

Awaiting the Manger: Jeremiah Waits for a Good Shepherd

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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Jeremiah 23:1-6

We are calling our Advent series *Awaiting the Manger*. For the four Sundays of advent we will look at four Old Testament characters whose lives were broken or unfulfilled in some way, four characters whose longings are fulfilled by the coming of Jesus. Today's Old Testament character is Jeremiah. Jeremiah is, let's face it, a grouchy man. He is a brooding prophet. Jeremiah looks around at the mess in the world and he cannot bite his tongue. He has to speak out! He speaks out against the people. They are complacent idol worshippers! He speaks out against the prophets: they are all liars telling people what they want to hear. He speaks out against his country: The Lord is against this land. Israel should surrender to Babylon. God is on Babylon's side! You can imagine how that went over. People call Jeremiah a traitor. They throw him in jail. They curse him in the streets. It all makes Jeremiah miserable, but he can't stop himself. A lot of people can just sort of walk past wickedness and injustice, look the other way and say nothing. Not Jeremiah. The word of the Lord is a fire in his bones and he must speak.

Today we will read one of those passages where the fire in Jeremiah's bones comes out. Today he will speak a word against the kings of Judah. He doesn't call them Kings; he calls them shepherds, but make no mistake, he's aiming these words at the leaders of the people. But even though these words are aimed primarily at the shepherds, we will also see that there is a word here for the sheep too.

Read Jeremiah 23.1-6. I said that this passage has a word for the shepherds and a word for the sheep. Let's start with the word for the shepherds. Do you know where to look in scripture if you want to find the job description for an Israelite king? Do you know where you would find a picture of what a good king looks like? One of the best places is Psalm 72. Psalm 72 is a coronation Psalm and it lays out the qualities of a righteous ruler. A good king will judge the people in righteousness and the afflicted ones with justice. A good king will take pity on the weak and save the needy from death. Although he cares about the needy, a good king will not be a pushover: the kings of distant shores will bring their tribute to him. He will bring prosperity: grain will abound throughout the land. That's Psalm 72's picture of a righteous ruler. When you read it carefully, you see why Jeremiah would compare a good king with a shepherd. Like a shepherd, a good king is one who cares for his flock and brings them into green pastures.

Jeremiah knows Psalm 72's picture of a good king. He also knows that the rulers of his day do not come close to the standards of Psalm 72, and true to form, he can't stop himself from speaking out against these bad shepherds. "*Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture!!*" That's his general condemnation. If you go back to chapter 22, Jeremiah tells you more specifically why these kings are such lousy shepherds. Kings are supposed to give green pasture to their flock, but these shepherds are not giving pasture, instead, they are building palaces at the sheep's expense! "*Woe to him who builds his palace by unrighteousness; his upper rooms by injustice, making his people work for nothing; not paying them for their labor. He [the king] says, "I will build myself a great palace with spacious upper rooms. So he makes large windows in it, panels it with cedar and decorates it in red. Does that make you a king! To have more and more cedar?!? Your eyes and your heart are set only on*

dishonest gain.” They’re supposed to be giving pasture; instead they are building palaces! They’re not caring for the weak.

At this point in the sermon you might be saying, ‘Very interesting Peter. That’s a fascinating critique of the failings of the Judean kings, but what has this got to do with me? I am not a king. I am not a congressman. I am a Mom. I am a middle school student. I am a regular schmoe. The kings were supposed to give pasture, they made palaces instead... I get it...but what has this got to do with me? Well, more than you think.

This pasture versus palaces thing isn’t just for kings and politicians. It’s for you too. We are all shepherds. All of us have an area of skill, a place of influence, an area of expertise, a place where we exercise dominion. In the place where you have power, you are called to be a shepherd of that power. In that place, you can either use your power to make a pasture, or build a palace. How does that work? Well, let’s make it very basic. Suppose you are an 11 year old kid playing on your soccer team. And you’re a really good player, in fact you’re one of the two best on the whole team. Soccer is one of the things God has gifted you to do. You can score goals and deke people out. You can shoot and dribble with both feet. You rule at soccer. The soccer field is your kingdom. But now, how do you use that power? You could use it to build a palace. You could become the kind of player who is all about getting goals. You could spend every game trying to be awesome. You could play the game hoping everyone will look at you and say: ‘Wow! She’s good.’ You could build a palace for yourself. Or, you could use your power to give pasture. You could use that power to bless others. When your team is ahead, your focus could shift from scoring goals to making sure others get chances. That girl over there. She has never scored, “Hey everyone, let’s make sure she scores!” You could encourage the weak: so that when that one player on your team who struggles to kick the ball with either foot, when she flubs you don’t shake your head and groan; you give her a word of encouragement and support. A pat on the head.

Do you see how this works? This isn’t just about kings and presidents. It’s about Moms and middle schoolers and regular schmoes. All of us have places where we have expertise, where we have a little skill and influence and in that place we face the choice between building palaces or giving pasture.

