

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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So I'd already made up my mind I was going to preach on the Jerimiah reading, and I opened it up and started reading and instantly felt super guilty because...last time I preached I told you all that "woe" means like yikes. And...that continues to be true, when it's a New Testament reading and the word is being translated from Greek. *But* Jerimiah's in the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament so we're translating that word from Hebrew. And when it's coming from Hebrew it's more...an audible sigh, dismay, lament even. These are the feelings bestowed on those shepherds this morning. But why?

Maybe it wouldn't surprise you too terribly much when I say that we're not talking about *literal* shepherds right now, but metaphorical ones. We're actually talking about kings! Which was a common image in the ancient Near East and as such that imagery shows up throughout the Bible. That makes sense, this is a region with a lot of shepherding, it's an image that will resonate with people! The way a shepherd behaves is how a king should behave: caring for others who are more vulnerable and defenseless than yourself, protecting against invading forces that seek to slaughter those under your care, if others carry them off you go after them and fight to get them back. Both king and shepherd should have a general sense of what direction the group is heading and leads everyone towards that destination, and the wellbeing of those in their care should be their primary focus.

But, the kings of Judah failed to act as shepherds to their people. And to fully appreciate the degree to which they failed, we need to take a step back and consider the time period in which Jerimiah is speaking. The Kingdom of Judah had been a vassal state of the Assyrian Empire for several decades. But eventually the Assyrian Empire began to collapse, and while the Empire was distracted trying to retain power within its own capital, Judah, who was under the reign of Josiah at the time, saw its chance and rebelled. They succeed in their rebellion and regained their independence and under Josiah's leadership things seemed to be going well and the Kingdom began to recover. And then he died, and what followed was chaotic for a lot of reasons. We go through four kings in rather quick succession 2 of whom ruled for about a decade each and the other 2 for three months each. During that time, only one of the kings had concern for the common person—he was one of the three monthers. The Babylonian forces start invading, the Egyptians are trying to fight them off, Judah tries teaming up with Egypt, Egypt very briefly gains control over Judah and selects one of those kings (who by all accounts was a tyrant who habitually committed truly awful acts on his own people). He ruled for 11 years. Judah becomes a vassal state of Babylon and then they rebel and aren't and then Babylon sieges Jerusalem and then they are again, but they keep trying to rebel again. The terrible king of Judah is finally killed in a skirmish and his son ascends the throne and vows to avenge him. So, the King of Babylon has him dethroned, he and 3,000 other Judeans are carried off into exile in Babylon and the Babylonian King appoints Zedekiah the new king of Judah. He will also be the *last* King of Judah. His reign will end with the fall of Jerusalem and the First Destruction of the Temple, and the Judean people will be scattered, most to Babylon, many to Egypt. But really people will escape to whichever neighboring country is closest. It

is during the final portion of Zedekiah's reign, in the midst of political and social turbulence, on the brink of this complete societal collapse that the King reaches out to Jerimiah to plead with God for deliverance from the Babylonian forces that Jerimiah calls out woe to the shepherds!

Because while all of this—and more! remember I have to keep this brief— was going on do you know what King Zedekiah was doing? He was trying to consolidate his own power. He, and the kings before him, lived in palaces decorated with extremely expensive materials, even as food was becoming scarce. The only reason he was in that position was due to a series of actions that were violent and oppressive, which resulted in the death of innocents for the king's own dishonest gain. In addition to not adequately paying laborers for their work, Jerimiah specifically calls out in the previous chapter the suffering inflicted upon the alien, the orphan, and the widow—the most vulnerable people of their society—because of decisions these would-be-shepherds made. When Pilate declares Jesus King of the Judeans, *this* is the kingship he is inheriting. And God cries out no! I am a God of justice, and as such the needs of the poor and the oppressed matter deeply to me! This situation has become entirely intolerable to me I will not permit this to continue any longer.

So while yes, these unjust shepherds will be faced with the consequences of their actions, that's not the focus of what Jerimiah is prophesying today, is it? Sure God will, attend to them, but they aren't his priority, God's sheep are! They have been scattered and displaced, as refugees, some as prisoners, others enslaved, still others remained relatively free, all of them grieving for what was lost, and living with both the trauma of what they'd lived through and apprehension of what the

future had in store. The Judean diaspora had well and truly begun. But Jeremiah insists that this isn't some sign that God has abandoned them, but rather that the very act of their scattering will result in their safety. When these dispersed people gathered together, these were the sort of words they shared with one another with yearning and with hope as they tried to process and make sense of the events that they, or their parents, or grandparents, or their great-grandparents experienced. Remember, the Babylonian Exile lasted for 70 years, this was a trauma felt through generations. Long enough that many of these political captives and refugees would know no other way of life. That the scattering of the exile could become just "the way things were" even as people looked back with longing upon what came before.

God, speaking through Jeremiah, addresses the Judean people. Take heart! Hold on! Your earthly shepherd-kings failed you long before the city fell. I will gather you back together though, I have not forgotten a single one of you. I will bring you back to the land you were carried off from. And then God makes a decree that seems a little counter intuitive. The shepherds failed...and yet, God vows to raise up new shepherds in their place. But these shepherds won't be like the last ones, they will care for the people and bring them back as a untied people. They will be righteous and deal in justice. Maybe now is a good time to point out that Zedekiah, the final King of Judah, his name literally means "the Lord is *my* righteousness" and his actions were largely focused on himself and his own well being, but God says the new ruler, a descendant from David, will behave in such a way that he will be called the Lord is *our* righteousness, because his priority will be on caring for the entire community.

And so often when Christians read this passage we grin and go yep I know exactly who they're talking about here! But I want to be really really clear here: this prophecy *is not* about Jesus. This is actually a prophecy about Zerubbabel, the Persian governor of Judean decent who was himself a descendant of David who successfully petitioned the emperor to allow him and 42,360 other Jewish people to go resettle and rebuild Jerusalem and who began the rebuilding of the Temple. And by all accounts, Zerubbabel *did* fulfill this prophecy! The scattered people were gathered back together and they were fruitful and multiplied and no longer lived in fear.

And maybe this is the part where you go, well if Zerubbabel fulfilled this, then *why* were things not *better* in Jesus' time? And for that really all I have to offer you is that the two lived 500 years apart. A lot can change in 500 years. Judea was conquered again, several times in fact. Every few generations, the rules and regulations they existed under and what was expected of them completely changed when the Empire occupying them did. And throughout that time, justice would wax and wane, just as it does during our own lifetimes. To the extent that some of the same dynamics that were in play during Jeremiah's time were in play during Jesus'. And I admit that this is around the part of my sermon where I stopped and went "woah the direction this is going is a real bummer!" And I went back a few times trying to figure out if there was a way to cheer it up a bit. But...displacement and genocide and separation of families and military occupation...those aren't cheery topics. It's a disservice to those who came before to try to make them such.

And while, I think there's certainly room to look at this continuation of unjust shepherds throughout history, and feel like it's all pointless, that all that work of

the people amounted to nothing. But I think there's equally room for us to look at that and feel reassured. Because even as all of those other factors changed during those 500 years, God's word didn't. What was true about God during Jerimiah's time held true during Jesus' and continues to be true to this day. And that is that God cares deeply about the most vulnerable, those who are overlooked and shunned by society.

And that God will continue to overthrow the corrupt shepherds. And when all else fails, God will go out and gather us back Herself. This isn't a one time only promise with an expiration date. But rather one that will continue through the ages as empires come and go. Because they are fleeting whereas God's love and concern for us is eternal. And I can think of no better good news than that. Amen.