

The Ninth Sunday After Pentecost
August 2, 2009
Amazing Grace Lutheran Church - Pastor Chip Wilke

Jeremiah 23:1-6

"Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture!" declares the LORD. Therefore this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says to the shepherds who tend my people: "Because you have scattered my flock and driven them away and have not bestowed care on them, I will bestow punishment on you for the evil you have done," declares the LORD. "I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and will bring them back to their pasture, where they will be fruitful and increase in number. I will place shepherds over them who will tend them, and they will no longer be afraid or terrified, nor will any be missing," declares the LORD. "The days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The LORD Our Righteousness. (NIV)

I'm sure we have all observed the fact that there are good parents and there are no so good parents. A good parent is one who looks after their children, loves and disciplines them, and is faithful in their responsibilities toward their children. A bad parent is not faithful. It's the same with government officials. There are good and bad. Good ones are faithful in protecting and serving the people. Bad ones, on the other hand, often use and abuse their power. Think of the many teachers you have had. What makes some so good and others - well thankfully you were not in their class forever? A good teacher cares for the students and faithfully goes about preparing and teaching his or her class.

Now what about when it comes to our spiritual leaders? The people of Israel had them in the form of priests, and prophets, and kings. These leaders were to shepherd and care for the people. They had the awesome responsibility of over seeing the spiritual welfare of these eternal souls. Today, most call a person who has that responsibility a pastor - which by the way means shepherd. As we consider this lesson from Jeremiah in the light of the day in which we live I want us to think about what makes a good pastor. I want to word the question for us to consider this morning this way: **What makes a faithful pastor?**

What do you want in your pastor? Do you want someone who cares for the people, someone who hurts when his people hurt, someone who loves his people dearly? Jeremiah was such a person. He was a priest who God also called to be a prophet. In fact, many refer to Jeremiah as the weeping prophet because we see his emotions and love for the people maybe more than any of God's prophets. Jeremiah was also faithful to the message God gave to him. He ate the words of God and repeated them without changing them. Jeremiah was not only loving but he spoke the truth. People would just love such a spiritual leader, wouldn't you think?

Yet, Jeremiah was anything but loved by the people of Israel. Most referred to Jeremiah as a traitor. He had very few friends and at times had to sit all alone. Once a group of people lowered Jeremiah into a deep muddy cistern and left him there to die. Another time Jeremiah brought God's word to Judah's king only to have the king take the

scroll, rip it, and throw it piece by piece into the firepot in his winter apartment. Jeremiah was not what the majority of the people wanted in a pastor.

But there were other spiritual leaders. They gave a far different message than Jeremiah. While Jeremiah talked about sin, these other spiritual leaders told the people that they were alright the way they were, after all they were all God's children. While Jeremiah talked about punishment and God's coming judgment, these other prophets were proclaiming a message of peace and safety. They were telling the people what they wanted to hear. Earlier the Lord said: ***"They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. 'Peace, peace,' they say, when there is no peace."*** (6) The Lord also said: ***"The prophets prophesy lies, the priests rule by their own authority, and my people love it this way."*** (5)

So the people were pleased and the prophets were popular, but listen to what was happening to the Lord's sheep. Listen to our text and what the Lord has to say about this situation: ***"Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture!" declares the LORD. Therefore this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says to the shepherds who tend my people: "Because you have scattered my flock and driven them away and have not bestowed care on them, I will bestow punishment on you for the evil you have done," declares the LORD.***

God makes it pretty clear that these unfaithful shepherds were killing and scattering His people. Since David's time things went from good to bad to worse. They went from relying on God and His forgiveness to not thinking they needed any forgiveness. They turned to idols. They thought they had all they needed in their own strength and work. The spiritual leaders were leading God's sheep right off a cliff.

God makes it clear what He wants in a pastor. He wants faithful pastors to proclaim His message. What do we want? What do we look for in a pastor or a church? Do we want leaders who are always going to tell us what we want to hear? It is much easy for us to stomach at times, isn't it? It's funny how we almost always want to hear the straight truth, until it comes to our own sins. Wouldn't we rather hear about how God will still love all as His children no matter what lifestyle we choose? Preachers who say: *"Live and let live."* Wouldn't it feel better to listen every week about how we are good Christians and get advice how we can do things better? Pastors who teach: *"Everybody makes mistakes and no one is perfect so God understands as long as you try your best that's all He asks."* Would we like to come to church and not have to hear about sin or hell week after week? To hear preachers who proclaim: *"A loving God wouldn't send anyone to hell."* Wouldn't that feel better than being told by God the truth that *"there is no one who does good not even one, together we have become corrupt...the wages of sin is death...and there is a place called hell where there will be eternal weeping and gnashing of teeth?"*

Pastors who tell people what they want to hear may make people feel better, but God wants faithful pastors who tell the truth about sin. For where there is no truth about sin, there is no need for a Savior. Where there is no trust in a Savior, there is no salvation. So the Lord Himself promises to take action for His people. ***"I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and will bring them back to their pasture, where they will be fruitful and increase in number. I will place shepherds over them who will tend them, and they will no longer be afraid or terrified, nor will any be missing," declares the LORD. "The days are***

coming," declares the LORD, "when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The LORD Our Righteousness."

Here is what the Lord promises. Now recall what the Lord did. God raised up Babylon to carry off Israel's brightest and best and leave their city and temple and land desolate. The Lord then brought a small group of believers back to Jerusalem. The Lord would give them new shepherds who would speak the truth about sin and proclaim His word faithfully.

There is one person specifically mentioned. He is called "***a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land.***" The Hebrew word for branch is kind of an interesting one. It is not a branch in the sense that we would think of one that is dependant on a tree for strength and growth. This branch grows out of a dying stump or from the ground where a tree has recently decayed. It is a fresh new growth with its own strength and life and is something new and independent.

We know who this Branch is don't we friends? We know the Righteous One who came from the dead and decaying kingdom of David. We know the only One to be without fault and perfect and holy and faithful in every way. This can only refer to Jesus. Jesus always was and is the good shepherd who loves, protects, and cares for the people. He also always spoke God's Word faithfully. He proclaimed the truth. People who are not completely sinless will suffer and burn in hell. Jesus said so.

Then Jesus, the sinless One, suffered hell. Jesus suffered hell as He hung with his wounded body on the cross. You will never receive what your sins truly deserve because Jesus suffered it for you. The punishment you deserve was upon Him. Now you get to dwell safe in God's love and in the security of His forgiveness. Because Jesus rose from the dead and is alive, Jesus promises that He will not only be with you always but that you will one day be with Him forever. These truths are all wrapped up in the name Jeremiah records for us, the name by which He will be called - "***The LORD Our Righteousness.***" This is the gospel in the fullest. Jesus took our sin and gave us His righteousness. Jesus took death and gave us life. Through faith we are now covered in Christ's holiness. That is why we call Jesus Savior.

So what makes a faithful pastor? I pray God's word makes it clear. Faithful pastors care for & tend God's people by proclaiming God's message and by continual pointing to a faithful Savior. They do not scatter and destroy the sheep with false teachings. Instead, faithful pastors lovingly speak God's truth. It hurts sometimes. It hurts to hear the truth - the truth about our sin - the truth about what we are doing or have done - the truth about what we deserve or where we are going if we do not repent. But without truth there is no love and God is love. He loves everyone of His sheep. That's why He sent the good Shepherd. That's why He sends faithful shepherds to proclaim His Word and keep pointing us to Jesus our Righteousness. Standing firm in this truth have no fear little flock for the Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. Amen.