

Jeremiah 23:2-6

²Therefore, this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says about the shepherds who shepherd my people.

You have scattered my flock.
You have driven them away.
You have not taken care of them,
but I will certainly take care of you,
because of the evil things you have done,
declares the LORD.

³I will gather what is left of my flock
out of all the countries where I have driven them,
and I will bring them back to their pastures.
They will be fruitful and multiply.

⁴I will raise up shepherds over them
who will shepherd them.

They will no longer be afraid or terrified,
nor will any be missing, declares the LORD.

⁵Listen, the days are coming, declares the LORD,
when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch,
who will reign wisely as king
and establish justice and righteousness on earth.

⁶In his days Judah will be saved
and Israel will dwell securely.
This is his name by which he will be called:
The LORD Our Righteousness.

King of Righteousness

I.

He was misnamed, the King of Judah at the time of our Old Testament Lesson from Jeremiah. You know how it happens sometimes—a person is given a nickname that is completely contrary to his or her nature. The name seems to be a joke—like calling a 7-foot-tall man “shorty.”

The misnamed king was a fawning bootlicker of a king. A conniving individual who was always looking out for number one—always trying to see what deals he could make to benefit himself. He was one of those people who is always looking for yes-men.

Nebuchadnezzar, the conquering king from Babylon, had removed the previous king and put in place a puppet king, giving him a new name in the process. Nebuchadnezzar renamed his puppet king Zedekiah.

Zedekiah was such a poor excuse for a king that he would be the last of the kings of Judah. He surrounded himself with prophets who were guaranteeing that the deportation of many of Judah’s leaders to Babylon was only temporary, and Babylon’s rule would be broken in two years. Jeremiah—a *true* prophet of God—was insisting the other prophets were merely so much fake news.

Zedekiah means “the Lord is my righteousness.” It was like calling a tall man “shorty.” He did not follow the Lord at all, much less could he identify the Lord as his righteousness.

“Therefore, this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says about the shepherds who shepherd my people. You have scattered my flock. You have driven them away. You have not taken care of them, but I will certainly take care of you, because of the evil things you have done, declares the LORD” (Jeremiah 23:2, EHV).

“Shepherds who shepherd my people.” Judah was what was left of God’s Chosen People.

Ultimately, *God* was their King. The kings and religious leaders of Judah were to serve as under-shepherds, following God's will for the people. They were to be responsible not just for the physical needs of the people, but were to watch over their spiritual condition, as well.

"You have not taken care of them." The vast majority of those entrusted with being shepherds of God's people were failing in their God-given responsibilities.

"I will certainly take care of you." These false and failing under-shepherds would be judged by God for their evil and their lack of concern for what God wanted them to do.

II.

False shepherds have always been a problem for the Church. Throughout the history of God's people you can find cycles of faithfulness and unfaithfulness. There were kings who followed God's will and were spoken of as doing what was right in the eyes of God. Other kings, unfortunately the majority of them, were judged by God in the history of his people as doing evil in the eyes of God. The evil kings undermined the truths of Scripture.

How do leaders of today stack up as shepherds for God's people? Elected officials often leave much to be desired. To be sure, we don't *expect* godliness, since we are not living in a theocracy where God is to be the sovereign ruler, as he was in Israel and Judah. Still, all too often the morality and integrity of public officials is lacking, to say the least. The examples of Christian faith in secular leaders is even rarer.

How about religious leaders? Do *they* set a good example? Of course, there are many religions that purport to be Christian, but are actually non-Christian religions posing as just another Christian denomination. Their teachings obviously lead many astray, even if their lives *appear* to be outwardly moral.

But what about leaders in Christian denominations and churches? Surely there would be no "false shepherds" among Christian leaders, would there? Sadly, there are plenty of lapses of morality in Christian pastors and teachers. They are human, too. There is also a great deal of false doctrine perpetrated by Christian leaders. False doctrine has caused rifts and splits within Christianity. Some well-meaning church leaders think that all the Christian denominations should just agree to disagree on the teachings of the Bible. The truth of Scripture cannot be compromised, however. God does not endorse the concept of go along to get along. It's really the same kind of attitude King Zedekiah had in seeking prophets who would tell him what he wanted to hear.

