

9th Sunday of Pentecost
Sermon 7.21.18
Scripture:

Jeremiah 23:1-6

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."

Mark 6:30-34

The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught.³¹ He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat.³² And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves.³³ Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them.³⁴ As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.³⁵ When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat.³⁶ When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him,³⁷ and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was.³⁸ And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

This deserted place: it's been a while since we've been in such a place—not since the first chapter of Mark, not since the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Then we were there with John the Baptizer, who was the voice of one crying out in a deserted place to prepare the way of the Lord. Then we were also there with Jesus who'd been driven by the Holy Spirit into such a deserted place where, for forty days, he'd be tempted by Satan and would be with wild beasts and would be waited on by angels. A few verses later, in a deserted place, Jesus alone prayed, that is until the disciples found him, having hunted for him—*hunted* as only otherwise some Pharisees did, the Chief Priests did, and at last Judas did, the bad guys in other words. Then, finally, we hear of Jesus having to stay in such deserted places because word had spread about him, even though he insisted that no one say anything about him to anyone, and now he couldn't enter towns really at all.

Deserted places: if these were safe places for him, they were also dangerous. Really, in a deserted place, things could go either way. Physically as metaphysically, there's just not enough growth in a deserted place to moderate the weather or hold it constant. Nothing's settled, and everything runs to an extreme.

So it's been a while since we've been in such a place—six chapters according to Mark, and a lot of action. Most recently, the disciples had been sent out to two by two, Jesus having given them authority over the unclean spirits. They were to do the work Jesus had been doing. They were to be the gospel now multiplied, whereas once done by one, now done by several. And now they'd returned, which had Jesus receiving them, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.”

I have to admit I'm surprised to hear Jesus cast it in these terms. Deserted places have hardly been places of rest.

And then there's the way it's spoken of in this reading: three times mentioned, and with each mention sounding more ominous. There's something persistent about the mention of this deserted place, the description of this deserted place, the disciples eventually sensing it thus: “This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late.”

I once had to sell a group of parents on the proposition of my taking their teenaged children on a mission trip to New York City. Especially as regarded our anticipated reliance on the subway to get to our work sites, the parents weren't convinced we'd be safe. I assured them New York is crowded, and that's what makes it safe. But, having got my way, while on the trip, we now rode a stop-by-stop emptying out subway car, got out of an almost entirely empty subway car, and into all but deserted and far-flung neighborhood.

That's when I got nervous.

I wouldn't have wanted us to linger too long, looking for park benches or, finding none, doorway stoops to take our rest. “C'mon kids! C'mon!”

Really, this deserted place feels more and more ominous, far from restful. Perhaps restoration is more what Jesus had had in mind for the disciples? Or maybe regeneration, a return to the milieu whence came the first call?

Whatever. It was far from restful because those familiar crowds had once again found them—and they of the crowds were like sheep without a shepherd.

For this, Jesus had compassion on them, which wasn't just a feeling but a ripping open of the gut. The Greek original is the same word you'd find in a blood sacrifice described, the sacrificial animal having given of its guts. See? There's some sacrifice with compassion, there's some self-giving. Otherwise, it's just sentiment—and not to worry, it will pass.

This Sunday is sometimes jokingly called Bad Shepherd Sunday. It's a joke among scripture scholars so it isn't necessarily a funny one, though I laughed. Good Shepherd Sunday, of course, is the 4th Sunday of Eastertide, and it features in each of the three years an excerpt from the otherwise long discourse in the gospel of John wherein Jesus speaks of a good shepherd. In contrast to the hired hand, this good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep, a promise made more pronounced by its being accompanied by an Old Testament text of similar theme and by the 23rd Psalm.

Today, then, is bad shepherd Sunday, which comes along just once every three years, with Jeremiah railing against the rulers of his day, the highest of whom was the king, Zedekiah. He was also the *last* king of Judah, placed there by the emperor of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar, to rule at his pleasure. When he failed to, Babylon raided again and at last. Jerusalem fell, just as Jeremiah had prophesied it would. (Zedekiah, it seems, didn't know when to assert his authority as the shepherd of the people Judah and when to acquiesce to the greater power of the Babylon. So,) "Woe to the shepherd who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the Lord." Yet, "The days are surely coming when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and do wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land..."

Shepherd imagery, of course, is classically a rich one, going beyond its plain sense, though that in itself is quite rich. Shepherding sheep is a mundane task, but has its mysteries—beginning with sheep, and their wandering yet domesticated dependence upon their shepherd, their stubborn refusal to be so necessarily sheered, their obedience though in sometimes rebellion. The shepherd, then, has terrific power over the sheep but power that is best expressed firmly, gently.

But it's more than just this, which I've often failed to fully grasp, to say nothing of preach on. My Good Shepherd Sundays are lackluster at best. This set of images, after all, came to be symbolic of royalty, a king as regards his peoples, which also calls on the implication of king as warrior, most ancient kings having become so by winning a war, conquering in battle. It's only in recent times that kings weren't made so by their superior skills as makers of war; it's only in very

recent times that kings are merely ceremonial. Classically, a powerful king would have been a proven warrior, and a proven warrior would have managed to lead men into battle as a shepherd leads sheep, and thus the shepherd became an abiding signifier for goodly governance, signifying of a true king.

Thus the compassion, the giving of his guts, that Jesus felt at the sight of this gathering people seeming as sheep without a shepherd: they were as a nation in crisis or a battalion doomed for defeat.

