

The Lord Our Righteousness

Jeremiah 23:1-6

¹ Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the LORD. ² Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the LORD. ³ Then 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. ⁴ 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.

⁵ The days are surely coming, says the LORD, 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. ⁶ In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness."

A few months ago, at a stewardship workshop, I mentioned that about 30 to 35 members carry this congregation by their attendance and offerings. This was not exactly accurate as at least twice that number attend throughout the year, we just don't all attend at the same time! We are scattered geographically and physically. Our situation is not unusual and our scripture speaks to our situation. Bringing people together is never an easy task, despite all our best efforts. This is not to say that we should not try to gather people together. It only means that we are better served by keeping our expectations grounded—not necessarily low, but realistic. Still, bringing people together, especially people scattered over many places, or people who actually come from many places, seems to be what God is doing, according to the text that occupies us this Sunday.

The task of bringing together is not necessarily doomed to failure. This assurance lies in the promise that God is giving in the passage, especially in the words "I will bring them back" (v. 3), which surely sounds like "I will do the job myself." It is reassuring to hear such a promise, because it means that God is the one who is in control and who will bring the promise to fruition. The word here is that God will ultimately do the much-needed job.

In our situation people have busy schedules and other demands on their time, but how did the people spoken of in these verses get to be so scattered in the first place? It is a long story of invasions and exiles, but the blame, says God through Jeremiah, finally lands on the leaders of this people, the nation of Judah. We are confronted here by a situation that seems to repeat itself at other times and in other places: leaders taking advantage of their positions and serving their own narrow interests, rather than the best interests of their own people, whether in ancient Israel or in the modern world.

Of course there are some added dimensions to the biblical story. The leaders of Judah were seen as shepherds to the people. We can say that their role as leaders had a religious dimension, since these leaders represented God (YHWH) to the people. They were considered God's anointed ones, called to lead in God's name and on God's behalf, although God was the one true Shepherd of the people.

Because God is the one true Shepherd, God cared about their conditions, and had decided to do something about them. So the harsh word of warning that God will do the reckoning from now on, pushing out of the way those who have caused the problem in the first place, is actually a reassuring word. A people scattered by the action (or inaction) of their leaders will be brought back under the sole oversight of God as Shepherd. Once they have been gathered together like a flock, God will see that new shepherds, who will lead in accordance with God's heart, will be put in place to lead the people of God securely once more. Order will be reestablished. Fear will dissipate. Most importantly, the people will trust again fully in their God.

Under the new order, all of the people of God will be served well. They will prosper and increase. God will see to it. It is clear from the text that those formerly of Israel, to the north of the land of Judah, had not been forgotten. God 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" (v. 3).

Most importantly, the promise of God does not stop at the effort to bring back the scattered ones, and to put in place new leaders who will serve the people. The promise

goes beyond the present to another time. The word is that God will raise for the people a true heir of David's lineage, "a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land" (v. 5). This is clearly a word of restoration, but one that does not limit itself to things past. It is a word that looks forward to the future, a different future, that belongs to God. **Nelson Rivera**

Looking back through Jeremiah, we are able to see his expectations for a righteous king, a king we Christians find fully realized in Christ Jesus. This king does not exhibit the behaviors of a grand military ruler, but models ultimate leadership by being present with the people, all the people. This king reached out beyond the margin with a model of radical inclusivity. This king's ethic modeled what Micah's call to the people was all about: "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God" (Mic. 6:8b). This is the model we are called to emulate.

As we look to Christ as the model shepherd or king, what can we learn for living in and engaging the world? As our world struggles with war, famine, and fuel shortages, how do we consider our call to live as God's people? Are there really shortages, or is God's abundance simply unevenly distributed? What are useful responses to the underlying issues of poverty, health care, hunger, clean water, violence, and power? How do we get in on God's restorative justice?

The reign of Christ is the reign of peace, so, how do we live faithfully under this reign? As Christians, do we stand by and let national leaders direct us into war, or do we stand up, moving the prism around until we discover a just and equitable approach to handling the impasse at hand? Whether the crisis in our region, nation, or world is war, natural disaster, young people dying violently, lack of work, racism, sexism, trade policies, or migration, we are called to look to the underlying issues that play into the brokenness. At times, we are even called to upset the applecart in order to empower all people as children of God.

Living under Christ's reign means we are called to stand behind those who model Christ's example to love God and neighbor. We are called to see the value God has

bestowed on every human being and work toward justice and God's restoration for all people.

Elias Chacour, archbishop of Galilee for the Melkite Greek Catholic Church, stands out as an authentic model of Christ's leadership in the world. Archbishop Chacour shows a different way as he works with his own people and with those in opposition, amid controversy between Palestinians and the state of Israel. Grounded in the understanding that all human beings are children of God, and therefore sisters and brothers of one another, he works for justice and peace building for all involved.

Preaching before the 218th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the archbishop said that he did not need help if helpers were going to take sides, one or the other. Rather, he charged his audience to come to Galilee, to experience the place where Christ was resurrected, and to help encourage a new model of living in peace for Jews, Muslims, and Christians. Archbishop Chacour is one of many models of Christians living as Christ our King lived and lives. It is not by brute force but by caring for those who are oppressed that he communicates leadership and the power and love of God for all people.

We are called to look to the righteous branch of David, manifest in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, and we are constantly to reorient our lives, proclaiming to all whom we encounter the justice and love of God. **Mary Eleanor Johns**

This text takes us from judgment to promise; from the description of the situation to its solution; and from what humans have messed up to what God is still able and willing to accomplish. The promise of God comes in the midst of a bad situation. This word of promise creates the very condition of salvation, as it re-creates the people's trust in God. The word is the word of God's promises, a word of assurance, a vision in the present of new things to come.

This passage speaks powerfully both to what God will do in the future and to what God is doing in the here and now. Such is the dynamic life of the word of God wherever it is uttered. It speaks to the possibilities of the present, as well as to the hopes of the

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future. God is able to do all of that under one and the same word of promise. **Nelson**

Rivera

The shepherd that God send to us is called: The Lord Our Righteousness; Wonderful, Counselor, The Prince of Peace, Jesus, Christ, David's righteous Branch, one who executes justice and righteousness in our lives and in our land!

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