

## **The Lord Is Our Righteousness**

Jeremiah 23:1-6

John 10:7-18

The last sentence in our passage from Jeremiah today reads, "And this is the name by which he will be called, 'The Lord is our righteousness.'" Yet again our English ears cannot hear a Hebrew word play. In Hebrew, that name is "Yahweh-zidqenu." The name of the King of Judah at the time Jeremiah made this prophecy, in its Hebrew form, Zidqeyahu. (Our Bibles call him Zedekiah.) Faithless, a puppet of his Babylonian masters, Zedekiah was one of the bad shepherds against whom Jeremiah spoke. His hearers would have picked up on the similarity of zidqenu and zidqeyahu. Jeremiah is calling the king useless without actually naming him.

Today we start our stewardship campaign, when we ask everyone prayerfully to consider pledging to support the church in 2021. Our theme today is that we ought to reflect on just how good our Shepherd is when deciding what to give. We begin with the observation that our Shepherd is so good, he laid the plans for our salvation before time began. Last Sunday Jonathon Sutter preached on the power of words to create worlds. He noted that in Genesis God spoke creation into being. The Word of God has ultimate power. Theologian Gerhard von Rad writes of God's purpose in creating. Many have seen that God desired company, that God wanted space and time and, well, us, to share in the experience of passing time in space. Von Rad adds an important insight: God desired to create us with the goal of saving us. Genesis tells the

story. God made us. We fell. God held us accountable. But God also made covenant with us, to save us when the right time came. In Jesus, the right time came.

Jeremiah remembers the accounting and the covenant, and anticipates the saving. Writing at about the time the Babylonians came to raze Jerusalem and carry its people into slavery, he uses the image of bad shepherds and good. Though he does not explicitly say it, without doubt he sees the kings, the priests and the leading citizens of Judah as the bad shepherds. They have actively misled the people. They have scattered them, even driven them away. They have not attended them. Like a pastor who neglects the people in order to sit in her study all day and read books and journals, like parents who ignore their children's needs in order to attend to their own, these bad shepherds have allowed their "sheep" to wander into danger.

Ah, but the Lord remembers those covenants. Jeremiah hears him saying, "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. 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." This restoration will happen in two phases, two existential contexts. First, the Children of Israel will be restored to the Promised Land. After a season of suffering, they will return home and rebuild their nation and their lives. Second, a descendant of King David will offer permanent and glorious restoration. He will offer salvation.

Jeremiah speaks of a branch for David. This person of the house and lineage of David will rule powerfully and justly. He will save. He will be righteous. This is among the most obvious of all the Messianic prophecies. There is nothing subtle about it. A descendant of David will appear, with even greater power and wisdom than the big man himself. He will save. Jesus and John, who wrote about Jesus, certainly understood this prophecy in this way. Jesus cast himself as **the** Good Shepherd, the fulfillment of Jeremiah's six hundred year-old vision. His words in the tenth chapter of John are what jazz musicians call a quote. They are not a literal recitation of Jeremiah's words but a riff on them. Jesus uses the ancient prophecy as a basis for his own music, a foundation for his own message. Yet as with Genesis before, Jeremiah's words contained everything important that Jesus would later have to say. He is the Good Shepherd. He protects and restores his sheep. He saves them.

The bad shepherds had their turn, Jesus says. They proved to be thieves and robbers. But the sheep would not follow them. My family lived next to a sheep farm in my boyhood. I can verify first-hand that sheep learn to follow familiar, safe voices. I have always loved animals. (Yes, I know I talk too much about my dogs.) I hung around with those sheep and eventually they became comfortable with me. The farmer would have me lead them into the pen in the evenings. All I had to do was walk toward the dominant male and speak to him. They would all come along. They would not follow my brothers. I make no further comment about my brothers at this time.

The salient point today is that Jesus has done more than enough to establish his identity as our Good Shepherd. As he predicts in John 10, he would die for us. But then, with God's power, he would rise up again. And he calls us. We know his voice. Everything about this story to date has happened as advertised. Genesis and Jeremiah and John tell the same story. What we do not yet know is how we sheep will respond to the call. The Lord *is* our righteousness. Only by his death on the cross do we have the chance for redemption, for rescue, for restoration. What are we willing to give in return as our thank offering? Do not think this is an appeal only for money. Certainly it is that, but it is also an appeal for us to give our very selves to God.

In times when many seek intentionally to mislead us, the Good Shepherd yearns to lead us to safety. In times when elite power brokers have lost their desire even to try to hide their manipulations and deceits, the Good Shepherd longs to guide us honestly. In times when every sneeze and cough makes us wince, the Good Shepherd offers us spiritual and emotional health. Give yourself to the Good Shepherd. Trust him. Follow him. Support the work of his church. We have now experienced eighteen months of pandemic stress. Let's face it, this has damaged our congregation. While we perhaps have experienced less conflict than some churches, we have not completely eluded all controversy. Let us remind ourselves that we are all sheep. We need leading. We need protecting. And we have them. Let us all together, as one body, follow the Good Shepherd. Let us all together, as one body, support his church. Maybe you are the person God is calling to run a camera for digital worship. Maybe you are the person God is calling to telephone a lonely

member sitting in isolation. Maybe you are the person God is calling to pledge to give money to the church. Whatever the exact shape of your calling, the Good Shepherd *is* calling. Follow him into the pen. Give yourself to the Good Shepherd.