

Preacher: Tim Hollenberg-Duffey

Scripture: Jeremiah 23:1-8

George Buttrick is often considered one of the best preachers of the 20th century. He teaches preaching at Vanderbilt Seminary. “In one of his favorite stories, he tells of coming one day upon a farmer who had just rescued a lost sheep. When Buttrick asked how the sheep got lost, the farmer replied, “They just nibble themselves lost.” They go, he explained, from one tuft of grass to another, until at last they've lost their way.

That's what happens in life, isn't it? Unless we make judgments about what are the big rocks, the medium-sized rocks, the pebbles and the sand, we nibble away at life until it's gone, and we have no idea where we went.”¹

We nibble ourselves lost, too, and wonder how we got so far away from the shepherd.

Shepherds are responsible for their flocks because shepherds know their sheep are prone to wander and nibble themselves to danger. Shepherds become a central image of the Christmas story. Shepherd's receive the angelic proclamation of “Good News.” Shepherds go to the manger to greet the newborn king. But these responsible shepherds—what did they do with their sheep while they wandered into Bethlehem? Well, I imagine the sheep came along. If these are good shepherds, they'll know the sheep will wander without them.

In our Bible read-through, we've clearly witnessed the wanderings of the people of Israel. Over and over, they nibble themselves into trouble by sampling the grass of other lands, sampling gods, sampling customs, when they should have stayed closer to God's law where things were safe. My Sunday School class has now said repeatedly that they understand why the people wished King David or someone from his line would come back because even though while we read about David, things were always great, they were a lot better than how life for the Israelites progresses. David sins, but he returns to God, and David is a good King maybe because he's cast as a good shepherd. Remember that young image of scrawny David, the shepherd boy. He's a boy who protects his flock from danger. He keeps them close—much like he'll do when he's at his best as king.

Carl Rife tells of being chosen to be the drum major of a new marching band his senior year in high school. “Most of us had absolutely no experience of marching in parades. I still remember leading the band down West Market Street in York, Pennsylvania. My basic job was to march in front of the band and every so often blow my whistle in a certain cadence to strike up the band. As we were marching down West Market Street for a short time, I heard someone from the crowd, who had gathered to watch the parade holler to me, 'Mister, you lost your band.' I sneaked a look back and sure enough, there was the Central High School marching band about three-quarters of a block behind.”² It is so easy for leaders to lose their bands. It's easy for shepherds to lose their flock because people wander.

In our text from Jeremiah this morning, Jeremiah denounces the shepherds of Judah. He uses shepherds as this perfect metaphor for leadership which hearkens all listeners back to the great King David, the Shepherd boy. Verses 1-2 of Jeremiah 23 say, “‘Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture!’ declares the Lord. Therefore, this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says to the shepherds who tend my people: ‘Because you have

¹https://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/illustration_search.asp?item_topic_id=870

²Carl B. Rife, Milford Mill, Maryland, Palm Sunday

1994. https://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/illustration_search.asp?item_topic_id=870

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."

These shepherds of Judah are the kings who were supposed to guide and direct the flocks of Israelites into righteousness. A little later, Jeremiah will also chastise the prophets who gave in on their message from God and instead chose a message of self-service. These are the leaders and shepherds of Israel that let the flock down. And these leaders according to Jeremiah are accountable to God. For God expects his leaders to lead with righteousness and justice. He expects them to lead selflessly with the future of his people in mind. The leader was responsible for the people's longevity in the Promised Land.

Malcolm Warfield tells this story about this kind of desired leadership.

"A few years ago, at New College, Oxford (England), the beautiful old oak beams in the dining hall were found to be infested with the deathwatch beetle. There was no alternative but to replace all the huge fine old beams. Finding oak large enough to rebuild the ceiling appeared to be a physical and financial impossibility. Yet one of the junior fellows suggested that the extensive grounds of the college itself might provide the necessary timbers. When the college forester was asked if such a possibility existed, he calmly replied, 'Well, sir, we was wonderin' when you'd be askin.'

"It seems that at the time of the college's founding, 1379, a grove of oak had been planted for the express purpose of replacing the oak beams in the event of a deathwatch beetle infestation. The founders knew from experience that eventually such infestations would likely occur. For hundreds of years, each succeeding generation of college foresters was instructed with the information of the oak stand's place and purpose so that when the time came, the college community's needs could be met."³

When leaders don't give forethought to the future of their people, then the people, the sheep, become scattered into exile—some deported to Babylon, some escape to Egypt, some remain in the land leaderless and powerless.

Have you ever felt like a lost sheep or part of a scattered people? You become disconnected and lose your grounding. Many people have reflected that when a family loses their matriarch or patriarch, that family suddenly feels scattered. Where do we go to be together again? Living hours away, will we even gather at all? What becomes of our oneness? A similar effect is felt in a place of work or a church when there is a transition of leadership. We feel as though some person was responsible for binding us together? What do we do without them to be our glue? Will we become like sheep wandering off in different directions?

This is why God's desire is to take back control of his flock.

We were God's sheep to begin with. God didn't want us to have another shepherd. God has always wanted to be our Shepherd alone. This is God's responsibility—so in the rest of Jeremiah 23, God states his plan. God says through Jeremiah in verse 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." And who is the shepherd that God uses to do this—the prophecy continues in verses 5-6, "'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. 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.'" Who is this shepherd of David's branch? Who is this Lord our righteous savior? We

³Malcolm Warfield, *Recruiting Seminary Trustees* (Association of Governing Boards, 1985), 12-13.

know him as Jesus the Christ. Jesus comes to earth to be God's hands-on shepherd to bring us all back from wandering.

Commentator Elmer Martens says this good shepherd represents a "new phase of history" when a "God-sized problem was given a God-sized cure."⁴ No human leader was ever going to solve the problem of human wandering, of sin, because every leader was going to fall victim to the same issue, so God sends us a leader who is pure and good, righteous and just, his name is Jesus and he comes again this Christmas. Amen.

⁴ Martens, Elmer. *Jeremiah: Believer's Church Bible Commentary*. 150.