

The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
Christ the Rock Ev Lutheran Church
Farmington, NM
July 23, 2017

Jeremiah 23:1-6 “Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture!” declares the Lord. 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 for 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 Righteous Savior.

“The Righteous Plan for God’s People”

God has a plan. God has a plan for you. He has a plan for your life. You’ve probably heard that before from a concerned Christian friend. A family member tries to assure you that there is some kind of sense to events that seem absolutely senseless in the moment. That want you to know God knows you and knows what will happen for your life. But what is that plan? What is God going to do? And if God knows this plan, would it really hurt him to share that plan with you? It shouldn’t be that hard. Sometimes people tell you phrases like this to reassure you and comfort you in difficult times. But plans their words can be so vague that they are almost meaningless.

Plans can give us a sense of security in the middle of a chaotic world. But those kinds of plans have to have some flesh on the skeleton. It’s the difference between having a plan to get out of debt and outlining specific steps you will take to pay down your credit card bill. You make a plan to lower your cell phone bill to a plan with less data, getting rid of your cable - at least until the credit card bill is more manageable, and going out to eat one less time each week. You make a plan to be the starting shortstop on your baseball team next year. That means between now and then anyone who stops by your house will be forced to play catch so you can strengthen your arm, you will bounce a baseball off a wall until you become an expert at fielding grounders, and spending as much time in the batting cage as is humanly possible. You make a plan to be a doctor someday. That means it’s never too early to push yourself to get good grades, take advanced classes whenever possible, and volunteering at the hospital to get a little real world experience.

In Jeremiah chapter twenty-three, God tells his people he has a plan. It's not just a vague idea expressing some general sentiments. It is specific and detailed. It outlines steps God will take to make that righteous plan a reality for his people. It's much more like the first time a parent leaves her precious child alone with a babysitter. God's plan is realistic, requiring his intervention, and provides ultimate peace and security.

Part I: God's plan gets messed up by unfaithful shepherds

One of the only things you know with 100% certainty when you make a plan is that things won't always go according to plan. Something always goes wrong to make a mess of that plan and force you to come up with a Plan B. At the time of the Prophet Jeremiah, God had given his people leaders to carry out his plan. Prophets were sent to share God's message. Kings weren't just rulers, but spiritual leaders to direct God's people and guide them in God's ways. Think of the reign of King David. He led God's people and composed songs and poems to teach God's people. But David was also a deeply flawed person. He abused his authority to indulge his own desires. He mismanaged his own household so the kingdom was put in danger. And after the time of King David the kings only got worse.

God's people wandered farther and farther away from Him. Instead of correcting the people, the kings actually encouraged sinful behavior and led them into idolatry. False prophets became spineless yes men to faithless rulers and fed the people the spiritual junk food of whatever made them feel like they were ok with God.

God frames this spectacular unfaithfulness in these terms: **"Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture!"** (Jeremiah 23:1) These shepherds God had sent didn't just mess up a little bit in their jobs. They did the exact opposite of what God had told them to do.

God acts like a protective parent when his children's lives have been put at risk. His reaction is like a parent returning home to see a babysitter complete neglect her responsibilities. Mom and dad come home at 10:30 and the children are still awake with the babysitter, chocolate smeared all over their faces, candy wrappers laying all over the floor. When their anger finally subsides and the babysitter is dismissed, the parents find empty alcohol bottles in the trash can.

God isn't just a little bit upset about the miserable failures of his appointed shepherds. They should know better. He shouldn't have to explain all this. He shouldn't have to spell all of this out in detail. But he had told them. He had warned them. Now his patience is up. He has to take action. He has to act himself for the safety of his people.

Part II: God himself will shepherd His people

There is a reason why people avoid God. So many people have this notion that God is this angry being who is constantly raving about how naughty we have been. You might know better, but when you've been messing up, church feels like the last place you want to be. There are plenty of people out there who know less about the Bible than you do and they just want to avoid an angry confrontation with a hostile deity.

Last week we saw how God doesn't shy away from bad news. God wants us to be realistic and embrace the bad news because it serves his bigger purpose. And that's exactly what we see in these verses from Scripture today. God has this harsh message. But God mainly wants to deal with the harsh realities of our human predicament. And, more importantly, God uses that bad news to show us his better way.

