

“The Good Dream”  
FPC 10/4/09 (World Communion Sunday)  
Psalm 23/Jeremiah 23:1-6/Luke 15:1-7  
By Rev. Dr. Glenn Hink

I. Text

Jeremiah 23; “I myself will gather the remnant of my flock.....I will raise up shepherds over them.....”

Luke 15; “Now the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus....and he said, ‘A shepherd had 100 sheep and lost 1.....he looks for it until he finds it.....and when he finds it he lays it on his shoulders, rejoices, and carries it home.’”

**Read Psalm 23.**

II. Introduction

Years after dreaming about a trip to Israel, a retiring pastor was finally able to go with his wife. One day while they were in the northern Galilee area he had to stop his rented car when a large flock of sheep crossed the road. As he took in the sight it was all as he had imagined; green pastures, blue skies with white, puffy clouds, woolly sheep.....it was perfect. It was perfect, that is, until he saw the man coming after the sheep. He was yelling and cursing at the sheep. With a stick he threatened any sheep that began to stray from the flock, and struck those who did, driving them back into the flock. The pastor was alarmed by this man’s behavior. It was not at all like he had imagined. So he called out his car window to the man; “I thought a shepherd was suppose to gently lead his sheep, and call them by name.” The man smiled and responded back, “I’m not the shepherd. I’m the butcher.”

The term “shepherd” is a theologically loaded concept in the Bible. All of our texts this morning draw on this depth of understanding. In a “shepherd culture” people have some familiarity with the responsibilities of a shepherd, so they naturally understand some of the theological depth of the texts. In our culture we are more familiar with the responsibilities and attitudes of a butcher.

A shepherd is to provide provision and protection for the flock under his or her care. This means adequate pasture and water, leading the sheep in the right direction, finding any who mindlessly wander away, and protecting them from predators. The term “shepherd” is also a metaphor for the responsibilities of Israel’s leaders; kings, prophets, priests, and rabbis. Just like shepherds these leaders were to provide provision and protection, give of themselves, keep special watch on the weak, and search for the lost. The model for the various leaders of Israel was to be the Lord, their God, who provided provision and protection for the people during their long history, and

now called these leaders to embody God's shepherding. The Lord, the Shepherd, set the standard, and the leaders were to incarnate the same care, also confessing themselves that "the Lord is my shepherd." Unfortunately many leaders of Israel acted more like butchers than shepherds.

### III. Brief Exegesis

A. Psalm 23. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want..." The well-known Psalm is a confession; a personal statement of trust. It is honest, and acknowledges dark valleys and frightening enemies. There is no foolish delusion about some type of "blessed life in a bubble." Dark valleys and enemies.....they are part of real life. In this real life the Psalm invites trust in the Lord's ultimate provision.....to stare into the face of darkness and real life and believe "the Lord is my shepherd." The Psalm is a personal confession of faith; the trusting of life into the care of the Shepherd.

B. Jeremiah 23:1-6. The leaders of God's people are also to be shepherds, providing protection and provision. Through the prophet Jeremiah we hear God's judgment against Israel's leaders. They have acted more like butchers than shepherds. They have scattered the people, corrupted justice, served themselves, favored the rich and powerful, and ignored the weak and the lost.

And so the Lord promises to come and gather the scattered flock. The Lord will provide protection and provision, and they will know new life. And the Lord will raise up new shepherds.....good shepherds.....faithful shepherds.....who will care for God's people.

And there is a final promise. The day will come when a good shepherd, a faithful shepherd, will come from the line of King David. God will call forth this shepherd, who will lead with justice and righteousness, a shepherd who will act with the grace, power and care of the Lord.....the shepherd who will be the Messiah, the Savior, the Christ, and bring the kingdom of God. It is a great promise for a great day.

C. Luke 15:1-7. That day of promise did come. There was one gathering the scattered. There was one protecting and providing. There was one from the line of King David who acted with the grace, power and care of almighty God. There was one inviting people to a new way of life in the kingdom of God. That's what Jesus is doing in Luke 15. Lost sheep.....tax collectors and sinners....they're gathering around Jesus. And perhaps they believed for the first time, "The Lord really is my shepherd."

And the religious leaders.....the ones who thought they were the shepherds... ..they didn't get it. They knew Jeremiah 23, and could recite and pray the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm....but the concept of shepherd did not shape their faith and lives. Their behavior and beliefs were more like butchers than shepherds. And it's a sad irony that they

cannot recognize “the Lord who is our shepherd.” Sometimes I get concerned about making the same mistakes.

So Jesus tells a story. It’s a story about the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm and Jeremiah 23. It’s about God.....and a story about who Jesus is and what he’s doing. “A shepherd has 100 sheep...one is lost....he looks until he finds it because the one matters.....each one matters.....he never gives up....he rejoices when the lost is found, and brings it home.” That’s what Jesus is about.....who he is.....what he’s doing....then and now.

#### IV. Reflection

Today is World Communion Sunday. Christians around the world are gathering around the table of our Lord, and sharing communion; the Orthodox in Russia and the Orthodox in Hermitage, Roman Catholics in Rome and Farrell, Pentecostals in Brazil, Coptic Christians in Egypt, Presbyterians and Lutherans and Methodists, “mega-churches” with 10,000 members and my little home church of 17 members in Northport, Wa. World Communion Sunday.....honestly it doesn’t fit the way the world is today.....or has ever has been. Different people around one table.....it’s a dream.....really more heaven than earth. We live in a day of scattering and labeling; conservative or liberal, red state or blue state, contemporary or traditional, healthcare reform or “don’t touch my medical plan,” prochoice or prolife, Arab culture or Western culture, “red or yellow, black or white.” And we are scattered because old hurts haven’t healed, old arguments still rage, and old friends can’t forgive. We are more interested in labeling and scattering, and gathering with a few who are “like me,” than we are interested in the work of the Shepherd and welcoming the lost home.

But today is World Communion Sunday.....all people who follow Jesus are invited to the one table of our Lord.....in Russia, Farrell, Egypt, Northport and Sharon. Maybe it is of more dream than life.....more heaven than earth.....but we break bread and share a cup because it is the dream of God, and the Shepherd still gathers the lost. We gather around this table today, together, because each of us has been found, and we’re invited to this banquet to share in the joy of Shepherd. It is a good dream.....a sign of the life to come in the good plan of God.