

## **Jeremiah 23:1-6**

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Our text for today is from the book of Jeremiah the prophet, “Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!” declares the LORD. Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who care for my people: “You have scattered my flock and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. Behold, I will attend to you for your evil deeds, declares the LORD. Then I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will set shepherds over them who will care for them, and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall any be missing, declares the LORD. “Behold, the days are coming, declares 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. In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: ‘The LORD is our righteousness.’”

In our text today, we find a very pointed rebuke and condemnation of the shepherds who have been faithless in their task. A shepherd was someone to whom much trust had to be given. The very well-being of a master’s flock would be the care of the shepherd. If the flock were scattered or lost because the shepherd was not doing his job, it would be a huge disaster for the livelihood of the owner. And in our text, the flock of God has been scattered. It has been scattered because those who were given oversight abused their power and were proven faithless.

This is a challenging idea for us to wrestle with today because when we are in church and we hear talk of shepherds,

we immediately think that the text is talking about pastors. We would then understandably find this text to be a condemnation of the false priests and prophets that were a blight upon the people of Judah during the time of Jeremiah. But in the context of Jeremiah, this is the end of God's condemnation against the kings. The shepherds here are not spiritual shepherds, but they are earthly caretakers. They are the ruling elite. The shepherds that God is taking issue with here are the people within the realms and halls of governmental power. What we see as we read the work of the prophets, especially those like Jeremiah who prophesied in the years leading up the Exile in Babylon, is that the rulers of the people had become terribly wicked and corrupt.

We see this laid out at the beginning of Jeremiah 22, “Hear the word of the LORD, O king of Judah, who sits on the throne of David, you, and your servants, and your people who enter

these gates. Thus says the LORD: Do justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor him who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the resident alien, the fatherless, and the widow, nor shed innocent blood in this place. For if you will indeed obey this word, then there shall enter the gates of this house kings who sit on the throne of David, riding in chariots and on horses, they and their servants and their people. But if you will not obey these words, I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that this house shall become a desolation.”

So instead of a sermon condemning the false teachers of our own day, this sermon is going to take a hard turn and instead condemn politicians, right? But you see, therein lies the problem for us today. Ancient Israel was a theocracy. The faith of the people and the government of the people were closely and inexorably linked. That is not the case in our nation. We are not,

nor are we supposed to be, a nation ruled by the Church. Rather, what we see in our own day is that politics has become the religion of many. We would turn our attention and our focus to those who hold the temporary and comparatively weak power of government and hope that they will fix our problems and make things better.

Now, make no mistake here. I am in no way saying that one political party is better about this than the other. The truth of the matter is that both of them in their own ways are guilty of not doing justice and both are guilty of wronging those put under their care. Instead, both of our political parties argue like children, bickering and pretending to be better than the other side when both are doing whatever they can to maintain their tenuous grasp on power. The difference is that God doesn't tell the people of the United States government that they must obey his words or he will bring desolation. I know that it's sometimes

hard to hear, but the United States is not ancient Israel. Those with political power today are not Judah's shepherds and we cannot expect them to maintain the same standards.

If we get bogged down in worrying about and parsing any political ramifications of this text, of which there is little for us, we miss the larger point that God is making here through his prophet. We would do well to remember the words of David himself, the progenitor of those who were faithless kings. He says in a Psalm, "Put not your trust in princes, in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation. When his breath departs, he returns to the earth; on that very day his plans perish. Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD his God, who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, who keeps faith forever..." If we are looking for our good from earthly politicians of any sort, stripe, or situation, we are idolaters.

Rather, we see in our text today that God promises the one who would be the ultimate fulfillment of the line of David. The one who sits on David's throne forever. Jeremiah points the people back to God and he points them ultimately to Christ.

“Behold, the days are coming, declares 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. In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: ‘The LORD is our righteousness.’” Jesus is the righteous branch who was raised up. He is the one who is the good shepherd. It was in his days that Judah was saved and it is in his days now that we, the true Israel dwell securely in his loving hand.

He is the one who is the king of God's people. He is our King. But he is not our king who is renowned for his diplomatic skills, disarming conflicts around the world. He does not have a

0% unemployment number among his citizens. His citizens, his people, are still terrorized by crime, evil, and sorrow. Indeed, by all human measures this “King of the Jews” as Pilate put above his head was and is a total and abject failure. But what our king does for us that no earthly ruler can ever do is give us salvation. Truly, the Lord is our righteousness. We find the righteousness of Christ given to each and every one of us freely and completely.

This righteousness that is given to you and to me is given to us because of the cross. Our king did not ride into battle with a sword and shield in his hands. He does not gather an army of soldiers to go out into the world and subdue it in his name. No, his battle took place as he was nailed on a rough wooden cross outside of Jerusalem almost two thousand years ago. He gave his life in this battle, not because he lost, but because he won! Jesus became the sacrifice for your sins and mine at the cross.

His blood was shed to pay the price for our sins. Because of Jesus, our debt to God has been paid in full.

There is nothing more for us to do. It is given to us totally. And it is this same King who we look to for our good and for our help. The fact of the matter is that earthly kings and rulers derive their authority from the one, true King. And those rulers still today scatter, oppress, and hurt the flock of God in many and various ways. But even in the midst of much evil and division, we do not trust earthly princes to fix these things. We look only to our Lord Jesus Christ who has promised us things that no ruler can take away. And we see that in Christ, our citizenship in his kingdom is more important than earthly boundaries or citizenship.

In Christ, we have eternal life. In Christ, we have salvation and peace with God. For us who believe, who are in Christ, there is nothing that this world can do to us that God cannot

undo. We cannot be isolated because our God is always with us. We cannot be killed because our God gives us life even if our physical bodies should die. We cannot be made truly poor for we are rich in Christ. Yes, there are temporary and physical comforts that can be gained in this life and every politician will promise to increase those things for you.

But those things are passing away. All of the money, property, and worldly success that the world offers us is nothing on the day when we draw our last breath. The thing that matters the most because it matters eternally; is Christ. And it is Christ who is our shepherd. It is Christ who is our king. It is Christ the Lord who is your righteousness and mine. He is the one who is the fulfillment of God's promises to us in the Old Testament and he is the one who is the fulfillment of God's promises to us in the New Testament. Everything must always point us back to Christ, the righteous branch, the lamb of God who takes away

the sin of the world. Thanks be to God that we have a savior who has accomplished all of this and more for us and gives it to us without cost and not as empty campaign promises. Amen.

Now, may the peace that surpasses all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord to life everlasting. Amen.