

Sermon for July 22, 2018 – Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

Jeremiah 23:1-6 (EHV)

Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! declares the LORD. ²Therefore, 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. ³I 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. ⁴I 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. ⁵Listen, 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. ⁶In 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.

You have probably heard me ask this question before, but I will ask it again: do you know who your pastor is? I'll give you a hint: it's not me. Who is it then? It's Jesus himself.

The word "pastor," you see, is Latin for "shepherd" - and Jesus certainly is your Good Shepherd, who laid down his life for you: his sheep. He bought you with his own blood. You belong to him.

And this is an important thing to keep in mind. Why? Because our trust should always be in Jesus, and not in any other. All earthly leaders (be they pastors, presidents, governors, mayors or anyone else) are flawed. Because they are sinful, they will all end up disappointing us at some point. And when leaders (especially spiritual leaders) disappoint us, we feel betrayed – so much so that we may even be tempted to give up our faith. This is why it's important to remember who our true leader is – something we will do today under the theme: **Jesus is...** 1) *Your true Pastor.* 2) *Your Righteousness and Salvation.*

Part One: Jesus is... Your true Pastor.

Our sermon text is found in the Old Testament book of Jeremiah. Let me explain the situation under which it was written. Judah was about to be punished for their unfaithfulness to God. Much of their unfaithfulness stemmed from the fact that they had horrible civil and spiritual leaders, who did more to lead the people away from the LORD than lead them to him.

This is why the Lord says: *Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!* In Old Testament times, the Lord often compares both spiritual and civil leadership with shepherding. Why? Perhaps it was because the patriarch Abraham was a nomad who kept flocks. Isaac, Israel and all of his sons did the same. They all found comfort in considering the Lord their Shepherd – understanding that they are as helpless as sheep without his loving care and leadership.

The term “shepherd” is a wonderful name for a leader. Good shepherds care for their sheep. They water and feed them. They guide and protect them. When a sheep strays, a good shepherd goes out of his way to look for it. They have compassion on their sheep. These are exactly the kind of leadership qualities God wanted Judah’s prophets, priests and kings to possess.

But they didn’t. ²*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.*

What did the leaders of Judah do to cause the Lord to charge them with scattering his people? Didn’t the citizens of Judah like and support their leaders at that time? By and large, yes. Well, then, what was the problem? The leaders were selfish and materialistic – not in a way that hurt the general population, but that, nevertheless, oppressed the poor and needy by not caring for and defending them as God wanted. Judah’s leaders loved sensuality and let the people live in immorality. They promoted idolatry – or at least did not bother to speak out against it. Do you now see why the Jews liked their priests and kings? It’s because they both indulged and allowed the populace to indulge in selfish materialism and unrestrained pursuit of the cravings of their sinful hearts. In doing this the leaders drove the people further and further away from the Lord.

What would God do because of this? *I will certainly take care of you, because of the evil things you have done, declares the LORD.* The Lord would “take care” of the leaders of Judah in the sense that he would punish them in the near future. The armies of Babylon would destroy Jerusalem. The nobles and priests who weren’t executed would be exiled.

But the LORD would have mercy on his people: his scattered flock. True, the people were as much to blame for Judah’s destruction as their leaders. They blindly followed their wicked kings and priests instead of listening to faithful prophets like Jeremiah. Nevertheless, the LORD promised to be merciful. He says: ³*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.*

This is a prophecy of the New Testament church. Through the worldwide proclamation of the Gospel, the Lord himself would personally search for people from every nation under heaven that they might believe in him and be saved. Through Word and Sacrament, the Lord himself would gather his lost sheep – adopting them to be members of his flock.

Hearing how the Lord promised to search for his scattered people, I can’t help but think of a parable Jesus told about a shepherd who had 100 sheep. One of the sheep wandered away. What did the shepherd do? He left the 99 in the open country in order to search for the one lost sheep. We all, at one time or another, were that one lost sheep, which Jesus sought to save. And how did he do that? First of all, by taking our sins upon himself – suffering and dying on the cross in our place. Then, after his resurrection and ascension, Jesus sent out apostles, missionaries, pastors and

evangelists with his Word - calling us to repentance and faith. Having found us, he poured out the Holy Spirit on us through holy baptism – thereby washing us clean from all sin, awakening faith in our hearts, and adopting us as his own dearly loved children.

Yes, we were all once like wayward Judah, but the Lord pitied us. As a shepherd carries his hurt, wayward lamb back home in order to nurse it back to health, so the Lord carried us home to himself in order to care for us.

