

Jeremiah 23:1-6; Psalm 23;
Ephesians 2:11-22; Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

I can't tell you how often I say words similar to these: "I wish I had just two more inches of height – oh, the things I could do!" Then I wouldn't have to stand on this box in the pulpit . . . and I could more easily reach the chalice on the altar . . . and I could grab something off the third shelf in my kitchen cupboards . . . and I could see without the obstruction of other peoples' heads the entire high school auditorium stage. But those two additional inches are not to be gained (in fact, I'm probably on the way down) but fortunately I am married to someone who is a foot taller than I. Very useful. Not the main reason I married Randy, mind you, but a great benefit of our union. So if Randy happens to be passing through the kitchen, I can rely on him, and not my step stool, to get to that third shelf. And Randy generously switches seats with me in the theater the moment that inevitably someone tall sits in front of me. I appreciate Randy's height more than he could ever know.

Being six foot tall is especially beneficial to us when we are in crowds. It's Randy who always walks ahead and who can see over other peoples' heads whenever we're in places like HersheyPark or Disney World, and so he can look above everybody to see where the end of the line for a ride is and whether it's too long for us to want to wait. It's Randy who can spot the best route to go through the horde of people around us, and I just kind of trot along behind him because I trust that he will get me to where I need to go; I know he will lead me there. In fact, a favorite photo of ours in our photo album is from our first family trip to Disney World back in 2002, and it's simply a picture of Randy's back (not his face, just his back), because that's all I saw of him the whole time we were at Disney World because I was just trotting along behind him as he took us where we needed to go. (And in turn, we have a photo of where I spent most of my time at Disney World, where I always seem to be, the photo is of the entrance of the women's restroom. Short in stature, small in bladder.) But the point is, I do rely on Randy to lead me through the places where I cannot see ahead and where I'm not entirely sure where to turn and where guidance is needed.

So the image of God's people being sheep *in need* of a shepherd to lead them is this wonderful image that's raised up in our lessons today. It's the image found in Jeremiah's prophecy. It's the image in our beloved Psalm. It's the image that's actually visualized by our Lord Jesus in His compassionate heart and mind in our Gospel lesson. All three passages remind us that we are people who cannot make it on our own, and we need someone to lead us.

Of course, that image flies in the face of what we often personally think and value. In our self-centered endless pursuit of pleasure, even our placing a higher premium on being rugged individuals and being rather strong-willed and independent, the idea of relying on someone else to lead us is somewhat of a confession on our part; it's something we don't do naturally; it

somehow seems a lessening of our very important selves – I suppose I could spend considerable time reflecting on how we really try to go it alone.

But more noteworthy in our scripture today than simply *needing* a shepherd to lead us, is the fact that we need a leader who is going to lead well. I think that is the important point that gets noted in our lessons. Jeremiah in our Old Testament lesson voices the righteous anger of the Lord God in his prophecy regarding all the poor shepherds in Israel; and he's not talking about the shepherds who were shepherding real sheep, he's talking about the political and the religious leaders in Israel – they are manipulative, they are selfish, they are evil, and they are tearing apart and scattering the community of faith; they are leading the people of God astray – and these are the people Jeremiah condemns with the word of God. These leaders, these supposed “shepherds”, are the ones who engender fear and despair in people, who breed injustice, and who commit sin and cause others to commit sin – those are no leaders in the sight of God. In fact Jeremiah pronounces in his prophecy that the Lord God is going to attend to those who did not attend to the flock. Then, says Jeremiah, the Lord God will raise up good shepherds, and they will gather the people, and they will bring hope to the dismayed, and none of the people of God will be lost.

So while Jeremiah's words evoke images what bad leadership is, the words of Psalm 23 evoke images of what good shepherding is – what a good shepherd leader looks like and in fact, who God is – the One who not only in the joyous moments of life, but also in the challenging and dark moments of life, will be there for the sheep, will not abandon them, but will feed them, will guide them, get them to the place they need to be and ultimately, bring them home. It's no wonder we treasure that psalm so much; it has the words that answer all the poignant questions that needy people ask.

But even that beautiful psalm will give way to the Gospel lesson today from Mark (and this is a real treasure). We've got to spend some time on it here; there's a lot to plow through. First, remember Jesus is fully human. He has taken his disciples away to a deserted place where they can rest and be refreshed. He's tired, He's worn, He's weary, so are His closest friends. Small wonder, because they have been busy healing and caring for all the needy people who have been coming to them. But there's not going to be any rest for the weary in this case. No sooner have they found a place where they can actually sit down and rest, than they are recognized and the word spreads and people come from the towns and villages around to be near to Jesus and to be near to his disciples.

Now had Jesus been only fully human and not also fully God, don't you think he would have been irritated and annoyed at the encroachment on His precious vacation time? But if you go all the way back to the first verses of Mark's gospel, to Chapter 1, where you learn that Jesus is the very sign of the kingdom of God drawing near, then you realize that it makes sense for exactly what Jesus is feeling deep inside, in this lesson. Deep inside, Jesus feels – not irritation and not annoyance for the crowds coming to Him – He feels compassion. Mark writes, “. . . he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd . . .”