So, that’s God’s word for all us shepherds. There’s also a word here for the sheep. That’s all of us too. I know that might be confusing. How can we be both sheep and shepherds? Here’s how: When we are using our power to pasture others we are shepherds, but when we are under the authority and influence of someone else, we are sheep. There are areas of life where we have strength and expertise. Those are our shepherd places. There are areas in our life where we depend on the strength and expertise of others. That’s when we are sheep.

Jeremiah has something to say to the sheep. Jeremiah understands the truth and the tragedy of human leadership: all our shepherds will let us down. All the people in your life who you lean on for strength and wisdom will fall short. Your parents will let you down. For every single one of us, there are areas in our life where our parents weren’t able to give us what we needed. For some of us our parents added burdens instead of lifting them. Your teachers will let you down. All of us can remember teachers who neglected, or even wounded, their students instead of shepherding them. In your time of need, your pastor will not be as attentive as you hopes, and when you ask him for pastoral advice, sometimes his advice will seem obvious. Your political leaders will let you down, they’re elected in a cloud of confetti and promises, but soon reality sets in. All our human shepherds will fail us. They don’t have enough compassion to bear

the weight of our need, they don't have the wisdom to untangle the knots of our questions, and they don't have the power to meet the hopes and fears of all the years that fill our longing hearts.

This is a big deal. A significant part of the misery of us sheep is the failure of our human shepherds. God gives Jeremiah a word for this misery. What word is that? Maybe you noticed that our passage finishes with two separate prophecies. First, in verse 3 and 4, God promises better days ahead. He will bring Judah back and he will give them new kings and new shepherds. *"I will place shepherds over them who will tend them and they will no longer be afraid."* That's a general promise of better human leadership. But then, in verses 5 and 6 God makes a second promise. God promises a special individual. A new king. A new shepherd. God will send a descendant of David, who will do what kings are supposed to do. *The days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The Lord Our Righteous Savior.*

Jeremiah has a vision of a special king. This king will fulfill the promise of Psalm 72. He will be faithful in a way that no human king has ever been. Jeremiah doesn't know that King's name, but we do. It's Jesus. The child in the manger is the one who we call, the Lord, our righteous savior. The child in the manger is the one human leader who has the strength to bear the hopes and fears of all the years. The child in the manger in the Good Shepherd who will lay down his life for the sheep and lead us into green pastures of joy and fruitfulness. We need this Shepherd at the center of our lives. When you know that all human shepherds let you down, when you know that all human shepherds will disappoint you, it is so good to know that Jesus is the Good Shepherd who will not let you go. We need human shepherds in our life. We need teachers and parents and pastors. We need political leaders too. We need them to function well. But when we try to make any of these people or any of the foundation of our hope and happiness we are setting ourselves up for misery. Only Jesus can carry that weight.

There used to be a thing that every Christian Reformed Church did at the beginning of a worship service. It was called the votum and salutation. I wonder how many of you remember the votum and salutation? We used to have it in our liturgy art LaGrave. In my youth it was the first thing the minister said in the service. He'd look out over the people and he'd say, *"Congregation, where does our help come from?"* And then he would answer his own question: *"Our help is in the name of the Lord who made the heaven and the earth."* I never paid much attention to the votum when I was a kid. I thought those words were just meaningless ritual that weren't affecting me at all. I thought those words were just going in one ear and out the other. But obviously that wasn't the case. Obviously some of the words stuck because I still remember them. Now I see wisdom of those words. Every week we came out of a world where we'd been let down. There were human shepherds whose help we needed, and they disappointed us. But when we came to church, at the very beginning we were reminded that we had a help that could not be shaken: the Good shepherd who laid down his life for us.

May I apply this specifically in one area? It seems to me that many people today make an idol out of politics. We make an idol out of politics and political leaders. Here's what I mean by that. We get into a mindset where we believe that the health and well-being of our society completely depends on which party is in power. If my party is in power and my person is in the white house, salvation will come to America! The nation will flourish and peace shall cover the earth. If the other party and their leader get in power, all is lost. Evil will reign and the nation will descend into chaos. This idolization of political parties and political figures relates to the secularization of this country. As people drift away from church, as people drift away from God,

they leave a spiritual void, and something will fill that void. Lately it seems that something is politics. People talk about politics with religious fervor. This is a recipe for disaster. Politicians and presidents cannot save us; they cannot bear the weight of all our hopes and longings. Politics is important and Christians should be politically active. We should care about policies and we should care about justice, and we should care about leadership, but when things get crazy, let's hear the wisdom of that old question again. *“Congregation, where does our help come from? Our help is in the name of the Lord who made the heavens in the earth.”*

Our help is that baby lying in a manger. Our help is in the one Jeremiah foretold: Jesus Christ. The Lord. Our righteousness.

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