

Sunday July 21, 2024

## Christmas in July

It seems a common occurrence these days that one of the marketing strategies is to celebrate Christmas in July. The southern hemisphere enjoys their winter weather then and the celebration takes on what we in the north usually experience in December. Movies play on television to get us in the mood for the upcoming season, prompting us to spend money during a time which would otherwise be uneventful, helping to clear out businesses old stock inventory making space for the new products we will want in the months to come. We reminisce about the journey Mary and Joseph took, the inn and the stable, and all the travellers who followed the star to visit them: the magi and the shepherds. In Luke chapter 2, verse 8 we hear that there were shepherds living out in their fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night. And behold an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. The angel said, "Do not be afraid, for behold I bring you good tidings of joy which will be to all people". The scripture tells us that they went to Bethlehem and found Mary and Joseph and the Babe lying in a manger. Now when they had seen Him, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child and all those who heard it marveled at those things which were told them by the shepherds. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they have heard and seen. Shepherds are mentioned more than 118 times in the Bible, and they play many significant rolls in the ancient text. It is estimated that shepherding has been around for more than 5000

years and that it exists today as one of oldest occupations. The duty of a shepherd is to maintain the flock, moving it from pasture to pasture, protecting the flock from predators, and guiding it to markets. It has been and still has a vital role in our economies in addition to its significance Biblically: the patriarchs Abraham and Jacob count themselves amongst many figures who were shepherds, like Moses and King David. Our word pastor derives its meaning from the Latin term pastor, meaning shepherd and we know Jesus is referred to as the Good Shepherd. Today's readings center around this concept of the shepherd and what it represented to those people: many suffering and exiled, lost without someone to guide them, and feeling excluded and alone. The first reading today is from book of Jeremiah.

Centuries of corrupt leadership has taken its toll in Jewish society. It was about 630 BC and the Assyrian empire was the dominating force at this time, occupying territory from Africa all the way into Asia Minor: attacks from the Hittites to the northwest, Babylonians in Asia Minor and Egyptian forces to the south, this empire it is nearing its end. Surrounded by a society of pagan beliefs which included child sacrifice, Judah stood alone with its once traditional belief in Yahweh: but no one can be an island under these circumstances. Pressured to tow the line, Judean rulers for centuries, had adapted some of these pagan traditions of their oppressors and lost the truth and justice that God has taught them. King Josiah was the ruler of Judah at this time and desired a remodelling of the great temple. He sent his priests to find out the treasures and monies available for this venture. What they discovered would have greater significance than they could have ever imagined. Amongst the treasures unearthed was the original Book of Law. King Josiah after having had the book read to him, was overcome with repentance and shook Judah's society with many reforms: he tore down idols and restored

the worship of the Lord in the temple. He commanded the celebration of Passover which had not been observed for over 500 years. Onto this stage, Jeremiah stepped. Jeremiah was a man consumed by his faith and commitment to God. When only a teenager, God spoke to Jeremiah and said, “Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you. Before you were born, I sanctified you: I ordained you a prophet to the nations”. Then Jeremiah said, “Behold, I cannot speak for I am youth.” But God said to Jeremiah, “Do not say I am youth, for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and whatever I command you, you shall speak. Behold I have put My words in your mouth.” There are 57 chapters in the Bible attributed to Jeremiah – he had a lot to say and a lot to do. In 609 B.C., King Josiah fell in battle, and his sons took over the reigns: but both were corrupt and gave up the reforms their father had in place and followed the Egyptian and eventually, Babylonian ways. Eventually, the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar stormed Jerusalem, sacked the temple, and dethroned the current ruler, sending many into exile. Jeremiah warned the Hebrew people of their wrong doings and was a very vocal force against the oppressors, for which Jeremiah was punished and eventually exiled. The first reading today is from **Jeremiah, Chapter 23, verses 1-6** and I am reading from the **New Revised King James version**.

**“Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter my sheep of My pasture!” says the Lord. <sup>2</sup>Therefore thus, says the Lord God of Israel against the people who feed My people: “You have scattered My flock, driven them away, and not attended them. Behold I will attend to you for the evil of your doings,” says the Lord. <sup>3</sup>But I will gather the remnant of My flock out of all countries where I have driven them and bring them back to their folds; and they shall be fruitful and increase. <sup>4</sup>I will set up shepherds over them who will feed them; and they shall fear no more, not be dismayed, nor**

**shall they be lacking,” says the Lord. <sup>5</sup> “Behold, the days are coming,” says the Lord, “That I will raise to David a Branch of righteousness; A King shall reign and prosper and execute judgement and righteousness in the earth. <sup>6</sup>In His days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell safely; Now this is His name by which He will be called: THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS.”**

Scholars debate this text: whether these are admonishments of the corrupt kings of Judah, and the suffering Hebrew peoples in Babylon scattered like seeds in exile or that this is the prediction of Jesus Christ foretelling of His ministry and ultimate sacrifice. God is eternal. He knows the past, He knows the present, He knows the future – He is the great I AM. This is a warning to all who stray from the Word: truth and justice is what God asks of us. We may all feel abandoned at times and lost without direction like sheep without a shepherd. But God reassures us through this text, that He is always there for us, tending us, guiding us, leading us, protecting us. Like the shepherd in the field watching over their flocks, God feeds and nurtures us with His word. The second reading for today is the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm which is most likely one of the most well known of any of the 150 Psalms in the Bible. Studying the Psalm, it can be noted that in the heart of this poem, are the words “Thou are with me.” There are exactly 26 Hebrew words before and after this numerical center which address God in the third person, He does this, and He does that. But in the center, the Psalmist speaks to God directly: “Thou art with me”, “Thy rod and staff”, “Thou dost prepare.” God should be at the center of our lives and His teachings lead and guide us everyday.