Unfortunately, the flock of God *itself* is part of the problem. Leaders and followers alike are equally sinful human beings. Sinful human beings are prone to turn away from God and follow their own selfish interests—some to lead people astray, others to choose to be led astray because what they are being told *sounds* good to them. Just like Zedekiah, they look for people to tell them what they want to hear. Immoral behavior and general sin is not something people, by nature, *want* to have pointed out in themselves. They flock to leaders who tell them what their itching ears *want* to hear, instead of seeking out those who faithfully speak the Word of God.

III.

We are just about to enter into the season of Advent, when we will be reminded of all the prophecies of the coming Messiah. Remember Isaiah? He said: "A shoot will spring up from the stump of Jesse, and a Branch from his roots will bear fruit" (Isaiah 11:1, EHV). "Branch" is one of the titles true prophets of God gave for the coming Messiah.

Jeremiah uses the same term in our text today: "Listen, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, who will reign wisely as king and establish justice and righteousness on earth" (Jeremiah 23:5, EHV).

A new King is coming. He will *not* be a poser. He will *not* be a fawning bootlicker who simply agrees to disagree, or who cowers and submits his doctrine for the sake of a contrived peace. No, the real King will establish justice and righteousness on earth. The *real* peace he came to bring is a peace between God and human beings. That kind of peace comes only when the sinner can be

reconciled to God—it comes only when sins have been taken away and righteousness is restored.

Remember that name, Zedekiah? Remember what it means? Zedekiah means “the Lord is my righteousness.” King Zedekiah certainly did *not* represent that for God’s people. But...God’s *new* King was coming. The King who would establish the true throne of David forever and ever.

“This is his name by which he will be called: The LORD Our Righteousness” (Jeremiah 23:6, EHV). Jeremiah very deliberately called attention to the corrupt and immoral king of Judah who had been misnamed Zedekiah—“the Lord is my righteousness”—by mentioning all kinds of details about false shepherds. Now he identifies the King of kings, the Lord of lords, the King of Righteousness.

It is Jesus, the Lord our Righteousness, who would establish justice and righteousness on earth, as Jeremiah said in the previous verses. Jesus lived in an exemplary way and showed us what true righteousness looks like, unlike Zedekiah and his ilk.

Jesus, the Lord our Righteousness, did far more than show us some nebulous path that we must work out for ourselves. Jesus was such a true Shepherd that he allowed himself to be nailed to a cross. Though he is God, he was willing to be abandoned by God so that we would never have to be. Jesus laid down his life for the sheep there on the cross of Calvary, and took his life back up again on Easter Sunday. He is truly the King of Righteousness.

The Lord our Righteousness, the King of Righteousness, *provided* you and me with the righteousness we could never hope to achieve or attain. *That* is the true Shepherd the Lord promised for his people. *Jesus* is the true Shepherd Jeremiah pointed to in his prophecy.

IV.

“I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them. They will no longer be afraid or terrified, nor will any be missing, declares the LORD” (Jeremiah 23:4, EHV).

God has a promise for his suffering people. You are *God’s* flock. He will provide new under-shepherds—pastors. To pastors Jesus says: “Feed my sheep,” just as he once told Peter. Pastors are to tend the flock with the Word and Sacrament. They are to speak the Word, in season and out of season. They are to use the *whole* counsel of God, not just bits and pieces that suit their liking. Pastors are not to say “I think,” but “This is what the Lord says.” Scripture is to be the only source and norm of Christian teaching.

“I will gather what is left of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their pastures” (Jeremiah 23:3, EHV). God promises under-shepherds to guide his flock in this life. That is good and right. It is important. But ultimately, God promises to bring his flock back to their pastures.

“Listen, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, who will reign wisely as king and establish justice and righteousness on earth. ⁶In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will dwell securely. This is his name by which he will be called: The LORD Our Righteousness” (Jeremiah 23:5-6, EHV). At the last day we will see the *ultimate* fulfillment of this prophecy.

The Righteous Branch has come and has established peace with God through his death on the cross for all sinners. On the Last Day, he will come and take his flock of believers to the greenest pastures of all—heaven. There we will dwell securely forevermore.

God be with you as you await the return of the King of Righteousness. Amen.