

The Lessons Appointed for Use on the

Sunday closest to July 20

Proper 11

Year B

RCL



Jeremiah 23:1-6

Psalms 23

Ephesians 2:11-22

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

The Collect

Almighty God, the fountain of all wisdom, you know our necessities before we ask and our ignorance in asking: Have compassion on our weakness, and mercifully give us those things which for our unworthiness we dare not, and for our blindness we cannot ask; through the worthiness of your Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God,

now and for ever. Amen.

Jeremiah 23:1-6¹

Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! Says the LORD. Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the LORD. Then 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, says the LORD.

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I

¹ Jeremiah's ministry was active from the thirteenth year of Josiah, king of Judah (626 BC), until after the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of Solomon's Temple in (587 BC). This period spanned the reigns of five kings of Judah: Josiah, Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah. Wikipedia

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 live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: “The LORD is our righteousness.”

Psalm 23 Page 612, BCP

Dominus regit me

- 1 The LORD is my shepherd;
I shall not be in want.
- 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures
and leads me beside still waters.
- 3 He revives my soul
and guides me along right pathways for his Name's sake.
- 4 Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I shall fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff, they comfort me.
- 5 You spread a table before me in the presence of those
who trouble me;
you have anointed my head with oil,
and my cup is running over.
- 6 Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.” For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.

When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on

mats to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

SERMON

What a witness Jeremiah was! Jews count him as the second of the major prophets, behind Isaiah. His words are quoted frequently in the New Testament, and Islam counts him as a prophet as well. When we think on the issues that divide these three great faiths in today's world, we would do ourselves a world of good if we were to remember that all three great understandings honor Jeremiah's words, particularly when he says things like this:

Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! Says the LORD.

That sounds pretty alarming. We need to understand that better, but before we begin studying the message from Jeremiah, we need first to clear something up. Most of us, I think, carry around an idea that a prophet is one who predicts the future. That's quite wrong. Peo-

ple who predict the future are called “fortune tellers” and fortune tellers are not thought well of in the Old Testament.

There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, anyone who practices divination or tells fortunes or interprets omens, or a sorcerer or a charmer or a medium or a necromancer or one who inquires of the dead, for whoever does these things is an abomination to the LORD.²

The job of a prophet is to speak truth to power. That is quite a different thing altogether. Recall Nathan, the prophet of David's time. David had arranged things so that Uriah the Hittite was in the thick of the fighting and was killed, all because David wanted Uriah's wife. Nathan came to David and told him a sad story about a poor man with a pet lamb that a rich man took and slaughtered. When David responded with self-righteous

² Deuteronomy 18:10-12

indignation, he heard these terrible words from Nathan:

“You are the man! This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: ‘I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you from the hand of Saul. I gave you all Israel and Judah. And if all this had been too little, I would have given you even more. Why did you despise the word of the LORD by doing what is evil in his eyes?’³

Speaking truth to power is still a good way to get yourself killed because in any time or place power does not like to be spoken to, truthfully or not. Nonetheless, speaking truth to power is the job of a prophet.

If we can agree that Jeremiah truly is speaking truth to power when he says “Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!”, we had best pay attention. Jeremiah spoke to a particular time in history, but the burden of his words are with us yet. The promise of God to those who aren't clear on this point is this:

³ 2 Samuel 12:7-10 NIV

So I will attend to you for your evil doings,
says the LORD.

My guess is that this does not promise to be a good thing for those who don't pay attention.

Now, in modern discourse, my sense is that this is the place where I am expected to get all red-faced and loud over gay marriage. You can relax. I'm not going to do that. The law speaks to whether or not two people may take advantage of the legal benefits of a relationship called “marriage”. That's what courts are supposed to do – interpret the law. Courts can't speak to whether or not a church will bless the union. That is a separate question. There's a good deal of nonsense on the Internet about preachers being arrested for refusing to perform marriages. Don't believe it. There is no such criminal offense as “Failure to marry people in the first degree.” I know. I used to be a lawyer. I have the books. If

we can agree that there is something awry in our world, and if gay marriage isn't the problem, what is?

I'd submit that the problem is in the way we have chosen to look at ourselves and our institutions, not with confession, but with satisfaction. The problem is in the way we blind ourselves to our own shortcomings, and those of our country, while focusing laser beams on the shortcomings of others. To understand what I mean, we must define who the shepherds of our time are.

Walter Wink's marvelous book, *“The Powers that Be”*, defines them for us:

“All of us deal with the Powers That Be. They staff our hospitals, run City Hall, sit around tables in corporate boardrooms, collect our taxes, and head our families. But the Powers That Be are more than just the people who run things. They are the systems themselves, the institutions and structures

that weave society into an intricate fabric of power and relationships.⁴

That's who they are. How do they go wrong?

