

WGUMC November 20, 2016
Jeremiah 23:1-6

" Sheep May Safely Graze"

Jeremiah was a prophet in the last days of the kingdom of Judah, the southern part of the formerly united kingdom of Israel. Under the leadership of Josiah and Jehoiakim, the people of Judah revolted against their Assyrian overlords. Then, when the Assyrian Empire fell apart, they revolted against the Babylonians. But in the end, they failed to stop the sack of Jerusalem, the destruction of the temple, and the forced exile of all the leading citizens to Babylonia.

Throughout all these troubles, Jeremiah was quite a troublemaker. He was descended from the priestly clan that was banished from Jerusalem by King Solomon. So he let it be known what he and God thought about these kings. "Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!" [23:1]

Ominous words, considering what is going on in our pasture! In these troubled times, many of the sheep are scared

and are scattering. In the first several days after the elections, the Southern Poverty Law Center received reports of 437 incidents of intimidation targeting blacks and other people of color, immigrants, the LGBT community and women. A Colorado mother told the Center that her 12-year-old daughter was approached by a boy who said, "Now that Trump is President, I'm going to shoot you and all the blacks I can find." In Washington State, chants of "Build a wall!" broke out in a school cafeteria. [*The New Yorker* online, Nov 17, 2016]

Here in the Bay Area, there has been intimidation on both sides in our schools. And just on Friday, I read about a woman hiking in a headscarf in Fremont. When she returned to the parking lot, she found her purse stolen and a note on her car that read, "Hijab wearing (expletive). Get the (expletive) out." The ironic thing is that she is not Muslim. She wears a headscarf because she has lupus.

Shepherds are supposed to protect the sheep. So what do we do when shepherds say things that incite others to go after the sheep? The question of how to make our communities safe is being asked by city councils and school districts all over the country. Hank and I attended a meeting at Sacred Heart on Tuesday about what we can do to promote a safe environment for vulnerable people in this community. When it comes to harassment, we talked about the need for training in intervention strategies. When it comes to the threat of immigration raids, we talked about the need for an immediate response team. The people who were in the room that night were truly afraid and feeling a little lost, like sheep without a shepherd.

I asked myself what I could do to make people feel safe. After all, my title is Pastor and that means "shepherd." I don't have any special training. I don't have any secret weapons. All I have is what Jeremiah had, the Word of God. And so I turn to

the Word for wisdom, to Scripture for my strategies. What does God have to say to us in a time like today?

Jeremiah had a challenging job as a prophet. He had to do two contradictory things at once: announce the coming judgment and offer words of reassurance. He had to warn about the coming doom and hold out hope for redemption. He had to criticize the leaders without abandoning the led. And that juggling act is exactly what is going on in these short verses.

First, Jeremiah calls out judgment on the shepherds of Judah. They have not served the sheep. Instead, they learned the art of the deal and made alliances with other nations. They let the people make sacrifices to other gods. They became great and rich, fat and sleek. They did not judge the poor with justice nor defend the rights of the needy. [Jer 1:18, 23; 5:27, 28] And so, Jeremiah says, the wind is going to shepherd the shepherds and blow them right into Babylon. [Jer 22:22]

Chapter after chapter, Jeremiah hammers this judgment home. But he does not leave them entirely without hope. His second job as prophet is to gather the scattered and bind up the broken-hearted. So he announces that after God attends to the evil shepherds who have not attended to their sheep, God will round up the remnant of the flock and bring them back into the fold. None of them will be missing and none of them will be afraid. Then God will raise up a new shepherd who will shepherd them. He will be a different kind of leader, a different kind of king.

And that's what we need so desperately. So find hope in the words of Jeremiah: "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days, Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety."

For Christians, Jesus is that righteous Branch, that wise king. And he is here to lead us not on some distant day, but today. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who cares for the sheep. And how do we know that he cares? We have God's Word. Read it. You'll learn that Jesus doesn't think of himself first, but he lays down his life for the sheep. [John 10:11] Jesus doesn't threaten to deport children. He says, "Let the children come to me. Do not hinder them." [Matthew 19:14] Jesus doesn't build walls. Jesus is our peace. He breaks down the dividing walls, that is, the hostility between us. [Ephesians 2:14] Jesus doesn't think you are a loser if you are not rich. He says, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." [Luke 6:20] Jesus doesn't exclude people from other countries with other beliefs. He says to a Roman soldier, "Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith." [Matthew 8:10] Jesus doesn't denigrate women, not even adulterers. He says, "Let the one who is without sin throw the first stone."

[John 8:7] Jesus doesn't tell lies. Jesus is the way, and the truth and the life. [John 14:6] Jesus doesn't take revenge on his opponents. He says, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." [Luke 23:34] Jesus doesn't plan to harm God's creation. He says, "Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them." [Matthew 6:26]

These are the words and actions of a true shepherd. Heed them. They will give you hope. Then let me tell you what gives me hope, what I am thankful for this Thanksgiving. I am not only thankful for Jesus who is the Good Shepherd, but I am also grateful for his sheep.

Contrary to popular opinion, sheep are not dumb. According to the Merck Veterinary Manual, sheep respond to food calls. They can problem solve. They learn their names. They recognize faces. And they remember who has been kind to them and who has not. I have faith that the sheep in our

pasture will remember who has been good to them. They will hear the Good Shepherd calling their name and not blindly follow someone who will not protect them. It is imperative that we who love the Shepherd keep standing up and speaking out for his truth and that we keep loving his sheep and not letting them scatter. As members of Christ's flock, we must never forget that we are all in this together.

The woman wearing the headscarf has the right idea. Nicki Pancholy lives in Milpitas. She says that her religion is love and she has been climbing Mission Peak every day since September 24th. She will hike 65 consecutive days for Mission Peace, a fundraiser for the South Asian Heart Center. When she read the note left on her car, she was shocked. But she said, "Then immediately forgiveness washed over me and compassion...and I began to pray for [the person who did this]." Whether or not she is a believer in Jesus, Nicki is following the way, living the truth, and embracing the life. After what happened to her, she

says that she hopes people will be "vigilant and cautious but not fearful." [*Mercury News*, Nov. 18, 2016]

That's good advice for us sheep. Be vigilant but don't be fearful, because we have a Shepherd who will keep us safe, a Shepherd who makes us lie down in green pastures and leads us beside still waters, restoring our souls. Through all the trials and tribulations of life, he leads us in right paths, for his name's sake. And even when we go through the darkest of times, we fear no evil, for the Lord is with us and God's protecting presence comforts us. God prepares a place for us at the table. There, God consecrates us for service, while our cup of blessing overflows. And thus we have faith that no matter what happens in the days and months ahead, the goodness and mercy of God will surely follow us all the days of our lives, and we will dwell in God's green pasture our whole life long.