I've never been a soldier, but I've talked to and read of soldiers who've had to obey the orders of someone unworthy, and I've imagined what it must be like to have to follow someone undeserving of following—not only frustrating but also frightening for the possibility that the stakes are *high*. Following a fool or a coward into armed conflict could get you killed.

I've never been a subject in a monarchy, but I've had recent occasion, as we all have, to think about when one person exercises power above reproach, and has been ordained to do so by what increasingly behaves as a mob. We are more and more, it seems to me, at the mercy of a mob, something I truly thought I'd never see in my lifetime. We're simply too big for that, and too abstract a society; our power centers aren't physically so, are instead virtually so—and how do you storm a castle that isn't anywhere to be found, is instead everywhere to be sensed?

More than that, though, I thought liberal democracy and free-market capitalism were a given, a settled matter. The fact that these have unfettered human potential so astonishingly much in the last century, had me thinking that they'd continue to do so. I wouldn't have said as much, fully aware as I am of the problems that these have also ushered in. But that's how I behaved, as if high-minded, idea-driven, abstracted civilization would prevail.

But lately—like these past few weeks, few days—have had me thinking otherwise, thinking we might be at the mercy of a mob. And yes, it's mostly virtual, but I think no less menacing, in fact is more so for it's attacking a society that is in many important ways also virtual, or at least abstract. Yes, it's not localized or “IRL” (in real life), but it's instead splayed all over the place, which presents an altogether new sort of challenge. Unseen, it's not unfelt, is instead maybe even more pernicious and destructive—and it seems to me that what's at risk is no less than the foundations of the republic and our enlightenment values.

Past prevention, we might even be past cessation.

I don't know how you quell a mob, especially not in the Internet age. Do you?

We've been behaving for decades as if civilization is won, and therefore needs nothing more of us. We've been flirting for the length of my lifetime with cynicism, nihilism, as if we can take a tire-iron to the body politic just for the hell of it and not actually catch hell.

I'm watching Ken Burns' series on the Vietnam War, which reveals that whole thing as a misbegotten, cynical, and ultimately nihilistic enterprise—but one we kept at in order to save face.

I'm reading Jonah Goldberg's *Suicide of the West* and finding a lot of truth in it—and, yes, that Jonah Goldberg, he of *The National Review* and the American Enterprise Institute. (Who knew? But don't tell anyone. I think I could get excommunicated from the UCC.)

I'm also reading the gospels with renewed, and even militant, urgency—especially Mark's gospel, Mark's Jesus, who knew how to quell a gathering mob. I'll give you a hint as to how he did it. He used his power not in service of himself but in service of the good. He took people's desperate trust and returned it to them as blessing. He sacrificed his desired solitude at the altar of their crowding need and, moved by compassion, he filled at least this deserted place with his gut-level and abounding and holy spirit.

As it happens, in the next scene following this reading, Jesus is remembered to have gathered the people into groups of hundreds and groups of fifties. In this array he would then have the disciples feed them, serving them to filling though only with five loaves of bread and two fish, feeding them though they were five thousand in all. As it happens, this arrangement was a military one, gathering people in groups of hundreds and in groups of fifties. The people might have actually assumed they were being readied for battle, mustered as troops. And in a certain sense, they were.

We who would follow him are to do so as well—to ready ourselves as for battle and to proceed from this place in the mode of our good shepherd, prepared to use what power we have in service of the good, receiving of people's desperate trust and returning it to them as blessing, and sacrificing the inner peace we've come to expect of life, the peace of mind we've come to believe is a great good but which is in truth self-centered and partial, sacrificing even our civilized going along to get along, all in service of the building up of the beloved community whose center is God as revealed in Jesus Christ and whose outer edge has yet to be found.

This is a high-minded, idea-driven, enlightened project indeed. And it won't be easy. I actually anticipate it will be evermore difficult. But we have a good shepherd to follow, and we've been preparing for such a time as this—a time when acrimony is everywhere and divisiveness prevails, a time of scattering and alienating and isolating and (at least for me) a daily nearly giving up. But so what if the world as we've known it and which we thought was a settled thing was instead but a phase? So what?

I know. I get it. It's lasted the length of all our lifetimes, which means we might have mistaken it all for the final state of being, natural, a given; and it's unnerving to consider that it really was just a phase. It's distressing to imagine it could collapse or get away from us.

But so what, because the way we learn of here, in this deserted place of a room, is an abiding way, has proven true through time immemorial. We can trust it, and we can live by it, and in so doing we can gather others so to do as well. If Enlightenment-era civil society is a phase now passing, that doesn't mean the way of Christ (which of course undergirded the whole Enlightenment project from the start) isn't yet to be our Way.

We can do this. We can be the church even amidst a society that has chosen regression, tribalism.

We can do this. We *must*.

Remember when church was boring? Those who grew up in the mainline church, remember being bored by it all? I'd forgotten that quality of it, but last week, where I led worship, I was reminded. There seemed to be a tacit agreement among those gathered that nothing would happen here: nothing would stir or move. This would be a preserved-in-amber experience, even the light of the room having an amber tint, what with the newly refurbished yellow-paned windows streaming yellowed sunlight into the yellow-walled room. What happened here would be nice, would be dull, but nice.

Not so anymore; not so here. I'm warning you, here we're readying for battle, a battle which if we win everyone else will too.

Thanks be to God.