When a particular Power becomes idolatrous—that is, when it pursues a vocation other than the one for which God created it and makes its own interests the highest good—then that Power becomes demonic.

I love that phrase, “...when it pursues a vocation other than the one for which God created it...”. I think we should all have a recording of this paragraph on our alarm clocks so that it is the first thing we hear in the morning. “When a particular power pursues a vocation other than the one for which God created it and makes its own interests the highest good, it has become demonic.”

In our time, it is the systems who run things which

⁴ *The Powers That Be*, Walter Wink

have departed from the purposes for which they were called into existence. The problem isn't that the people who toil in the systems are evil. The problem is that these systems themselves depart from their intended course to make their own interests the highest good. It becomes more important to have a Republican president or a Democratic president than to have a president who can lead us away from the sinful views we love so well – views like “might makes right”, which is quite possibly leading us to our own extinction. We celebrate our powerful military and terrifying nuclear capacity. What do we look like to the people of the world who don't trust us? We see our place within the limited resources of our planet as one of entitlement. What do we look like to a Masai father who struggles to feed his family? To a Greek citizen with an unpayable debt?

It is difficult for me to imagine that God created this

world to be held in check by terror – terrorist activities or terror of a military with the capacity to extinguish life from this planet. And it is precisely because it is the job of the prophet to speak truth to power that I say that to you, knowing how badly you will hate hearing it.

This summer, Pope Francis released his encyclical, “Laudato Si (Praised Be)”. In it he spoke truth to power, and power responded as you would expect – powerfully – claiming that the Pope had no business speaking about politics. If the Pope is not to speak about the powers that be who have wandered afield from the purposes for which God created them, who is?

To what, then, are we called? Walter Wink answers that in this way:

The gospel, then, is not a message about the salvation of individuals from the world, but news about a world transfigured, right down to its basic structures.

And if the demonic arises when an angel deviates from its calling, then social change does not depend on casting out the demon, but recalling its angel to its divine task.

We have been taught to view God as something like a school lunch lady. God has an array of foods before Him, ranging from the most delicious down to just regular food, and, at the end, a fresh cow pat. If you have lived an inoffensive life, gone to church and not caused too much fuss, you get a delicious sandwich. If you have done badly, you get a different sort of sandwich altogether. I want to draw you from that view of God and our relationship toward Him, to a different, and, I hope, more helpful view.

Here's what I mean: The people of Jesus' time had no idea about the causes of illness and disability. Their belief was that these conditions were caused by sin – ei-

ther the sufferer's sin or that of an ancestor. In other words, if you are sick, it's your fault or the fault of your ancestor. To recall God's creation, that which God Himself called “good”, to its divine task required that these sins be forgiven.

When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

Here we find the answer to all the questions we have raised. Jesus never sought to banish evil. He sought to recall a world gone wrong to the path God intended.

Any brush with Jesus, even with the tassels of his tallis, restored creation, wiping out the sin which was distort-

ing God's creation. It is that burden and goal of restoration which Mark is setting out for us. We are to recall a damaged creation to God's purposes. It is in that way that we can begin to discharge the task granted to us in our call to be Christians – we must fearlessly speak truth to power, even if power responds negatively. You are to be Nathan to today's Davids. You are not called to exorcise evil. You are to devote yourself to restoring the world. You are not called to give pain for pain, stripe for stripe. You are called to be balm to the world, for the way shown us by Christ is one of restoration, not destruction. It is for this you were born into God's Creation. Keep in mind Jeremiah's words, “Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! Says the LORD.”

AMEN

BENEDICTION

It is terribly difficult to hear, but Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the saint martyred by the Third Reich, declared that the primal sin of humanity consisted in putting the knowledge of good and evil before the knowledge of God.

What did he mean?

All of us have within ourselves a book of right and wrong. It is our personal moral compass. It is also flawed, for we are flawed. Fortunately, there is a bigger compass as well, God's compass and He knows things you do not know. When your moral compass calls upon you to treat others in ways contrary to Jesus' words, you can be sure that it is you, and not God, who has made a mistake. Be patient with one another. Love your enemies. Care for God's creation, for He has called it good. See each person as a child of God, and treat them as you would have your own children treated. Speak your

truth to power.

Until we meet again...

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

The Bible texts of the Old Testament, Epistle and Gospel lessons are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Church of Christ in the USA, and used by permission.

The Collects, Psalms and Canticles are from the Book of Common Prayer, 1979.

Sermon Copyright © 2015 J. Stewart Schneider
