

Sunday July 5, 2020
Lesson 5: Promised Restoration
Scripture: Jeremiah 23: 1-8

Context:

We move from looking at the prophet Hosea to looking at the prophet Jeremiah. Like the other prophets in the Old Testament, Jeremiah speaks to the people of God about what is to come and the future God has in store for the people of Israel. In the midst of the doom and gloom prophecies of Jeremiah, there is also the promise of restoration for the people.

There are a few distinctions to make when studying the Book of Jeremiah. This includes looking at the background of the time and the portrayal of the prophet Jeremiah. Until the late twentieth century, a majority of scholars believed the book was a chronicle of one time period in history and there were attempts to write a biography on the historical Jeremiah.¹ Yet certain biographical events did not match up with the long timeline of events. Later studies of the time and contents of the book reveal the prophet is simultaneously a literary character in the book as well as a historical person.² Thus, Jeremiah was a historical person in a certain time period who also became a literary device.

The conclusion was to look at when Jeremiah actually lived according to the text and then also look at themes in the chapters and speeches attributed to him. There was a person named Jeremiah who lived in a turbulent time in the midst of the fall of Jerusalem and the last reigning kings of Judah, while also suggesting he was a literary figure representing the suffering of the inhabitants of the time and the minority who disagreed with the kings who failed to continue King Josiah's reforms.³ A good comparison would be the character Socrates in *The Dialogues of Plato*, in which the historical person of Socrates serves as a vehicle for expressing Plato's ideas.⁴ Like Plato and Socrates, Jeremiah is weaved in and out of the text to reveal his own story in the midst of the messages God was sending to the people and prophets of Israel.

This particular text focuses on one of Jeremiah's confessions in which he warns the people of what is to come and simultaneously offers hope. He uses the image of

¹ Michael D. Coogan, ed. *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures*, (Oxford: University Press, 2011), 366.

² Ibid., 367.

³ Ibid., 366.

⁴ Ibid., 367.

shepherds and sheep, a rural allusion, which would have spoken to what the people knew. While the people have bad shepherds, the Lord will make sure they are given ones who will guide them to be better pastures. Ultimately, they will have someone from the Davidic line who will come and save them all.

Application

There are two parts to this passage addressing our hope for the world today. One aspect of hope deals with those who lead and take care of us, those who are the shepherds among us. The second aspect of hope is beauty in the promise of the ultimate king of our lives.

While the people of Judah and Israel certainly had their own list of personal and communal sins, it was not simply their fault. If you read through the book of First and Second Kings as well as the recordings of the prophets, you will find the people did not have the wisest or most well behaved leaders. The leaders oscillated between being wishy-washy and letting the people do whatever they wanted to those who encouraged and belligerently dismissed the teachings of God and the warnings of the prophets. They were poor shepherds of the people God had entrusted them to serve. Thus, God promises God will address them and in the restoration post exile give the people the shepherds they need.

The image of the shepherd is sometimes that of a pastoral image with someone who is meek and mild. Yet the more you study a shepherd, the more you realize how strong they had to be physically and mentally. They had to sometimes chase after sheep or wrangle them with a crook. They had to watch out for wolves and sometimes climb steep hills to capture wandering sheep. A shepherd had to be resilient and ready for anything.

The same image of a shepherd provides a model for a leader today. A leader must be one who doesn't cave to the bleats of whiny people or simply allow "lost sheep" to direct the group. A leader must be cautious about where they lead those who have been entrusted to them, always aware of the dangers lurking even in the most beautiful of pastures. And a leader must be sure to think simultaneously of how to best take care of the entire flock even when there are those who want to wander off and do their own thing. Perhaps most importantly, a leader must be like the shepherd who knows how to take care of themselves and their walk with the Lord so they can lead the flock.

The second description of the Jeremiah passage alludes to a king from the family of David, who will be called: "The Lord is our righteousness." For the Christian faith, we know this king as our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Jesus is the one who brings justice and righteousness to the land. He is the one who is over all nations and brings hope to the world. He is the ultimate good shepherd.

What good news for us today as we think of who we place our trust and allegiance in at times. The ways of the world at times might tempt us to put our sole trust in ideologies, certain leaders, and even ourselves. Ultimately putting our trust solely in these places leads to disappointment and illuminates how we at times might slip into building

idols even if we don't mean to do so. For followers of our Lord, Jesus is the one who surpasses our allegiances to those things of the world. Following Jesus rocks our world and challenges us to look at ourselves and ask to whom do we truly belong.

If you are a leader, how do you make decisions when things are hard? What is the danger of people pleasing so people will like you instead of doing the difficult task of leadership? How do you support your leaders in your church and your community? If you are a leader, how do you take care of yourself? Who do you truly follow? How have you made Jesus the Lord of your life? What are the idols you are tempted to worship? How does Jesus challenge and rock your world?

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