

Pentecost IX, 2018
Jeremiah 23.1-6

“Danger Will Robinson. Danger!”

Those of you of my generation may remember that line from a 1960s TV show, *Lost in Space*. I thought of it when I read the warning sounded by Jeremiah the prophet in today’s first reading: “Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture,” says the Lord. Who are these bad shepherds? What is the problem Jeremiah is speaking about? What is God saying to us in this text today? That is the subject of my thoughts this morning. But first, some background to this reading.

Jeremiah lived in the decades before and after 600 BC. It was the tail end of a four-hundred years decline from the glory of the empire of kings David and Solomon. Those years saw the land shrinking size while the corruption and injustice in it grew. The problem was not the barbarians at the door, but the spiritual and moral rot under the floor. That is, the main problem of God’s people was not their enemies round about them, but the state of their soul, their nation’s own internal decay. Through the years various prophets, like we read in the prophecies of Amos last week, had tried to address the problems, but to no avail. It finally all came crashing down on God’s people in 587 BC, when the Babylonian Empire conquered Judah, destroyed Jerusalem with its magnificent Temple and carted the leaders off into exile.

Jeremiah laid the fault for this right at the feet of those to blame: “Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter God’s people.” Who were these bad shepherds? They were the kings and clergy of his day. They had failed in their role of leading God’s people. In any system – a nation, a family, church, a business – it is the leaders who set the tone, who most influence a system for good or ill. In Jeremiah’s time, the nation’s leaders had failed both God and His people. The result was national decay ending in disaster.

Yet, Jeremiah was not all bad news. Though the people were unfaithful to the covenant God had made with them, God was not. He would renew His

people and set a faithful, good shepherd over them, to lead them in righteousness and holiness.

Let us reflect on this metaphor of shepherds to describe leadership in today’s text. In biblical times it was a very common sight to see shepherds and their sheep. Though this world is far removed from ours, it is still easy to see what is talked about in this image of shepherd. It is the importance of leadership and the qualities of a good leader.

We are most familiar with this from Psalm 23: “The Lord is my shepherd.” God is our “good shepherd” who faithfully watches over His flock, His people. God makes sure His people receive the basic necessities of life: food and safe dwelling. He makes sure His people are safe. He guides them in the ways of right living. As a result of the Lord’s leadership, the people of God flourish and know peace and prosperity.

In Bible times, political leaders were depicted as “shepherds” of their people. This understanding is in the reading from Jeremiah. The prophet criticizes the rulers of his time as poor shepherds, who have failed as leaders of God’s people. They were to be the truthful voice of God for the people. They were to care for the flock of God as His representatives. And when they failed in their ministry, Jeremiah says they are accountable to God. “Woe to the shepherds....” These leaders have not simply neglected the people of God, they have actually misled them and caused them to be scattered. They have been occupied with their own advantage rather than with the well-being of the people.

The Gospel says that Jesus had pity on the crowds, “for they were sheep without a shepherd.” Here the reference was to the religious leaders. Some were corrupt with power; others sought to use their position for their own selfish interest. The people were searching for direction, but their religious leaders were not helping them.

The Church has a long tradition of characterizing its leaders as shepherds. The bishop’s crosier represents the shepherd’s staff. The Latin word for “shepherd” is “pastor.” Pastors are called to shepherd God’s people. Their specific responsibility and

authority is not secular or political, but the proclamation of the Gospel of God's grace in Christ.

Parents are also understood as shepherds of their children. They have a responsibility to protect, provide, and lead their children into mature adulthood. They assume responsibility for the faith of their children when they baptize them. Martin Luther described parenting as a vocation, a calling, in which every parent is a "pope, bishop, and priest" to their children. How is that for a job description?

Our reading from Jeremiah is a judgment against negligent shepherds: all those in a position of leadership who do not faithfully and wisely care for those whose lives have been entrusted to them. Woe to those, says Jeremiah, who scatter, confuse, and divide their people instead of guiding them and looking out for their welfare.

This happens in a number of ways. Leaders can fail their people by being more concerned for themselves than the welfare of their people. They exploit their followers for their own gain. More often, leaders scatter, confuse, and divide their people by failing to provide clarity and challenge their people when confronted by difficulties. It is an axiom that, if leaders become as anxious as the people they are trying to lead, they cannot lead. Instead, everyone is bound together by anxiety and gives in to panic reactions to situations.

Then there are the charmers. These are charismatic, narcissistic personalities who use the people they lead to feed their need for attention. They need people who will adore them. Such persons present themselves as heroes who will rescue whatever people they are trying to seduce. They prey on people who are needy or vulnerable, who are looking for some brilliant, dynamic personality to inspire them. But in time it always becomes apparent that such persons are not leaders, but fakes, using people to satisfy their ego needs for attention.

Our society is particularly vulnerable to narcissistic "people of the charm." A study a few years ago said such personality types are most often found

in three professions: entertainers, politicians, and pastors.

Last there are the fear-mongers. These are false leaders who confuse and divide people by playing on their fears to mislead them to serve their own interests. An example of this in our history was Senator Joseph McCarthy sixty years ago, who played on fears of communism to promote himself and his causes. A book by Paul Johnson, *The Age of Anxiety*, draws parallels between the time of Senator McCarthy and ours, how politicians today often play on our fears to mislead us, turn people against one another, all to promote themselves and their agendas.

Against the false leaders who confuse, divide, and scatter those whom they are called to lead, Jeremiah promises the people of God that the Lord will provide a good shepherd, a true leader, to watch over His people. That person, of course, is Jesus. In John's Gospel, He is called the "good shepherd," who will shepherd the sheep "so that they need no longer fear and tremble." What are the marks of good leadership that we see in Jesus? We see a person who:

- Sought above all God's will in all things, who sought to do what was right, not just what was popular.
- Challenges people to faith and hope, instead of caving in to fears and offering a quick-fix of calm and peace.
- Did not use people to serve His ego needs, but freely and in love sacrificed His interests to serve our good.
- Put the need for truth above the desire for peace.

This Jesus is also our risen Lord. Because He is risen and lives, we can trust and follow Him, knowing that He has our best interests in His heart. He will, in the words of Psalm 23, guide us in the paths of righteousness, so that goodness and mercy shall follow us, all the days of our lives and the life to come. Amen.