

Sermon Draft

Text: Jeremiah 23:1–6

Sermon: Shepherd-King

Our text this morning from the 23rd chapter of Jeremiah takes place in the city of Jerusalem during the last days of an independent Judah with its own king, King Zedekiah (597–587 BC), before the Babylonian exile of Jerusalem.

The chapter preceding our text surveys the reigns of Zedekiah's immediate predecessors: King Jehoahaz (609 BC), King Jehoiakim (609–598 BC), and King Jehoiachin (598–597 BC). It displays the lack of righteousness of the past and present kings in Jerusalem and announces their end. In contrast, chapter 23 promises a different future with a righteous shepherd-king of the line of David.

Jesus came to fulfill all the Old Testament Scriptures. These Scriptures are still important because they can help us modern day Christians understand the person and work of Jesus the Messiah. They help us better understand the Messiah's job description and the blessings he now gives us. Bottom line...

We need a king. We might not think so. Americans do not like kings. We affirm government of the people, by the people, and for the people.

As a worldly political policy, our American system of checks and balances is good and beneficial. It works. But before God Almighty himself, we need a king, God's kind of human king.

We do not need the world's kind of king. The kings of the world can prove to be incredibly violent and murderous. One thinks of all the blood that was shed by the kings of ancient Assyria and Babylon and Greece and Rome and, in more recent days, absolute rulers such as Hitler, Stalin, Chairman Mao, Pol Pot, and many others.

Kings of the world are typically not righteous in God's way of righteousness. They rule in very unrighteous ways, with wicked policies toward the people and in turn leading the people in wicked ways. As goes the king, so go the people.

The root of the problem is this: kings of this world are self-serving. The adage is apt: "It's all about power, getting it and keeping it." Worldly kings seek their own glory and prestige. They often don't really care about their people or their people's plight. They're interested only in feathering their own nest.

What results from these policies and practices? The sheep scatter. Every sinner does his own thing. Every sinner goes his own way, and that way is always away from the true God, their Creator always. Without a righteous shepherd-king, the sheep disperse and wander aimlessly. At an archaeological dig in northeast Syria, the those conducting the dig saw a flock of sheep daily passing the site. Each sheep would wander off in its own direction until the shepherd came and gathered them together. Sinners are like that. Without a good shepherd-king, everyone does what is right in his own eyes, instead of what is right in God's eyes. As Isaiah confessed for us, ***"All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way"*** (Isaiah 53:6).

Ancient Israel can function as a visual aid, as a model of what happens without God's kind of human king. In ancient Israel, the king was supposed to be a good shepherd who would gather his sheep and lead them in the ways of the Lord. Jeremiah states God's own expectations for God's kind of king: ***"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."***

(Jeremiah 22:3)

But a bad shepherd-king will mislead the people and serve only himself.

Jeremiah, as well as Ezekiel, condemned the last shepherd-kings of Jerusalem in his day. They attended only to themselves. They were only self-serving. They built their own magnificent palace but did not care for the people by doing what was right before God. Their eyes and heart were oriented toward only their own covetous desires. Their practices consisted of shedding innocent blood and practicing violent oppression. And the worst thing was that they led the people away from the true God toward idols. They corrupted the people, and the people themselves became corrupt and guilty as well. Sound familiar.

They were supposed to be good shepherds, to rule the people in true righteousness, to lead the people in God's ways, and to unite the people to serve the Lord in true unity. But in fact, the corrupt practices of the kings corrupted the people and would lead to their dispersion. Jeremiah announced the words of Yahweh, the God of Israel: ***“Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!”*** (Jeremiah 23:1).

And in fact, the sheep were scattered among the nations. In 587 BC, Babylon came, destroyed Jerusalem and the temple, and exiled the people.

But God did not end his message there. Through Jeremiah, God announced a wonderful promise of a different future. In the future, God will regather the remnant of his flock out of the other lands and bring them back to the sheepfold. Not only that, but the days are coming when God will ***“raise up for David a righteous branch, and a King shall rule and act wisely and do God’s judgment and righteousness in the land.”*** In contrast to the wicked and unrighteous kings Jerusalem was used to, this future king will be a righteous Branch, which will grow into a tree that will bear much fruit. This future king will rule wisely and do what is truly righteous. He will unite Judah and Israel in salvation and safety. No longer will they fear conquering enemies. And through the messianic King, the gift of righteousness will come to the people from God. The Messiah’s name will be “Yahweh is our righteousness.” Through the rule of the Davidic Messiah, Yahweh is the author and source of our righteousness.

Hear the good news. God fulfills his promises of old. He began to restore his exiled people back to the land of Israel in 538 BC and then more in 457 BC.

And in the fullness of time, six hundred years after Jeremiah's promise, God brought his ancient promises to fulfillment. God sent his only-begotten Son to join the human race, to become Israel's human King from the line of David.

God gave us a righteous Shepherd-King. During his public ministry in the land of Israel, he had compassion on Israel as sheep without a shepherd. He gathered to himself the lost sheep of Israel. He did what a righteous king was supposed to do. He had compassion on the helpless, the widow, the fatherless, the weak, the overlooked nobodies.

We can read about his public ministry in the Gospel appointed for this season, the Gospel according to Mark. Jesus saw the people of Israel as sheep without a shepherd, and he gathered them to himself. He continues to do that even to this day. Remember the Day of Pentecost, how the Holy Spirit was sent by the exalted Messiah Jesus and came upon Israelites who had gathered in Jerusalem from around the world.

God gave us a righteous Shepherd-King. Jesus is the Shepherd-King who unites his people like a shepherd unites his sheep. And he adds even more to his flock, those beyond native Israel. Through holy baptism, he brought even us Gentiles into his sheepfold. He gathers his own from around the world and brings us to God his Father. Jesus is the Shepherd-King of Israel, who is better than any of the preceding kings of Israel. In fact, he does something surprising.

This Good Shepherd laid down his life for his sheep, for you and me. And God raised him up on the third day and highly exalted him. Now Jesus as the Davidic King rules over you by his Holy Spirit. To live under his rule is a blessed life. He brings us to the God of ancient Israel, the true God and makes us part of his own flock. Through his sacred meal, he nourishes us with his body and blood and gives us eternal life with him. We by faith belong to his flock and enjoy salvation and safety under his rule.

We need not fear anything. For our Shepherd-King is all for us, no matter what. After those woeful shepherds, ***“behold, the days” of “a righteous Branch [who] shall reign as king and deal wisely and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.”***

Jesus is the righteous Shepherd-King. Through him, we receive true righteousness from God himself. God laid on Jesus, the King, our iniquity and sin. And God reckoned to us the righteousness of Jesus, which he achieved by his own righteous doing and suffering. By faith, we now stand righteous before God. Yahweh, the true God, is now the source of our righteousness. His righteousness has replaced our wickedness.

And by his Spirit, he promises to lead us in righteous ways. We belong to the righteous Shepherd-King of Israel. Follow his paths, the righteous paths of our righteous King. And wait with eager anticipation for when Jesus comes again in glory to gather you and all his flock together into his glorious, eternal kingdom. God has given us a righteous Shepherd-King. Enjoy by faith his rule now. Hear the Word faithfully preached and taught by his called under-shepherds. Receive the Lord's Supper rightly administered by his called under-shepherds. And look forward to the day of bodily resurrection when you will see your righteous Shepherd-King face-to-face.

Amen