We are to be holy as our Lord is holy. We are to be righteous as our Lord is righteous. We are to do justice as our Lord does justice. In Hebrew Scripture it is said that "... the criterion for determining whether justice is present [is] the way one treats the weakest members of the community, the powerless and the marginalized, the economically depressed and the vulnerable."² That criterion holds for Christians as well as Jews.

May our lives and our words extend an invitation for others to "Come and see!" what our Good Shepherd offers in the family of faith. And may we never take for granted the green pastures, the still waters, the table He sets before us. May those "sheepdogs" Shirley, Mercy and Kindness truly follow us throughout the world all of our days. Amen

¹*New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 8 (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), p. 745.

²*New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 6 (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), p. 745.

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