

SERMON – PASTOR GREG
21.07.2024

Jeremiah 23:1-6. ¹ *‘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.*

Some families are very close, staying together and caring for each other. Like king Jeroboam who we heard about last week where for four generations their family lived together and handed on the family business. Certainly, there are people here today who have taken over the family farm and who know exactly where their grandparents lived. People who often get to spend time with their cousins.

On the other hand, some families spread out over all the earth, being unafraid of moving to new places and making lives for themselves without constant oversight from their uncles and aunts. Certainly, Australia was colonised by these sorts of people.

In our Ephesians reading today we hear how many people were separated, isolated, dispersed. We hear how they are gathered together and welcomed into the family of God. From verse 17 we hear about Jesus: ¹⁷ *He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸ For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.*

¹⁹ *Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. ²¹ In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. ²² And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.*

Now from the very beginning God gave humanity the task of caring for His creation, he also told our ancestors to be fruitful and multiply, to fill the earth. Sometimes this was done in a joyous and orderly way and other times the effects of sin are evident. Perhaps we have been driven here against our will, like the exiles to Babylon. Or like our convict ancestors, sent to Australia from England in order to avoid the punishment of death. Perhaps, like in the parable of the prodigal son, we wanted to be our own shepherds and moved away from house and home in order to make our own decisions for ourselves.

In our OT reading the people were spread out because their leaders made it very difficult to live at home. They had been continuously failing to defend God’s Sabbath rest, they had not been caring for or nurturing the people as a father should nurture his children. The leaders of the people and the government were neither caring, merciful or forgiving. But most of all God was upset with them because they had scattered God’s faithful believers. We hear:

‘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.

This is when we get God’s amazing promise. When we hear how he will save his people. Not so much from the evil leaders or the invading armies. But rather from themselves. God promises that he will save his people from the influence of Satan.

We hear: *'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.*

Know that wherever you are, wherever you travel, no matter how far or how wide you roam. The Lord our God will always be ready to welcome you home. As it says in our psalm for today, he will pursue his people with his goodness and love.

As we build our lives upon the teachings of the apostles and the Lutheran confessions we can be 'at home' wherever we are. When Christ is our solid foundation and the one that we trust in, heaven comes to us. When we live our lives as a daily offering, serving our neighbours we become Christ's hands and feet in our community. When we continually repent of our sins and seek forgiveness from God, that is when the Holy spirit dwells within us richly and we grow in our sanctification.

What we have before us is a marathon of a journey and not a sprint. There will be many challenges and sometimes God will need to punish us by driving us away from his presence. But that is not because he no longer loves us, it is because he desires us to have repentant hearts, to not take pride in our own works and to not boss others around abusing our authority and perverting justice.

People in our community see you coming to church and know that you claim to be Christians. But when people in our community see us sinning, we bring shame upon the Lord our God, we cause his name to be blasphemed just as did those shepherds; the priests and kings in the time of Jeremiah. It is by our actions in our communities that we bear witness to the name of God.

Therefore, it is all the more important for us to come to church each and every week with the prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner"

Each and every time we turn back to God in repentance we are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit. Whenever we gather together as church community to support each other we grow in peace and unity. As we submit to Christ and his authority we will no longer be afraid or terrified.

Today and in this place, the Lord our God promises is present. He listens to our prayers. As we gather together in this building set apart for service to God, he serves us with the forgiveness of sins. Here is a place where we listen to God's word in peace and safety. It is here in this building that people make covenantal promises of marriage, present their children to the Lord for Baptism and say their final farewells to their parents. And most importantly this is where Jesus serves us with himself, in the bread and the wine for the forgiveness of our sins. Amen.