It's not just that there are vague, nebulous dangers out there. But there are people who are threatening your soul. People who should know better are leading people away from God. People with power and influence put souls at risk by their misinformation and bad examples. God has to respond: **"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."** (Jeremiah 23:2) There's actually a play on words here that isn't obvious in the English. Since the shepherds God appointed to take care of his people aren't paying proper attention to them, God will pay attention to them. God will turn his attention to them in retribution.

You don't have to look very far to find some examples. If God has given you responsibilities in your home, you know how many times you have looked out for yourself before the welfare of your family even crossed your mind. If God has placed you in a marriage, you know how easily you can feel slighted because you are getting what you need from your spouse, instead of thinking how you can serve your husband or wife in sacrificial love. If you are in a position where you can lead and influence others, you know how often your own agenda takes precedence over your care for other souls. You know the risk people face because of the failures of faithless shepherds. You know that risk because you have put others at risk when you have failed to properly care for the people God has placed under your care in your life.

You also know what happens when the people you trust let you down. If you need to do a job right, you do it yourself. God is realistic about the failures of his undershepherds. He can't leave them susceptible to bad influences, letting their souls be exposed to risks. God must act. He himself springs into action to care for his people.

Part II: The Righteous Branch provides ultimate care and security

God plans to care for his people himself. God makes this promise: **"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."** (Jeremiah 23:3,4) Even though none of God's people had been completely guiltless, God will demonstrate his compassion for them. Even though leaders and people alike had failed him, God promises generous faithfulness to give his people exactly what they need.

Most of the time there is no such thing as a foolproof plan. Most of the time. But if God is the one behind the plan and God is the one carrying out the plan, that changes things. God puts us all on alert: **"The days are coming...when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch."** (Jeremiah 23:5) That phrase, "the days are coming" are not a fortune cookie level

prediction. It is the certain promise that God is determined to personally intervene in history. He comes to act directly in the lives of his people. Sometimes that means judgment, sometimes that means rescue, sometimes that means sending the Messiah.

He gives us an important clue about the way God is intervening directly when he promises a "righteous Branch." It sounds like an odd guarantee. But there are some other really good and really clear prophecies in the Old Testament where the Branch is a name for the promised Messiah. And it makes sense when we remember the dynasty of King David is described as a tree. That tree gets cut down to a stump when the kings and prophets prove unfaithful. So from this lifeless stump of David's dynasty, we have life. We get growth.

And it's not just any growth, not just any life. It is righteous coming. For all the wayward and faithless spiritual leaders, this Branch will be in perfect alignment with God's will. He will conform to all God's instruction and go along with all God's decrees and carry out with 100% faithfulness God's guidance for his people. This one perfect leader will bring practical benefits for God's people: **"a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land."** (Jeremiah 23:5) He will have the wisdom and practical insights to rule for the good of God's people.

God's ultimate plan for the care and safety of his people requires him to send his own Son. Jesus didn't just go through the motions to keep up a good image, but was righteous in every way. He was pure in heart and blameless in his mind. Jesus challenged his critics to prove him guilty of even a single sin (John 8:46). He didn't just do what he was supposed to do to keep away God's anger, but he was perfect through and through because that perfection is what God requires of you and me and every person. His life wins approval from God. His sacrifice supplies the righteousness every human being lacks.

So Jesus earned the name: **"The Lord Our Righteous Savior."** (Jeremiah 23:6) That name is a play on words. One of the failed kings at the time of Jeremiah was named Zedekiah. His name means "The LORD is Righteous." But his life showed the exact opposite. Jesus is the true King and Messiah who is "our righteousness." He is your righteousness. He is my righteousness. He is the righteousness for every failed and flawed human being.

God has a plan. Jesus is God's plan for you. The life and death of Jesus are God's plan for your life. When God stepped into the failed mess his unfaithful shepherds had caused, he promised to intervene directly by sending Jesus to be your refuge and strength. Jesus gives your life a solid foundation. Complete reliance on your righteous Savior gives your life a solid foundation. God promises you will live in confidence, security, and peace.

God's plan for your life revolves around Jesus. Jesus is your shepherd and King. Jesus is your answer to death and life. Jesus gives you identity and adoption through Baptism. Jesus feeds you with forgiveness in the Lord's Supper. Jesus makes sure all your prayers and concerns are heard. Jesus will take you home to be with him. Amen.

Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him. Amen.