

## Readings for Sunday July 22<sup>nd</sup> 2018

### Jeremiah 23:1-6 (NIV)

23 “Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture!” declares the LORD. <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>“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. <sup>4</sup>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. <sup>5</sup>“The days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. <sup>6</sup>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 Righteous Savior.

### Mark 6:30-34, 53-56 (NIV)

<sup>30</sup>The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught. <sup>31</sup>Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, “Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.” <sup>32</sup>So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place. <sup>33</sup>But many who saw them leaving recognized them and ran on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. <sup>34</sup>When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things.

<sup>53</sup>When they had crossed over, they landed at Gennesaret and anchored there. <sup>54</sup>As soon as they got out of the boat, people recognized Jesus. <sup>55</sup>They ran throughout that whole region and carried the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. <sup>56</sup>And wherever he went—into villages, towns or countryside—they placed the sick in the marketplaces. They begged him to let them touch even the edge of his cloak, and all who touched it were healed.

## Sermon: The Compassion of God

The Lectionary has for today two short readings from Mark's gospel; the first concludes the mission of the twelve and then sets up what is about to take place next, and the second is more like a partial summary of Jesus' healing ministry in Galilee. There is no nice little story here, no parable or no one-on-one encounter resulting in repentance or a miracle. So the preacher scratches his or her head and wonders what to make of this selection! You know the expression, "You can't see the wood for the trees," in other words: by focusing on detail you lose perspective and miss what is important; well, I think that applies here. We need to zoom back for a moment and see the bigger picture of what God is doing in and through the life of Jesus the Messiah, and these two passages help us do that.

First, recall that Jesus had sent his twelve disciples off in pairs throughout Galilee to teach about the kingdom of God with a call for the people to turn back to God's ways. And they were to demonstrate that God's reign is near with healings and by expelling demons. Being made whole physically, spiritually, and relationally is a sign of *shalom*; peace with God, each other, and with creation. The disciples came back excited by all they had done and witnessed, but Jesus recognised they were tired and needed a rest. We are told that with all their "comings and goings they had no leisure even to eat!" That sounds like the descriptions of many households today. It's not only teens who grab a bagel for breakfast as they rush out the door! How many of us have lunch on the go or drive-through meals, and still we complain for not having enough time?! Mark tells us that Jesus then said to his disciples<sup>1</sup>: "Come away to a *deserted* place all by yourselves and rest a while."<sup>2</sup> Jesus himself had done this earlier in Mark 1:35. And so they went by boat to a remote place by themselves for some down-time.

This is extremely practical; we are finite human beings and we need periodic rest from our work – both from the secular workplace and from church life. I want to focus on the latter aspect for a moment. Yes, like the disciples, we too are *sent* into the world, but we cannot sustain that activity unless we also take time to withdraw to a place free from distractions and seek the presence of God. This time of withdrawal is to read, pray, and be re-energized for service in the kingdom of God – whatever those activities may be. Naturally, we all need to find the healthy balance between too much activity and too much withdrawal. I leave you access that for yourself; but bear in mind that is very common in church life for 20% of the people to 80% of the work! And we all know that more than 20% of any church has God-given talents and gifts that can be used in appropriate ways in the service of Christ. And as you reflect on the "being sent" aspect, think also to as to how effective and deliberate is your time of refreshment seeking God's presence and guidance.

Now while the disciples needed a break, it quickly seems to all go horribly wrong! By the time they get to the shore of where they're going, we are told people "from all the towns" had got there first. We might imagine the disciples' reaction, but we wouldn't guess what Jesus had to say. Mark tells us,

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<sup>1</sup> In Mark 6:30 he uses the term "apostle" for the *only* time in his gospel. Given that the verb "to send" in Greek is at "*apostello*," the generic meaning of apostle is "one who is sent" and this is fitting in this particular context.

<sup>2</sup> Mark 6:31.

when Jesus saw the large crowd, *he had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd.*<sup>3</sup>

The phrase, “sheep without a shepherd” is full of meaning to a Jew. First, a “shepherd” was a common metaphor for “king” in the Old Testament.<sup>4</sup> Second, this quote comes from Numbers 27:17 where Moses appoints Joshua to be his successor.<sup>5</sup> Moses prays: *“Let the LORD, the God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint someone over the congregation who shall go out before them and come in before them, who shall lead them out and bring them in, so that the congregation of the LORD may not be like sheep without a shepherd.”*<sup>6</sup> And God tells Moses to appoint Joshua, and, incidentally, the name “Jesus” is a variant of “Joshua” and means “Yahweh is salvation.” It is as if Mark is hinting that Jesus is like a new Joshua leading the people out of the wilderness into the Promised Land. Moreover, the later prophets – like Jeremiah, as we heard this morning - condemned Israel’s kings of failing to act like shepherds. Listen to the words of Ezekiel: *The word of the LORD came to me: “Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel . . . ‘This is what the sovereign LORD says: Woe to the shepherds of Israel who have been feeding themselves! Should not shepherds feed the flock? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the choice animals, but you do not feed the sheep! You have not strengthened the weak, healed the sick, bandaged the injured, brought back the strays, or sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled over them. They were scattered because they had no shepherd . . . with no one looking or searching for them.*<sup>7</sup>

