**Jeremiah 23:2-6** November 24, 2019

Pastor P. Martin **Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY** E.T. 4: Christ the King

*2Therefore this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says to the shepherds who tend my people: “Because you have scattered my flock and driven them away and have not bestowed care on them, I will bestow punishment on you for the evil you have done,” declares the Lord. 3“I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and will bring them back to their pasture, where they will be fruitful and increase in number. 4I will place shepherds over them who will tend them, and they will no longer be afraid or terrified, nor will any be missing,” declares the Lord.*

*5“The days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. 6In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The Lord Our Righteousness.”*

Dear Friends in Christ,

Who is the good leader? Sometimes, the best way to gauge that is not by what the leader does, but by what people are willing to do for that leader. Here’s one from the Bible, from the time of Israel’s King David: *“During harvest time, three of the chief men came down to David… At that time David was in the stronghold, and the Philistine garrison was at Bethlehem. David longed for water and said, ‘Oh, that someone would get me a drink of water from the well near the gate of Bethlehem!’ So the three mighty men broke through the Philistine lines, drew water from the well near the gate of Bethlehem and carried it back to David”* (1 Samuel 23:13-16).

Crazy, right? Great leaders have a way of doing that to people. People would take a bullet for them, dedicate their lives to them, offer their treasure for his mission and vision. Maybe they would even worship him.

Yes, worship him. That’s what Christ the King Sunday, is about. We put Jesus on that pedestal that our nation is dedicated to *not* putting *any* person on. Our great and powerful nation is premised on the idea that we will *not* have a king—not back then, not now, not ever. Yet we willingly, exuberantly say, “Jesus is my king!”

Today’s reading from the Old Testament gives us a special opportunity to appreciate Jesus as our king. It contrasts Jesus to other options. Sometimes we forget how good we have it with Jesus as our King. But that happens, doesn’t it? Underappreciation, I mean. After all, who even begins to really appreciate his or her mother until you have to do your own laundry and cooking? So with Jesus, especially if you are a life-long Christian, it is easy to underappreciate Jesus as our king.

To regain an appreciation for Jesus’ place in our lives, let’s look at Israel in the time of Jeremiah. We will see…

**Bad Shepherds, Good Shepherds, and The Shepherd-King**

**I. Bad Shepherds**

The first question is, “Who are these bad shepherds?” Here we need to step back in time. All over that part of the ancient world “shepherds” in this context referred not to shepherds, but to kings. This is a counter-intuitive way to think of kings. We think of kings as the guys who get whatever they want, whenever they want. Shepherds are very different. What does a shepherd do? He takes care of sheep. That’s his life. He sleeps out in the cold under the stars, he endures the blistering heat and pouring rain to make sure the sheep do what sheep do: which is eat grass, get fat and put on a good coat of wool. He is out there suffering, so that they, the sheep prosper. That’s what the ideal king was supposed to do in the ancient world. He was supposed to rule the people, not for his own comfort and prosperity, but for the comfort and prosperity of his people. In many ancient documents, not just Israelite kings, but even kings of other nations in their official propaganda promoted themselves as “shepherd kings”. Everyone knows that is what a really good ruler *should* be like. Of course, it never works out that way. But everyone realizes that is the ideal. Even the kings realized that is what they *should* have been doing.

God’s people, were afflicted with bad shepherds. Not just because of their neglect of justice and their well-being. Israel’s shepherd-kings were guilty of spiritual neglect.

One of God’s standing commands for Israel’s kings was that on his coronation day, he was to take a copy of the law of Moses, and start copying it in his own hand. Then he was *“to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the Lord his God… and not consider himself better than his brothers”* (Dt 17:18-19). He was king not just to be sure they had food on their table, but to be sure they had God in their hearts. This was God’s design for the leaders of his people

***“This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says to the shepherds who tend my people: ‘Because you have scattered my flock and driven them away and have not bestowed care on them, I will bestow punishment on you.’”***

Now there is not a direct parallel between Jeremiah’s day and ours. In the Old Testament times before Christ, God’s nation was a theocracy. Their political and religious systems were united. We do not have that in our day. Religion and politics are separate. While we are thankful that our government and national constitution make room for freedom of religion, we are very thankful that they have no role in governing religion!

