

Last Sunday of End Time – Christ the King – November 24, 2019

Jeremiah 23:2-6

2 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. 3 “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. 4 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. 5 “The days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. 6 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 Righteousness.

In 1962 there were two young men in southern California who each had separate bands. They met and decided to form one group. While performing in clubs as the Paramours they started to sing more and more duets together. One night several Marines came in from the nearby base and after they had finished a duet, one of them shouted, “That was righteous, brothers!” Using that comment, they changed their name and from then on were known as the Righteous Brothers. They would go on to perform for nearly the next forty years with such hits as “You’ve Lost That Lovin’ Feelin’” and “Unchained Melody” which later became the theme song for the movie “Ghost.” From our Christian perspective, “Righteous Brothers” is a somewhat unusual name. They were not righteous in the biblical sense as we usually understand it. Righteous was a slang term for something that was excellent or genuine. Our text from Jeremiah 23 focuses on the more familiar meaning of righteous, mentioning two names for the Messiah: a righteous Branch in verse 5 and The Lord Our Righteousness in verse 6. On this Christ the King Sunday we will see that **We Have a Righteous King** and look at the two pictures of our King in this text—one as our shepherd and one as the righteous Branch.

Our text begins does not begin on a positive note: “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” (v. 2). The prophet Jeremiah lived and worked during the last years of the kingdom of Judah. The shepherds spoken of in these verses were the leaders of Judah, both political and religious leaders—kings, priests, and prophets. The last kings of Judah were not righteous in any sense of the word. The previous chapter (22) is often entitled “Judgment Against Evil Kings,” and describes the Lord’s anger with the three most recent kings: Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim and Jehoiachin. “Woe to him who builds his palace by unrighteousness, his upper rooms by injustice, making his countrymen work for nothing, not paying them for their labor” (22:13). The kings as well as the religious leaders were at fault for leading the people of Judah into idol worship. They were scattering the flock of God and driving them away from the worship of the true God. They had ignored the warnings of prophets such as Jeremiah. The Lord would bestow punishment on these men as they were all removed from the throne by foreign rulers. Eventually their poor leadership would lead to the destruction of Jerusalem and the scattering of God’s people into exile.

But the Lord did not leave his people without hope. Verses 3 and 4: “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. 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." Jeremiah prophesied that even though the nation would be scattered, there would still be hope. There would be a remnant that would return from exile to live again in Judah under leaders, under shepherds who would take care of them, men like Zerubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah. Finally the ultimate fulfillment would come in the Messiah, the ultimate shepherd who would tend the flock. Jesus would call himself the good shepherd (Jn 10:14) because he was coming not to set up an earthly kingdom, but a heavenly kingdom, where his sheep "will no longer be afraid or terrified, nor will any be missing" (v. 4).

The warning of Jeremiah 23 is not just for the kings and leaders of Judah who lived many years ago. There is also warning for the shepherds of the church throughout the ages, up to this present day. It is for the pastors and teachers and leaders of this congregation who tend the flock of God. We also are to be careful not to scatter or destroy the flock the Lord has entrusted to us by turning the focus away from the preaching of God's Word. While these verses have special application for leaders, finally they apply to everyone. Woe to anyone who would lead one of the sheep astray, causing them to be destroyed in the fires of hell. The Lord will bestow punishment on anyone who does evil to his flock.

This is an awesome responsibility, but a frightening one as well. What if we do something even accidentally to scatter the flock or destroy sheep? After all we are sinful human beings and not righteous on our own. But we have a Righteous King who is also our shepherd. Through the times of our errors and misdirected ways, we do not have to be afraid or terrified because our Lord will shepherd his flock and watch over them. And he will place shepherds over his church to watch over his flock. Not shepherds who are perfect, but imperfect ones whom he can use to guide his sheep through this life until we reach the ultimate safety of heaven.

The other picture used for our righteous King is in verse 5: "'The days are coming,' declares the Lord, 'when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch.'" This is not the only time that the coming Messiah was referred to in this way. Jeremiah uses the same picture in chapter 33 and the prophet Isaiah also speaks of "the Branch of the Lord" (4:2). When we talk about a branch here, we're not talking about a regular branch that you would find on a tree. Rather this refers to a new sprout or shoot, oftentimes from a dead stump. The dead stump would be the house of David, the line of the kings of Judah. That line of kings would end at the destruction of Jerusalem. But the Lord would raise a new branch, a new king from David's descendants.

This Branch is described as righteous, "a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land" (v. 5). Only Jesus fits this description. Only he is righteous, having lived that perfect life without any sin. Only he could be the king who could always do what is just and right. Human rulers may at times be able to act in this way, but not all the time like Jesus can. Verse 6 says, "In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety." This king will bring peace and order, safety and security. Again, an earthly king could possibly establish a kingdom that has these characteristics some of the time, but only Christ could establish such a kingdom. And that kingdom is in heaven, the only place where there will be total security and safety.

What a beautiful description of heaven. A kingdom of safety with a king who reigns wisely. All that is required for entrance into this heaven is to be righteous, to be perfect and without sin. And there's the problem. We are not righteous. We can strive to live a good life, and maybe even seem close to it once in a while. But we do not do what is always just and right in the land. Listen to this list: "Have I been disobedient, proud or unforgiving? Have I been selfish, lazy, envious, or quarrelsome? Have I lied or deceived, taken something not mine, or

given anyone a bad name? Have I abused my body or permitted indecent thoughts to linger in my mind?" (CW p. 156). The list could go on. We are not righteous and Jesus would have every right, in doing "what is just and right in the land", to bar us from heaven and send us to hell for an eternity.

So how is our entrance into heaven possible? The key comes in the last part of verse 6: "This is the name by which he will be called: The Lord Our Righteousness." The key is that one little word "our." We are not righteous. But the Lord is OUR righteousness. Our King came to live a perfect life without any sin. Our King came, as we saw in our gospel lesson, to hang on a cross to pay for the sins of the entire world. He took on our sin so that we could have his righteousness. As the apostle Paul wrote in our second lesson, as a result, "he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Col 1:13,14). We will someday join our righteous King and be safe in his heavenly kingdom because of everything that he has done for us.

The Righteous Brothers will always be remembered for their music, not for being righteous in any biblical sense of the word. But we are righteous because we have a righteous King. As our Shepherd, he leads and guides us through this life, using his imperfect earthly shepherds along the way. As our righteous Branch, he rules and reigns wisely, doing what is just and right for his people. His righteousness is our righteousness because of the sacrifice he made on our behalf. We look forward to the day when we will join our righteous King in his heavenly kingdom. Then we will no longer be afraid or terrified and we will live in safety in his kingdom forever. Amen.