Last week we heard all about Herod Antipas and the death of John the Baptist. I suggest Mark is presenting a not-too-subtle comparison between Herod and Jesus here. Herod is *precisely* the kind of ruler the prophets like Ezekiel castigated for their lack of social justice or responsible care for their people. It is, after all, in the context of a lavish royal banquet that Israel’s new prophet, John, is killed. In Mark’s pivot from the scene in Herod’s palace, Jesus is the one who acting like a shepherd; first, in being mindful of the disciple’s needs and, second, in caring for the crowds. But Ezekiel’s prophecy goes on to say that God *himself* will search for his sheep and seek them out . . . and rescue them.<sup>8</sup> And in our Old Testament reading from Jerimiah we heard the following: *“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.* <sup>5</sup> *“The days are coming, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land.”*<sup>9</sup>

While Mark doesn’t make an explicit link, these prophecies were the hope of all Israel and Jews at that time lived in a high state of expectation that God would rescue them once again.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, Jesus’ recognition that the people are like “sheep without a shepherd” is followed up by Jesus

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<sup>3</sup> Mark 6:34.

<sup>4</sup> For example, see 2 Sam 5:2

<sup>5</sup> See also 1 Kings 22:17.

<sup>6</sup> Num 27:16-17.

<sup>7</sup> Ezek 34: 1-6 (NET Bible). The reinstatement of Peter in John 21:15-19 should also be seen in this OT context.

<sup>8</sup> Ezek 34: 11-16.

<sup>9</sup> Jer 23:4-6. See also Ezek 34:23-24, 30-31.

<sup>10</sup> The same is true today; Jews still long for the coming Messiah (since they do not recognise Jesus was that Messiah).

presenting himself to the people as their shepherd in ways that aligned with those prophecies of old. Furthermore, in our text for today, Mark makes other important links with Moses and Joshua.<sup>11</sup> In fact, the NIV translation of Jesus and his disciples going to a “quiet” place completely misses this point! The Greek term rendered “uninhabited (or remote) place” in other translations, where Jesus and the disciples were going for their retreat, appears earlier in Mark when Jesus went into the *wilderness* for 40 days and was tempted by the devil.<sup>12</sup> The people who came “*from all the cities*” ahead of Jesus therefore represent a “new Israel” going into the “wilderness” to meet their new deliverer. These multitudes and the disciples are the beginnings of a new community gathered around God’s shepherd, Jesus, who is exercising compassion by teaching at length the ways of the kingdom of God. What actually happens in the “wilderness” – which we won’t address today – only underscores this Old Testament connection.<sup>13</sup>

I mentioned at the beginning that we need to zoom back to get the fuller picture of what is going on here. We are, therefore, to join the dots between God’s prophetic judgement on bad shepherds, like Herod, and God coming himself to rescue his sheep in the form of Jesus, the good shepherd, the righteous branch whose root is connected to King David. This new king is one, in the words of Jeremiah, who will seek out and save the people, and reign wisely, and do what is just and right in the land.<sup>14</sup>

I want to zoom back even further this morning. Just prior to the “sheep without a shepherd” phrase, Mark tells us that on seeing the crowds, Jesus “had *compassion* on them.”<sup>15</sup> Compassion is implicit in the entire witness of the life of Jesus, including his healing ministry. Since for Christians Jesus is the supreme revelation of God and his unique representative in history, compassion must therefore be within the *very nature* of God, the Creator. This is quite a claim! The reason being is that “compassion” is not the attribute that comes to many people’s mind when considering God’s attitude toward the world. While many today dismiss the notion of a divine being, others have a negative view of God as being somewhat wrathful, angry, and punitive, and therefore approachable only in a guarded ritualistic way supervised by an intermediary priest. Christianity itself has been no stranger to such poor theologies. God, however, revealed himself to the prophets *not* as an abstract absoluteness, but someone having an intimate *relationship* with his creation. God is *moved* and *affected* by what happens in the world. God is concerned about the world and *shares in its suffering*! God is willing to be intimately involved in the history of humankind.