We don't read anything in this lesson about God being righteously angry like we did in Jeremiah – you know, the hot wrath of God being kindled by those irresponsible shepherds – but this isn't

really all that different than our Old Testament lesson. Don't think they are opposites – in both cases, it's clear that God has the utmost compassion for the sheep who need a leader; He wants them not to be shepherd-less, so Jesus' feelings being described in Mark as those of compassion are the same as those of the Lord God in Jeremiah who, out of compassion, is determined to raise up good shepherds for His people. The good news of Mark is that Jesus is the key, Jesus is the way God works out that promise and prophecy of the Old Testament. Jesus is the very cornerstone of God's compassion for His needy people.

And then I want you to note what Jesus does first, with all this compassion welling up inside of him; Mark writes, “. . . he had compassion for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.” Now you would suppose that Jesus' first act, based upon compassion, would be to heal all the sick, or offer food to the poor, or gather the children in his arms. He'll do that, alright, but He won't do it first; first, He teaches. And apparently this goes on for a long time. I don't know if you noticed in your bulletin that when I read from the gospel, we actually leave out a big chunk; we go from verse 30 down to verse 34, then we skip verses 35 to 52, and then we go from verse 53 on. There's a big chunk in the middle taken out, which happens to be the story of Jesus' miracle of feeding the 5,000. (There is some rhyme and reason to why this is omitted; over the next five weeks, the gospel readings will be from the sixth chapter of John, and that's John's version of the miracle of the feeding of 5000, so you'll have plenty to chew on for the next five weeks.) But I think it's important for you to note what happens here: I read verse 34, but had I read the opening of verse 35, this is how it would have sounded: “. . . and he began to teach them many things. When it grew late . . .” So apparently Jesus not only had many worthwhile things to say, it must have been so worthwhile that the crowds decided to stick around. And they stuck around until it was late.

Now Mark doesn't record for us what Jesus teaches the crowd that day, only that he teaches them many things. Mark does, in other places in his gospel, record some of the teachings of Jesus, and if you go to Matthew or to the gospel of Luke, there are whole blocks of teaching material of Jesus. But Mark does not divulge to us exactly what Jesus teaches here. Now maybe Mark was trying to impress upon us that a true leader, in order to help us know the power and the goodness of God, and in order to show us the way to be God's people and the way to live out a life of faith, would require a shepherd who will first teach us. That's what a shepherd leader does – teaches.

I've had plenty of teachers in my time. I suppose you have, too. Some teachers have a huge volume right at their fingertips, but that doesn't necessarily mean they are good teachers. The college professor I had for Western Civilization, three mornings a week at 8 o'clock for my first two semesters, had a lot of knowledge at his disposal. He would stand and lean against his desk, back in the era when you could still smoke in the classroom, and he would place a lit cigarette right on the edge of his desk. I would sit there and watch in fascination as the ash would just grow and grow and grow until finally it would drop off and fall on the floor in a heap. Meanwhile, for the next hour and a half, he would drone on from the yellowed pages of a loose leaf binder. I learned that the Hundred Years War was actually longer than 100 years; it was actually 1337 to 1453. And this is the first time I have ever had call to use that piece of information. That professor bestowed on us much random knowledge, but it wasn't teaching. Perhaps you have had teachers like that, and there isn't much you can do with what they hand you.

Or perhaps you have had like me, a Jim Bloomfield or a Robert Jensen, a Gerhard Krodel or a Sonja Wilt, and they have not simply handed you information to memorize and spit back out at them. Instead they have helped you think about that information – historical events or theological understandings or literary works – and suddenly you realize you are in the presence of a teacher and they have given you a gift. Their wisdom and their ability to convey ideas to you, help lead you to the place you want to go, and then use what they taught you. Mark is telling us that Jesus is the very best teacher for us, a teacher in the truest sense of the word.

Eventually Jesus' teaching of this particular crowd of folks will come to an end. And eventually Mark reports Jesus' continuing on His journey, which will take Him to Jerusalem and will take Him to the cross. But in the meantime, it would be good to look at one more thing that happens in and around this passage. Now recall that Jesus has taken his disciples out to this deserted place so they could rest and be refreshed. And that's really because earlier in Chapter 6, He had send them out in His name to do His work and use His authority. So these disciples, who were still a little wet behind the ears, were busy casting out demons from the possessed, and they were busy healing the sick, and they were teaching with authority. And then you get to the start of our lesson for today, verse 30 – they've come back to tell Jesus everything they've done and all that they've taught. They've come back. And Jesus takes them away to rest, but only long enough until they are ready to return to the world and resume work in His name. Apparently they benefit, as do the crowds, from Jesus' teaching them many things. There is much refreshment to be gained from learning from Jesus, so it seems to me that the only way you and I are ever going to imitate the true shepherd out in the world and so do his loving works, and the only way to be a good leader and so guide others in the faith, is to heed Jesus' call to come back to Him so He might regularly teach us. The only way to be a good shepherd is to regularly return to the Shepherd.

Perhaps that is why you are here. I hope it is. May scripture and song, word and meal, offer both refreshment and learning. I believe they will, for the Teacher we have in our midst is tall in his authority, generous in his compassion, and wise in his understanding. He knows the way to go. He knows the way to life. And he offers to take you and me there.

Amen.