**I will be reading from the New Revised King James Version:  
please feel free to join in.**

**The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.**

**He makes me to lie down in green pastures;**

**He leads me beside the still waters.**

**He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness  
for His name's sake.**

**Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,**

**I will fear no evil; for Thou are with me, Thy rod and Thy staff, they  
comfort me.**

**You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;**

**You anoint my head with oil; my cup run over.**

**Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my  
life;**

**And I will dwell in the house of the Lord, forever.**

As we discussed earlier, one of a shepherd's duties is to protect his flock. Oil was used by the Shepherds to protect the sheep's wounds and keep the insects away from their heads. By anointing our heads, God brings healing and comfort to brokenness, soothing our hurts and protecting us from the turmoil of life. A shepherd's path can be fraught with danger from thieves and robbers on the path. The rod was a cudgel: a short thick like a baton or mace worn on the belt. The staff was a long pole with a curved end and was used to move, count, and examine the sheep in the evening when they returned to the fold and to rescue those trapped, or to be used as a support to lean on. God is our protector, and He leads us to places where we can find peace and restoration and guides us to paths where we make better choices for ourselves. Any time we have troubles, God

promises to be there to save us and to lead us to safety and to be our support to lean on in challenging times.

Let us join our voices together in singing Voices United, #397, O Praise the Gracious Power

As we heard in the story of Jeremiah, the Babylonians destroyed the temple of Jerusalem, and exiled the people. About 70 years later, Cyrus the Persian conquered Babylon and granted permission for the Jews to return to Jerusalem and to rebuild the Holy Temple. This temple remained an economic, religious, and cultural hub for 535 years until Herod dismantled it and built a new structure on its site. Herod's version was grand indeed: he hired 10000 men to complete the project and 1000 stonemasons and builders to teach the priests how to build the altar as no Gentile was allowed to be in this Holy sanctum. The temple was 15 stories tall, and it measured about 35 acres and in its design, concentric rings of holiness. The outer court was called the Court of the Gentiles, where all nations could come and worship God, teach and be taught. This court was contained by a three-foot wall through which there were 13 gates and only Jews could pass through to the inner courtyards. Warning signs in various languages were posted at the gates clearly stating, "If any Gentiles would go past this wall, it was on the penalty of death."

**Our Third reading today is from Ephesians, Chapter 2, verses 11-22**

**Therefore remember, that you once Gentiles in the flesh – who are called uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands – <sup>12</sup> that at the time you were without Christ,**

being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope without God in the world. <sup>13</sup> But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. <sup>14</sup> For He himself is our peace, who had made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, <sup>15</sup> having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of the commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself, one new man from the two, thus making peace, <sup>16</sup> and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity. <sup>17</sup> And He came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near. <sup>18</sup> For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father. <sup>19</sup> Now therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, <sup>20</sup> having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, <sup>21</sup> in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, <sup>22</sup> in whom you are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.

The Jewish tradition of circumcision had been in existence since Abraham's time and set them apart from those who did not practice not just in a religious capacity but a social and economic one as well. But the author is clear to point out, it is not that one group would be more dominant than another or fall under the power of the others: Jews do not become Gentiles nor do Gentiles become Jews. It is that they become united in Christ, the Good Shepherd who shall lead them to victory through His sacrifice, that all will have everlasting life.

Let us join our voices together and sing Voices United, #436, Abide with me

**Our fourth and final reading for today is from Mark Chapter 6, Verses 30-34 followed by verses 53-56**

**<sup>30</sup> Then the apostles gathered to Jesus and told Him all things, both what they had done and what they had taught.<sup>31</sup> And He said to them, “Come aside by yourselves to a deserted place and rest awhile.” For there were many coming and going, and they did not even have time to eat. <sup>32</sup> So they departed to a deserted place in the boat by themselves. <sup>33</sup> But the multitudes saw them departing, and many knew Him and ran there on foot from all cities. They arrived before them and came together to Him. <sup>34</sup> And Jesus, when He came out, saw a great multitude and was moved with compassion for them, because they were like sheep not having a shepherd. So He began to teach many things...**

Each of these verses underscores the imagery that Jesus' identity is as a true shepherd as he recognized that these people are lost without knowing the word of God, in danger for the evil that can influence them. Everyone had heard of the miracles Jesus had performed and brought those suffering to be healed. Jesus felt compassion for them, even though he was ready to experience solitude and retreat in the desert. He was not only their guide but a leader: a subtle but important distinction between the two. As their guide, he spoke the truth of God, showing the way to their salvation but even more as their leader, the many and His disciples, he showed them through His deeds and actions the path to everlasting life.

In Jesus time, the marketplace was a centralized community hub which was not only an economic center, but political as well. Influential people



abound and those in power, abundant. Yet Jesus chose this place, to heal the sick, to help the poor, all of those who were unworthy for such a place. This created tremendous controversy but His mission was to show that all are worthy, all are welcome in God's kingdom if they believe.

### **Verses 53 - 56**

**When they crossed over, they came to the land of Gennesaret and anchored there. <sup>54</sup> And when they came out of the boat, immediately the people recognized Him, <sup>55</sup> ran though that whole surrounding region, and began to carry about on beds those who were sick to wherever they heard He was. <sup>56</sup> Wherever He entered, into villages, cities, or the country, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged Him that they might just touch the hem of His garment. And as many as touched Him were made well.**

Louise Harding