

Theme: "Servant Shepherd"

Mark 6:30-34; 53-56

Ps 23; Jer 23:1-6;

Eph 2:11-22

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The Lord is my shepherd... I shall not want. (in other words...I lack nothing, there's nothing else I need, when the Lord is my shepherd). And... I will dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long. Psalm 23 is familiar to most of us. Many times it's read at funerals and memorials, difficult impasses in one's life and sometimes, it's one of the first Biblical text kids memorize in Sunday school. It has been etched in my heart for a very long time and if you are ever standing near me when we collectively read the 23rd psalm, you will most certainly hear these words: He (the Lord) *maketh* me lie down in green pastures, *leadeth* me beside still waters and *restoreth* my soul. "Yea," though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for "thou" art with me.

The imagery the psalmist uses is comforting because, in light of one who cares for us in all situations... in death, in relational situations; with our enemies, for directional guidance in life and...as one comforts us... when we are lost, dismayed or in a compromising situation. *This shepherd*, you see, has been the catalyst for which my faith is founded upon ..my entire life, so when I am confronted with a text like Jeremiah today, it bothers me. You see, the kings of Judah and those who ruled during the Babylonian exile were also called "shepherds" - leaders, who were expected to lead their people and care for them. But in the prophetic words of Jeremiah, the shepherd kings were anything *but* leaders who served with compassion and cared for the marginalized.

With the exception of a king or two - who strived for peace and ruled with justice, most were war-mongering and trampled the poor. As a result, the people were scattered. Many died. And some were becoming more and more like those who led them - therefore, sheep...without a compassionate shepherd. Thus, Jeremiah's message to the leaders of Judah (and perhaps to us, too today), is a scathing reminder of what happens when those responsible for tending the flock, do not tend to the flock and when the flock is not following the shepherd who truly cares for them.

God, you see, is in the restoration business -restoring his people. And for the people of Judah, this is good news. God raises up new shepherds to tend to the flock - all of the flock. Shepherds whose attentiveness to justice, protection, peace, mercy, comfort and care for all "constituents" will mirror God's shepherding. Where will the new shepherds come from? How will the new shepherds be different from the former ones?(Indeed, where will shepherds come from in our own time?) Because there is no special breed of human shepherd. Ordinary people like you and me who elect to lead

are hopefully connected to a shepherd who leads with love and compassion. Who gathers up the lost; who gathers the “remnants and pieces them together to form something new.

The Lord is my (our) shepherd ...he maketh, he leadeth, he restoreth my (our) souls, and he leadeth me in right paths. Yea though I walk in the darkest valleys...I will not fear.

I have to wonder if the people during Jeremiah’s time would actually come to know a time where fear would not engulf them? And I wonder sometimes if we will live in a time where war, oppression, injustice, death, disease, strife within families, political upheaval, hateful language, personal distress, depression and deep distrust do not lead the way? I wonder? Shepherd us O, God, beyond our wants, beyond our fears from death into...life. Perhaps you can see why the “king” shepherds are so bothersome to me because I want to live into this idyllic world where leaders do care for their people - all their people.

In the gospel of Mark these past several weeks, a lot has happened. Jesus is rejected in his hometown. The twelve are sent out to do mission work. And...who could forget the story last week? A wild party at the house of Herod which...as we know, doesn’t end well. John the Baptist is killed and the final course for the evening - his head on a platter. All major events in Mark’s gospel so much so that the Biblical text for today pales in comparison. Yes, Jesus heals many people - and that’s a big deal, but otherwise, our stories today appear to lack the blockbuster appeal of those previous stories.

However, the lessons from Mark today are vital as they emphasize Jesus’ identity of the divine shepherd, who will guide his sheep into the kingdom; into the inauguration of the kingdom of God in Jesus - which is Mark’s primary concern in his gospel account. And there is always this sense of urgency in Mark’s gospel, and rightly so. I think the urgency extends to our day and age, too. Especially in the height of a very contentious political landscape here and abroad, we need servant leaders who lead with heart - who end to the needs of all the people. And we need followers of these servant leaders who also tend to the needs of the people. And that...can be an exhausting job. Just as the disciples found out. So Jesus’ invitation must have sounded pretty good to them at the time. “Come away to a deserted place...and rest. But so much for Jesus’ invitation to rest. Because As soon as they *got out of the boat*, (see *gospel reading*) *people at once recognized him (Jesus) and rushed about bringing sick people on mats to wherever they heard Jesus was. They followed him into villages, cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces and begged him to heal them.*

Wow...so much for Jesus' invitation to the apostles to "get some rest in a deserted place." And Lord knows...they needed it. Their mission of healing and teaching people and tending to a multitude of needs - and, the fact that they had just experienced the horror of their friend's death, John the Baptist certainly justifies the fact that they were certainly ready for a respite. John's death left a bad taste in my mouth. And following Jesus, well that meant following the cross that in itself deserves a rest. But the people. The People, you see ...were without...a shepherd. People without the basic provisions needed for their well-being. People who were hungry, tired, overwhelmed, sick and broken.

The compassion of the divine Shepherd kicked in and the flock was cared for. We get a picture of the divine shepherd... tending first to the needs of his closest friends, then to the needs of strangers. People from all around the lake. People who looked different and spoke different languages and dialects. People waiting for a glimpse, or a healing touch, or relief from the pain and oppressive powers that governed them. Gentiles and Jews alike. People who, according to the story, ran around the lake and cut Jesus and the disciples off at the pass.

Rest for the disciples would have to wait because they were following a "servant shepherd." The word here for compassion in Greek is associated with the word gut or bowels. The compassion for others ran deep. And I get it. And all too recently I get it. (ie, pit of our stomach) example of couple at church; my grandkids, Grace.

Sometimes these are the remnants. Sometimes we are part of the remnants. And For those familiar with sewing and fabric, a remnant is a piece of cloth cut from a larger piece. People who sew are always trying to figure out if they can make something out of it. And 't help but feel that sometimes we are a remnant after we have experienced deep loss of things we held dear for so many years. We are a remnant...when we have experienced structural and relational changes in family and shifts in society. We are a remnant when tragedy strikes, our health wanes. We too..are in need of some green pastures to sit still and rest. And I feel... as if we are a bit like the scattered people, Israel. A remnant of what we "used" to be.

Shepherd us O God, beyond our wants, beyond our fears, from death into life.

Jesus recognized the need for rest for his disciples, for himself...for me and for you ...but Jesus also saw the bigger picture. The disciples were not done learning yet when the boat docked on the other side. And I surmise... neither are we. The mission of living and caring for others, of extending grace and tending to the basic needs of others, IS our mission, too. It is what greeted the disciples as they got out of the boat. It is what greets us each day.

And what did emerge from *their* - the disciples' mission, and what will emerge from our mission, too, into a radically different community with the common bond of "needing a good shepherd." And of "being a good shepherd." A renewed community who deals with fatigue, hunger and obstacles which often seem insurmountable - together.

Israel needed a *good* shepherd. The disciples needed a *good* shepherd. I surmise that we...do, too. A shepherd, whose compassion for all people stems from deep, deep down in the depths of the gut. Down to its very core. We...are... not.... "shepherd-less" people. We have been gathered and pieced together by one who loves us, cares for us and calls us to serve one another. We are led by a servant shepherd. Who maketh us, leadeth us, restoreth us, guides us and comforts us. The Lord is "our" shepherd and we lack anything; we have all we need as we live, joined together, a flock - serving with compassion, justice and loving mercy.

Amen.