Yet there is a truth here about spiritual shepherds. We must be very careful about our moral guides. As the shepherds of Israel, Israel’s kings, led Israel to ruin, so it can happen to God’s people in our own day. Where do you get your spiritual guidance? What do you listen to or read, and say, “That’s a great thought. Let me do that today”? Are you more likely today to read the Bible or an inspirational meme with a pretty picture on your social media page? Which one is God’s truth? How many pop songs do you hear and sing a day? How many hymns? Compare the messages of each. Who has more time to shape your morality? Who is molding the way you think? There is a reason that Jeremiah wrote elsewhere: *“The prophets prophesy lies, the priests rule by their own authority, and my people love it this way.”* Bad shepherds have an appeal because they offer us what we want, and usually for a lot less effort.

**II. Good Shepherds**

So in the second half of our reading God promises a new sort of kingdom and leaders, or flock and shepherds. ***“I will place shepherds over them who will tend them…”***

The Holy Spirit points Jeremiah to a new and distant time, after the last king of Israel has passed from the earth. He looks forward to the new kingdom the Promised One would establish. His kingdom isn’t another Israel, another Jerusalem. It doesn’t have survey markers determining its borders or an ambassador at the UN. Jesus’ kingdom is in the hearts of those who acclaim him as king.

In his kingdom, Christ Jesus is pleased to appoint other shepherds, good shepherds, under-shepherds. In Ephesians 4 in the New Testament we hear it not as a future hope but a present reality, *“Christ gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people…”*

We dare not look at the leadership of God’s church as a human invention. Neither the readings from Jeremiah nor Ephesians allow that. We cannot look at our spiritual leaders as self-appointed grand-poohbahs with only as much authority as I choose to give them on a given day. God says, ***“I will place shepherds over them…”***

Again, the book of Hebrews puts it, *“Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account.”* (Hebrews 13:17) When a pastor or other spiritual authority speaks, they have authority, whether we like it or not, given by God.

Insignia of rank grants authority, not based on that person, but because a greater power has granted that rank. On the one hand, that insignia demands accountability in the wearer, but it also commands the respect of the hearer.

So when you haven’t been in church six weeks and an elder calls you, give them more respect than you would a telemarketer. Pick up the phone or at least call them back. Remember, *“They keep watch over you as men who must give an account.”* They are calling you because they care about your soul. They know that God’s curse rested on Israel’s leaders was because those leaders didn’t search out their people. Your spiritual leaders are the shepherds that God promises his people.

More than that, however, thank God for all the other spiritual shepherds God has put in your life and church: parents and grandparents, Sunday School teachers, council members who put opportunities to serve in front of us, yes, also the people who sing and play instruments – all God’s servants to strengthen the flock.

**III. THE Shepherd**

Jeremiah, however, does not end with the “shepherds” in the plural. He mentions another, *the* Shepherd King.

Remember those three warriors who broke through enemy lines just to get a drink of water for their commander-in-chief? Crazy, right? Yah, crazy. But that was because they knew what kind of man they served.

Listen about the One we serve: ***“ ‘The days are coming,’ declares the Lord, ‘when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land… This is the name by which he will be called: The Lord Our Righteousness.’”***

If you read in your Bible the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, you will see how different Jesus is from any other person, even from godly people. He is perfectly wise, just and righteous. In his kingdom there is forgiveness for the worst sinner. In his kingdom there is respect for the person challenged by the realities of his or her life. In his kingdom there is rest for those in trouble and distress. In his kingdom there is acceptance for all who submit to him.

No other leader has ever lived up to our expectations. None can. Even the Bible makes it painfully clear that even the most godly people committed glaring sins. David murdered one of his soldiers to get his wife! Moses blasphemed God. Abraham committed adultery. Christ Jesus is categorically different from all others. He is The Shepherd-King.

Another way to measure it is this: not only by what the leader does, but by what his people do. Christ our King inspires service like none other. Think of the martyrs who have been and are being executed for Christ. Think of the hundreds of billions of dollars people give every year for Christ’s kingdom, in this church and others. Think of the young men and women who dedicate their lives to be pastors and teachers. Look at the people who volunteer huge amounts of time serving God in music and mowing grass and cleaning church and serving the church council and helping the poor—all in the name of our Lord and Savior!

Crazy, right? It looks crazy to the outside world. But that is because we know that Jesus truly is ***“The Lord our Righteousness”*** (6). He is the divine one who took on human flesh to live in poverty, to suffer hell, to die in misery. He is the one who kept God’s laws, suffered our punishment, and forgives our continued lapses into sin. He accepts us in spite of who we are as sinners, and because of who we are as created in the image of God.

God grant that you continue to put Jesus, only Jesus, up on that pedestal, that throne labelled King of kings and Lord of lords. And thank God for and respect those he has put as his representatives among us. Amen.