Spirituality
Scripture for Life



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"Woe to the shepherds who mislead and scatter my flock!" Thus spoke Jeremiah about religious leaders around the year 600 B.C. Now, one does not have to be part of the clergy or a politician to mislead and scatter. According to an NPR report in May, a mere 12 individuals could take credit for the majority of the fear-inducing disinformation that had been published by then about COVID-19 vaccinations.

Today, all anyone needs to launch a career as a misleading shepherd are adroit social media skills and unscrupulous intentions. But as Jeremiah bears witness, 'twas ever thus.

Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 18, 2021

Jeremiah 23:1-6

Psalm 23

Ephesians 2:13-18

Mark 6:30-34

Both Jeremiah and Jesus tangled with plenty of false prophets and self-serving leaders who enjoyed bully pulpits. In the Middle Ages, deceitful troubadours could promulgate scandal and libel via popular tunes. After the mid-1400s, Johannes Gutenberg's invention made it possible for everyone who could finance it to try to sway public opinion by publishing their thoughts and opinions. Radio, television and the internet bring it to our day in a more democratized and often unscrupulous way.

Obviously, we could pick any century and gaze on our brothers and sisters and perceive them as Jesus did: as people in need of good shepherds. That leads to a critical question: How are we to determine who among all the competitors for attention are the good shepherds? Today's psalm offers some guidance.

Psalm 23 begins, "The Lord is my shepherd." Immediately, it gives us some definite hints about how to recognize a good shepherd. First of all, it indicates that good shepherds lead us to green pastures and restful waters — places that offer the rare

combination of bountiful possibilities and genuine peace. These are places where people feel confident that God's world can provide generous plenty for everyone.

At the same time, our psalmist admits that God's bounty and protection do not assure the absence of strife. The psalm reminds us that the right path often winds through dark valleys, but our divine shepherd remains with us, giving us the courage necessary to stare down evil. (Like a bully whose bluff is called, evil collapses in cowardice in the face of transparent faith.)

Halfway through our psalm, the image changes; the shepherd/lord becomes a servant or hostess. (What good hostess does not act as servant, happily attentive to her guests?)

In the images of this part of the psalm, God sets a lavish table for us, the sort of large, generous feast that begs to be enjoyed by a crowd of partygoers. Those partaking of the largesse of this table are also anointed, first as guests, then as people co-missioned to mark out the "right path," the way that welcomes others to the scenes already described in this song of joy.

Today's short Gospel snippet is Mark's prelude to the story of the miraculous sharing of bread. Placed here in our liturgical calendar, it focuses on how Jesus' awareness of people's needs led him to respond as a Good Shepherd who would reveal God's generous plenty.

When we listen to this in conjunction with Jeremiah's message and Psalm 23, we are led to discern about how we are called to respond to the great needs of our time.

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There is no doubt that one of our times' greatest needs is for healing the divisions that mark our church and world. Pope Francis warns us that, "Unless we recover the shared passion to create a community ... our energy and our resources ... will collapse and leave many in the grip of anguish and emptiness" (*Fratelli Tutti*, 36).

In last week's liturgy, we were put on notice that we either gather with Christ or we scatter. This week's Scriptures tell us that as followers of Christ the Good Shepherd, we must remember that the invitation to repose by restful waters is for refreshment, not permanent residence. We are invited to the banquet that nourishes us and

anointed to spread the goodness and kindness we have learned.

Mark did not set out to write a biography of Jesus, but an announcement of the good news that could change the course of our lives. Mark invites us to look at our world the way Jesus looked at his: to feel the needs of our people and to respond in whatever way we are able.

Given the divided state of our church, country and world, we cannot claim to be followers of the Good Shepherd unless we continue his work of tending the scattered flocks of which we are a part.

Like the psalmist, we are anointed to be troubadours who open others' hearts and minds and eyes to see God's gracious plenty and believe that they have nothing to fear from one another.

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