

Homily July 21, 2024

Beloved Creator, be our source of strength as we seek your presence. We acknowledge your presence in all we do and everywhere we go. Please, don't just keep blessing us, but use us to bless others in your name.

In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Woe to the shepherds! These are the first words of this morning's reading from Jeremiah. "Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the Lord". "It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you."

Now, Jeremiah is not talking about shepherds or sheep. The concept of a shepherd, one who protects, feeds, tends to the ills of his flock - that concept was often applied to a ruler in Jeremiah's time. Some shepherds took excellent care of their flock and others – well, not so much. Jeremiah was a prophet at the time of the Babylonian captivity and since the Babylonian captivity is such an important part of Israel's history, let's take a few minutes to review it. From 640 to 609 BCE (54 years or so before the Captivity) King Josiah was a righteous ruler who ruled Israel with justice, concern for the poor, and with emphasis on the the worship of God. However, after that, Israel fell on hard times, and by the time Jeremiah was prophesizing four kings had succeeded Josiah, and each had been a bad shepherd to his flock overseeing years of unsuccessful alliances, wars and destruction. These are the shepherds God is speaking about through the prophecies of Jeremiah.

Woe to the shepherds, indeed, but woe also to the people of Jerusalem. In 597 BCE, Babylon laid siege to the city of Jerusalem, and killed, or took captive many of the inhabitants. The second siege of Jerusalem, which took place in 586 BCE resulted in the complete destruction of the city, the temple and the death or removal of all citizens, except for the poorest who were left to farm and tend the vines. All others were brought to Babylon to live under Babylonian rule.

But the passage from Jerimiah not only says that God will "attend" to the bad shepherds but also states that "I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them". Now you may have read that line this morning and had the same response that I did when I first read it – the word "I" must be a typo. Certainly God had not scattered the sheep and driven them away, had he? But it does say "I" have driven them not only in our version of the readings, but in others as well. But why would the Lord say that he had driven them away? Well as it turns out not only were the rulers, irresponsible and incompetent but the people who lived under their rule, fell back into their old ways of pagan worship. Despite King Josiah's good leadership, the people of Israel turned away from God. Jeremiah, who was a prophet in Jerusalem at the time wrote in Jeremiah 7:9-10 "Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known, and then come and stand

before me in this house” (that is the temple) “which bears my Name, and say, ‘We are safe’—safe to do all these detestable things?”

Was the Babylonian captivity – the driving away of the sheep from their fold in Jerusalem - God’s promised punishment for the behavior of the Jews in the year’s leading up to the Babylonian captivity?

Some commentators believe that others see the Babylonian captivity as a period of purification and renewed commitment to God.

I like the second explanation and let me return to the analogy of a shepherd and his sheep for a moment to explore it. Sheep cannot graze in the same spot forever.

Periodically they need to be moved to other pasture to ensure their health and the health of the land they graze on. Certainly for the sheep it is upsetting when their shepherd drives them to a different pasture but ultimately it is for their own good and the health of the herd.

During the 70 years spent in Babylon, the Israelites rediscovered their faith and the traditions and beliefs centered on their special relationship with God. Perhaps Babylon was the new pasture in which the Israelites – the people of the Good Shepherd – were able to recover their spiritual health.

Still 70 years is a long time to raise your children to be observant Jews in an alien land. But that is what they did and when Cyrus the great defeated the Babylonian powers and took control of their empire, he encouraged the Israelites to return to Jerusalem and indeed to rebuild the temple there. How odd it must have seemed to most of the 50,000 or so that set off on that return trip to Jerusalem - to go back to a home they had never seen nor had their parents nor their grandparents. But God had said that he would bring them back to their fold and there they would be fruitful and multiply. It was an act of faith, a trust in God, their Good shepherd, that brought them back to Jerusalem.

This story, of the Babylonian captivity, and ultimately the return to Jerusalem, is one of the great biblical accounting of events which demonstrate the faithfulness of God in dealing with his chosen people. Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Moses - in each of these stories God remains steadfast.

And, although at times his patience is sorely tried, he honors the commitments he made to his people. It is this special relationship between God and the Israelites, that colors so much of the old testament.

