

July 22, 2018 – Jeremiah 23:1-6 & Mark 6:30-44

Quick show of hands: How many of you have ever seen a piece of artwork depicting Jesus as the Good Shepherd. You should all be raising your hands right now, because you walked right past one in our narthex. It's an incredibly common image.

That's probably because the Bible talks about shepherds a lot and uses the image of sheep and shepherds to describe God's relationship to His people quite often. In fact, I would venture to say that there is no more common metaphor in the Bible than that of sheep and shepherds. And Scripture does so because they have been a very visible part of daily life for virtually every culture in history, ancient Israel included.

Shepherding has been around for thousands of years. All the way back in Genesis chapter 4, we hear about Abel keeping flocks and taking one of the firstborn of his flock as a sacrifice to the Lord. Adam and Eve's own son was a shepherd.

Shepherding has been around for so long because it's absolutely necessary. Sheep provide clothing. Sheep provide food. They're incredibly useful to us. But domesticated sheep are, by definition, not wild animals. They cannot survive in the wild. They are virtually defenseless. Dumb as a doornail. And guided only by the most basic of instincts.

They need a shepherd. And the health of a flock is largely dependent on the proficiency of the shepherd. A good shepherd will have a healthy flock.

His sheep won't be sick, because he'll make sure they're well fed. His sheep won't be injured, because he'll keep them from danger. His sheep won't get lost, because he'll guide them where they need to go. His sheep won't be attacked, because he will defend them. Under a good shepherd the sheep live and thrive and multiply. Under a bad shepherd, they die.

In our Old Testament lesson, we see this contrast between a good shepherd and a bad shepherd playing out in the history of the people of Judah. You see, the prophet Jeremiah is writing literally just a few years before the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians. The warnings have been coming swift and steady for decades. Prophet after prophet warning the people of their sin, idolatry, and rebellion from God.

And it falls to poor Jeremiah to be the bearer of bad news: Things are going to get worse. Much, much worse. The exile is upon them. And there's nothing they can do about. Why is this going to happen? Well, there are lots of reasons. Two hundred years of reasons. Two hundred years of prophets whom they ignored.

But it really boils down to a failure of leadership. The buck stops here, as Truman famously said. Yes, the Israelites were each individually responsible for their sins and failures. Yes, they will each be individually punished with destruction and exile. But if you really want to identify who bears the most overall blame, it's the leaders.

Because people are sheep. They're dumb and defenseless and instinctual. They're meant to be led by a shepherd. And God had put the leaders of Israel over them to be their shepherds. To feed them and water them and guide them and protect them.

The leaders of Israel – the kings and priests and elders that the people looked to – they were bad shepherds. And so it would be they who were the first to suffer for the consequences of their sin. They who would feel God's wrath and punishment the harshest.

But that still leaves Judah without a decent shepherd. In fact, it leaves all of humanity without a decent shepherd. And in the absence of a Godly shepherd, more bad shepherds will quickly and easily step into the void. And we will follow them too. Because we are sheep. And that's what we do.

And today? Today you can't throw a rock without hitting a bad shepherd. We are shepherded by a news media that frighten and anger us. We are shepherded by politicians who confuse us and control us. We are shepherded by a culture of money and sex and possessions that consume us and blind us.

Whatever motivates your decisions or guides your actions is your shepherd. Whatever you fear, love, and trust above all things will always end up being your shepherd. And we are surrounded on every side by bad shepherds. Scattering God's flock and driving them away from Him and showing no care whatsoever for the sheep around them. So that when Jesus looks at humanity, he says, "What has happened to my people? They're like sheep without a shepherd."

And you know, there are times when I feel like a sheep without a shepherd. When I read the news and see mass murderers and terrorists killing people all over the world. When I see leaders in our own country who simply blame someone else while they line their pockets with the profits of corruption. When I see people tragically dying in boating accidents, like the one this past week.

When I look at the list of prayer requests and see, "Cancer, cancer, surgery, cancer, surgery, cancer, death, sickness, cancer." What is that? What food are we being fed that it makes us this sick? What streams of water are we drinking from that they leave us this thirsty? Where are we being led if it takes us down this path? Who is protecting us if we feel this vulnerable?

But then I read, "*When [Jesus] went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And he began to teach them many things.*"

When Jesus looked at the crowd, He saw sheep. But that was not a reason for despair. It was not a reason to turn away and let this world continue to shepherd them away from their Lord. It was a reason to help them.

Even when it looked impossible. Even when it would take a miracle to feed them all. He did it. He did the miracle. He fed them bread and fish. And more importantly, He fed them His Word. He taught them many things.

He fed them in body and soul and He became their shepherd. He gathered His flock and He brought them to pasture. And He continued to gather them and feed them. And when bread and fish weren't enough, He fed them His own body and blood. Enough for an abundant feast with 12 baskets extra.

And He continues to feed us. Because those words of Jeremiah have been fulfilled. Though we were scattered by sin, God Himself has gathered us together. Though we were dead in our trespasses – as dead as Christ on the cross – He has raised us from the dead. He has made His church to be fruitful multiply.

He has cared for us and been for us a good shepherd. A great shepherd. A shepherd like David himself. Who could fight off lions with a staff and kill giants with a slingshot. He is a branch from David's own tree. And is king over us. The king above all kings.

So that when the shepherds of our state and nation and culture lead us astray, we won't have to feel like sheep without a shepherd anymore. For we are citizens of heaven. And while the world crumbles around us, we dwell securely. For the Lord is our shepherd and the Lord is our righteousness.

And that is my job as your pastor. That's my job as Christ's under-shepherd. To be a shepherd to you. A shepherd so that you won't be afraid. Not because I'm such a greater leader. I'm not. But because I have many things to teach you. Most importantly, I have the Lord's Word of promise to you. That in him you have hope and a future. That in him you will be saved.

And that one day a greater pasture awaits us. The old things will pass away. This sinful world will not lead us into temptation and despair forever. The good shepherd will lead us through this valley of the shadow of death. And we will find the feast He has laid for us waiting on the other side.

We are sheep, but we have a good shepherd. He has given us heavenly food so that we will never go hungry. Living water so that we will never go thirsty. The guidance of His Word so that we will never go astray. And He has laid down His very life to defend us from the evil one.

Do not be afraid. Do not be dismayed. For the Lord has had compassion upon us. He has gathered His flock in his sheepfold. And no one can snatch us out of His hand. Amen.