The Lord says: *“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.”*

Who are the under shepherds the Lord would place over his sheep to care for them on his behalf? An obvious answer is: parish pastors. They even hold the title “shepherd” and have been entrusted with the task of caring for God’s people – not for selfish gain or self-interest, but out of love for God and the sheep he entrusted to their care. God wants them to feed and protect his flock with the tools he has given them: the gospel in Word and Sacrament.

But they aren’t the only shepherds God has placed over his people. This text applies to every councilman, board member, elder, Sunday school teacher, Vacation Bible school helper, etc., of this congregation.

It applies to every husband and father. Yes, men, the Lord has made you the pastor of your household. He wants you to shepherd your family with prayers, devotions, instruction, and bring your family to church, Sunday school and Bible class. And if you reject this responsibility? Then you become like the leaders of Judah, against whom this text was originally written - falling under the same judgment they fell. Repent, therefore, if you have not fulfilled your duty as you ought. Let the peace of Christ’s forgiveness move you to be the pastors of your family that God wants you to be.

Wives and mothers: God has also chosen you to be shepherds over his precious lambs. God wants you, together with your husbands, to take special notice of the music your children are listening to, the programs they are watching on TV, and the things they are doing on their electronic devices. Are they wholesome and God pleasing, or do they glorify sexual immorality, pride, materialism and violence?

All of us need to consider the fact that we are our “brothers’ keepers.” As we pray for and encourage each other with God’s word, Jesus – our dear Pastor – shepherds others through us. May the Lord forgive us for not taking this truth to heart: for being unfaithful shepherds to those entrusted to our care. If you are repentant, know this: the Lord forgives you for Jesus’ sake. He has taken your sins away and covered you in the righteousness of his Son. More than this, he has

given you his Spirit and every gift necessary so that you can be the under shepherd he has appointed you to be.

Part Two: Jesus is... Your Righteousness and Salvation.

Judah and its kings were about to fall – never to rise to earthly power again. But God does not leave his people without hope. He says: *⁵Listen, 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.*

Jesus is the righteous branch, who would rise from the dead stump of Judah's fallen monarchy. He is the eternal King, of which every other Jewish king was merely a symbol.

⁶In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will dwell securely.

The “Judah” and “Israel” mentioned in this verse are not just the political nations of the past. No, they represent the holy Christian church: the Lord's spiritual kingdom composed of every believer on the earth – regardless of their race or nationality, as the Bible says: *Understand, then, that those who believe are the children of Abraham.* (Galatians 3:7 EHV)

And believers are certainly saved in Christ Jesus. From what? From sin, Satan and unbelief. All their sins are forgiven. Even though the devil and world rage against them to such a degree that they might have to suffer much for Jesus' sake, the Lord still watches over them. They dwell in spiritual safety – knowing that the Lord will protect them from every spiritual harm. They can say with the apostle Paul: *The Lord will rescue me from every evil work and will bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom.* (2 Timothy 4:18 EHV)

Our text continues: *This is his name by which he will be called: The LORD Our Righteousness.*

What a wonderful verse! Jesus is not only our perfect pastor and King, he is also the very righteousness we need to stand before God.

Understand this correctly: this last verse of our text does not merely confess Jesus as being righteous, but that he is **our** righteousness. He covers every believer with himself to such a degree that when God the Father looks at us, he doesn't see our sins, but only Jesus and his righteousness. For this reason, God loves us as much as he loves Jesus – allowing us to be coheirs with Christ of eternal life in heaven.

Jesus is our righteousness. What does this mean for our lives now? The apostle Paul puts it this way: *I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I am*

now living in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.
(Galatians 2:20 EHV)

Brothers and sisters in Christ: rejoice in the fact that Jesus is your true pastor and that you are his dearly loved sheep. Listen to him by listening to his faithful under shepherds when they speak to you his Word. The Lord wants you to be where he is, so follow his voice.

And, fellow under shepherds of Christ (that is to say, all you elders, councilmen, board members, Sunday school and vacation Bible school teachers, fathers and mothers): be faithful in your duty of being the Lord's under shepherds – remembering that the Lord has given you the privilege of taking care of his precious sheep. Lead them in all humility. Promote the welfare of those you lead, and not your own. In all things, point those under your care to Jesus, who is both your loving shepherd and theirs. Rejoice in the fact he alone is your righteousness and salvation. Amen.