But how does that translate into the life of Christ, and ultimately into the New Testament? Well, Paul’s letter to the Ephesians which we heard this morning addresses that. He is talking to the Christians in Ephesia and dealing with a major point of contention for this time. Do Gentiles need to become Jews in order to be Christians? That sounds like an odd question for us since we see Judaism and Christianity as parallel religions but in those days many Christians were initially Jews. Were they to accept as brothers and sisters in their church Gentiles who did not follow the same Rules of Moses in their daily life? Now Paul points out that a major issue between the two groups was whether the males were circumcised or not, and uses it to describe the role of Christ in speaking to all Jews and Gentiles alike. He says that Jesus Christ is our peace and in his flesh he has made both groups – the circumcised and the uncircumcised – into one. That he has “broken down the dividing wall” and “abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new

humanity in place of the two, thus making peace” with the sacrifice he made. Paul continues, “You are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the Saints, and also members of the household of God built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ, Jesus, himself as cornerstone”. It is by calling upon the prophets, and the apostles to blend old and new that Christ creates something quite different and allows the two groups to move forward with one common goal and one common God.

But what about God’s special relationship with Israel? Well for the Jews, who did not become Christians that remains a cornerstone of their belief. For those who became Christians and the Gentiles that joined them, God through Christ created a new relationship, not one that discarded the old, but one that grew naturally from the old into the new.

And what did Paul mean when he said that Christ had “abolished the law with its commandments”? Jesus talked about two great commandments, simplifying man’s relationship with God and making it hard to quibble. Love God and love your neighbor as yourself. That is the distillation of the commandments, and a simple and inescapable way for all human beings to live a life of righteousness.

Now Paul in his letter to the Ephesians was talking about Christ after his death, but Mark’s gospel, our third reading from this morning, describes an event which took place earlier, when Jesus was still alive. I like to think that the story illustrates, the compassion of the good shepherd that was at the heart of so much that Jesus taught. First of all the apostles, who had been out on the road gathered around Jesus to tell him what they had done and taught, and instead of replying “this is wonderful, give me more information, let’s brainstorm” Jesus said, “come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while for many were coming and going, and they had no time even to eat”. So they went away in a boat to a deserted place but rest wasn’t to be theirs. For as Jesus went ashore to this place that he had hoped would provide a respite for his apostles, He saw a great crowd of people. A crowd He saw as sheep without a shepherd, and He began to teach them many things.

You know if you think of this great mass of people, I’m sure they came for different reasons - some came to hear Him preach - this man who spoke with such authority and preached a exciting and inclusive gospel. Some came to be healed or to bring their loved ones to be healed. And some were sort of the paparazzi of their day and came because it was exciting and maybe it was the place to be.

But for Jesus, they were all sheep that needed a shepherd. I like to think that as he walked among the crowds that gathered in the villages and cities He didn’t make His way through the crowds walking quickly so that as many people as possible could touch his cloak and be healed. I like to think it didn’t happen quite that way. When we hear of Jesus healing in other parts of the New Testament, we always see a one on one interaction. Could time slow down enough to allow a personal Interaction with each person He healed in these great crowds?

Several weeks ago the gospel reading of Mark 5:25-34 told of the menstruating woman who touched Jesus’s cloak to be healed and that Jesus made a point of turning to find her. It was really crowded and his disciples said you’re not going to figure out who touched your cloak but He persevered and He found her and blessed her one on one. In

the story of the blind man at the temple gate (John 9) Jesus even reaches out to the blind man several days after he healed him.

I like to think that as Jesus walked through that crowd, he knew his flock the way a shepherd knows his flock, and that each one of them was important and each recognized him.

What does that mean to us? Well, a few months ago I gave a homily on the good shepherd, and I said the good shepherd isn't about just God and Jesus taking care of us and being our shepherd, but that we need to become shepherds ourselves.

And the last time I spoke, I talked about how life-changing it has been for me to get to know people with dementia in my husband's nursing home.

I'm not very brave and I was very afraid of coming to know these people. I didn't think I could be brave enough to care about them. I thought I would just keep my distance and avert my eyes and walk by. But I didn't and it's not because I did anything but because in my heart there was something at work in me that helped me to see these people as individuals. I guess my question now is can I use that to deepen and broaden other parts of my life. Maybe right now isn't the moment, but sometime down the road can I find other ways to interact with people who have been marginalized, with people who can be easily seen as statistics or as simply part of a social class? Can I see them as individuals and say their names? And you? Can you find opportunities to shepherd to others on a one on one basis?

So it's a long story coming from the Babylonian captivity and the Jews who must've felt deserted and Jeremiah who said you're not deserted. There are better things coming for you. God will be faithful

A long way to Paul's letter to the Ephesians explaining that others who had not been called in the past to be faithful to God's law, could now become children of God, brothers and sisters of those who believed, part of a new covenant with God through Jesus Christ.

And then finally Jesus, coming into the crowds of people to be their Good Shepherd fulfilling again faithfully the words of Jeremiah that they "shall not fear any longer or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing."

Thanks be to God.

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Crabtree Cottage

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