

I Will Bring Them Back

Proper 11

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Jer. 23:1-6

Grace, peace, and mercy be to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

When does the sheepfold scatter? When they hear the voice of a stranger. For whose voice are they listening? The Shepherd's. That's what the Scriptures tell us.

The Scriptures also tell us that some may come to church as hypocrites. The word hypocrite actually means "two-faced." It's kind of like playing Halloween everyday—putting on a mask and acting like something or someone you're not. Hypocrites are not part of the sheepfold, unless they should turn and repent. The only thing which will cause them to turn and repent is the same thing which causes the sheep to turn and repent: the Shepherd's voice.

Who is this Shepherd? It is Jesus Christ the Lord. It is the "righteous Branch" God promises Jeremiah that He will send. So in both the New Testament and the Old Testament, the sheepfold was listening for the voice of the Shepherd, Jesus, whether in waiting for Him to come, or now that He has.

Verse 1

When God told Jeremiah "Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!", then, He was not issuing judgment against His own prophets. God does not use His wrath against His prophets for being saint and sinners and falling into sin on occasion. He was declaring that there were those prophesying whom He did not send. There were those prophets speaking the word of strangers rather than the Word of and about His Son, Jesus. And it was that, the speaking of the word of a stranger, which was causing His flock to disperse—not because one of His prophets was human and a saint and a sinner.

"Therefore thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who care for my people: 'You have scattered my flock and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. Behold, I will attend to you for your evil deeds, declares the Lord.'"

God is a jealous God who does not take false prophesy lightly. He will render judgment against those who falsely prophesy in His name. That is as true now as it was then. There are many today who claim to speak for God but who do not use His voice. They use the voices of strangers. They speak things which God has not told them to speak. And God will punish them for it if they do not repent of it and turn from it.

After all, it is only the Word of the Shepherd which will save His people. God has told us that it is only by His Son, the Way, the Truth, and the Life, that anyone will be saved. And God does not want any to perish. Yet when false prophets come along with the words of strangers, they mislead the sheep. They cause them to go down other paths which will lead to their deaths. So God doesn't take it lightly when false shepherds show up and begin misleading His people. He declares that He Himself will put an end to it. And He Himself will bring His sheep back to His fold.

Verse 2

"Then I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will set shepherds over them who will care for them, and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall any be missing, declares the Lord."

The Lord is a jealous God and a jealous Shepherd. He does not want His sheep to be without a shepherd, or, even worse, to be misled. That's why He sent His Son and why He sends men in the ministry to proclaim His Word—the Words of the Shepherd, to which all the sheep of His fold listen.

When Jesus departed with His disciples to receive much-needed rest in our Gospel text, He came ashore to the people who went ahead of them and had compassion on them. As the Shepherd, Jesus had compassion on them because they were as sheep without a shepherd. They had been hearing the false prophets—the Pharisees and the Sadducees—who were denying that He was the Shepherd, the Messiah and Branch to come. So Jesus fed them—yes eventually with bread, but first, and more importantly, with His Word. He taught them for hours, until it was coming up to sundown. And the people did not turn away from His teaching. They did not complain at how long He was teaching them.

It is true that after the great feeding of five thousand men John records in his Gospel that many left Jesus—so many that He even turned to the Twelve to ask if they were going to turn away as well. But the Twelve and perhaps a few others did not turn away. They recognized the voice of the Shepherd, and, as the Scriptures say, the sheep listen to the voice of their Shepherd. They do not turn away from it—at least not forever.

The image of the Shepherd implies that we, as sheep, turn away and need to be brought back from time to time. So God says He Himself will bring them back. And how will He do this? With His Word. The sheep of His flock will listen to His Word.

Verse 3

“Behold, the days are coming, declares 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 dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: “The Lord is our righteousness.””

Jesus came as the Branch, the Messiah who was promised to come, and ultimately as the Good Shepherd. He loved the sheep of His fold. He fed them with the good pasture of His Word. And He was willing to—and did—lay down His own life.

Jesus died on the cross for the sins of all people of all time. Every sin has been washed away—yes, even those of the false shepherds and the sheep who wander away. And the way to receive this forgiveness is by faith. This is not to say there is something you must do. It is the Holy Spirit who works this faith into us—into you and me. It is by the working of the Spirit that we not only hear but also receive and listen to the voice of our Shepherd—namely, His Word, which is all about how He came to lay down His life for you and me.

Woe indeed to any false prophets who do not repent. The Lord God will bring judgment on them. But God's favor remains on His sheep, whom He has brought back to His fold by the death of His Son. That's the Word which has been proclaimed from this pulpit for over one hundred years now, and will continue to be the Word proclaimed here because it is the Word of the Shepherd for God's sheep. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