Yale philosopher-theologian Nicholas Wolterstorff had been convinced for a long time that God was not the unresponsive, unchanging deity portrayed in classical theology. But it was in his own experience of profound grief over the death of his 25-year old son in a mountaineering accident that

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<sup>11</sup> See also Deut 18:18.

<sup>12</sup> Mark 1:12-13. (See also 1:35, 45). The wilderness is not just a place of rest, but of struggle and testing (Deut 8:2). David, on the run from King Saul, also spent time (hiding) in the wilderness; see also Ps 63.

<sup>13</sup> See Mark 6:35-44 – the “Feeding of the 5000” mirrors God’s provision of manna in the wilderness (Exod 16).

<sup>14</sup> Jer 23:6. See also Ezek 34: 23-24.

<sup>15</sup> Mark 6:34.

he recognized the *suffering* of God. He writes: “God is not only the God of the sufferers but the God who suffers. The pain and fallenness of humanity have entered into his heart. . . . Instead of explaining our suffering God shares it. . . . God is love. That is why he suffers. To love our suffering sinful world is to suffer. . . . The one who does not see God’s suffering does not see his love. God is suffering love.”<sup>16</sup> These deeply moving words cause us to pause and think, particularly those who have never regarded God the Father—or the Creator God—in such a way.

This notion of a “God of Sorrows” surprises some people. One reason is many see the Creator God as a remote Spirit above all the pain and anguish of the physical world, more like the unmoved Mover of Aristotle. Canadian theologian, Clark Pinnock, disagrees and sees God as the “Most Moved Mover”!<sup>17</sup> But this doesn’t mean we can sentimentalize or presume upon God’s generous grace and care. A second reason is that when we think of the word “compassion,” we think it means “pity.” Consequently, we hear Mark 6:34 paraphrased like this: “Though Jesus and his disciples wanted a break from ministry for a while, on seeing the crowds, Jesus took “*pity*” on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd.” But the Latin root of the word “compassion” is “*suffer with*.” There is no hint of condescension, as there is in the world “pity.” You do not have “compassion” unless you *suffer with* those to whom you refer. And a precondition for that compassion is unconditional solidarity with the ones for whom you feel it. Jesus’ compassion will be fully realized in the agony of the cross. It is there that the *Trinitarian* God fully “suffers with” creation. God identifies with us, not only in birth and life, but also in death. The great German theologian Jürgen Moltmann puts it like this: “When the crucified Jesus is called ‘the image of the invisible God,’ [which is a reference to Col 1:15], the meaning is that *this* is God, and God is like *this*.” Christians must ask not only whether they have grasped the full radical nature of a belief in the “compassion” of God, but whether we as a church are also ready to “suffer with” God’s profoundly threatened and needy world.<sup>18</sup>

The healing miracles at the conclusion of this chapter force us to look again at our suffering world. Gennesaret was noted for its numerous mineral hot-springs whose believed healing properties had attracted the sick and injured for centuries. It is little wonder that Jesus’ healing ministry draws much attention in that context. What is evident in Mark’s gospel account is a deep neediness in humankind. And we can rejoice that in Jesus, the healing power of God has erupted into this messy world and that the people responded in great numbers. While we acknowledge that people in the majority of the world today desire this kind of safety, for the most part, our churches in the West are designed for people who are able, to a significant degree, to be “in control” of their own lives. It is often only when we lose that control, or fear we might, that we consider God. We come to Jesus then, likely just as the people of Gennesaret did, with selfish motives. Nevertheless, Jesus seemingly responds graciously as their shepherd.

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<sup>16</sup> Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*, 81, 90.

<sup>17</sup> Clark Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God’s Openness*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001)

<sup>18</sup> Put more formally, God’s compassion for us must drive our *ethics*.

Even so, coming to Jesus for *healing* is *not* something that people typically associate with - or experience within - churches today. Indeed, most people look for healing from their physicians, prescription drugs, therapists, and self-help books, rather than consider entering a church building! Of course we *must* work with medical professionals, since all healing comes from God. And we must also recognize that we are body, mind, and spirit, and therefore *if* we do *not* acknowledge we are spiritual beings – designed to relate with our Creator - we will never be completely whole, or, in Jewish terms, experience *shalom*. But perhaps part of this aversion of coming to *Jesus* for help is because people both outside and inside the church do not fully appreciate the real nature of the now-and-not-yet kingdom of God. So if the church today is unrecognizable as a place of healing and wholeness, then *we* need to reflect on what our mission and purpose in the world are, and how the unique good news of God’s healing grace is to be manifest in *this* time and place. And we need to recognize our Trinitarian God calls *us* to also “suffer with” creation: to live out that compassion in the power of the Spirit, following the example of Jesus, who revealed the compassionate heart of God the Father to the world. Amen.