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Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

**Weekend of Sunday, July 18, 2021**  
**8<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 16/Proper 11/Year B**  
**First Reading: Jeremiah 23:1-6**  
**Second Reading: Ephesians 2:11-22**  
**Gospel Reading: Mark 6:30-34, 53-56**  
**Sermon Title: “The Need to Retreat”**

**Theme**

*Mark’s gospel makes clear how great is the press of the crowd, with its countless needs to be met, on Jesus and his disciples. Yet in today’s gospel Jesus advises his disciples to get away and rest, to take care of themselves. Sometimes we think that when others are in great need we shouldn’t think of ourselves at all; but Jesus also honors the caregivers’ need. We are sent from Christ’s table to care for others and for ourselves.*

**Text**

## Sermon

As you can imagine, this passage from Jeremiah is gut check for those of us in the vocation of ministry, and is a good follow up to last week's Old Testament Reading from Amos.

Though not a prophet in fulltime ministry like Jeremiah was, Amos was compelled by God to give a word of correction to the Northern Kingdom of Israel. It was not well received, and legend has it that Jeroboam, the king of the Northern Tribe of Israel, had him killed. Of course then, all that Amos prophesied came to pass – which was the destruction of the Northern Tribe of Israel.

By the time of Jeremiah's ministry, the prophet and author of today's Old Testament Reading, the Northern Tribe of Israel had been wiped out and the Southern tribe of Judah was on the verge of being overrun.

Have you ever noticed that people often seem to mark time by the wars that have been fought? In American history, there was the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, the Civil War, WW1, WW2, Korea, Vietnam, and the Gulf War. Major events happened that had nothing to do with the wars, but it seems to me that we mark time by wars.

It may seem like that in Old Testament history too if you knew it well enough. But that would be history from a human perspective. God sees things differently.

The reason God sent the prophet Amos to the Northern Tribe of Israel was not that they made poor political decisions or because they closed the border between them and the Southern Tribe of Judah. It was because they had ignored the Davidic Covenant God made with the Israelites, and though I know you already know the details of the Davidic Covenant because we covered them back on March 14, the Fourth Sunday of Lent, I will remind that in that Covenant, there would always be an heir of David on the throne, and Jerusalem would be the site of Israelite worship.

But when the Northern tribe of Israel rebelled against the Southern Tribe of Judah, they appointed their own king who was not from the line of David and created their own places of worship in their own territory. I am sure their secession from the unified nation of Israel did not please God, but the real deal-breaker was their

rebellion, their thumb in the eye of God, and their lack of trust in God, and their arrogance that they were better off without God. In other words, God saw the problem as a spiritual problem.

Enter the prophet, Jeremiah. The Southern Tribe of Judah was not thriving during his ministry either. They had a series of terrible kings, who though were from the line of David, were poor leaders and did not faithfully worship and honor God. And as the leadership goes so do all they lead.

The focus of the Old Testament Reading from Jeremiah was the priesthood. Remember that the priesthood was not a calling in those days. When the Israelites crossed over the Jordan and possessed the Promised Land, one of the twelve tribes of Israel received the responsibility for the priesthood instead of the inheritance of land. That tribe was the tribe of Levi, the descendants of Aaron.

I can only speak for the ELCA variety of Lutheranism, but we have an increasingly rigorous screening process before one can enter the seminary process, and then steps of approval throughout the four-year process before a candidate becomes available for a call. Not so in Jeremiah's day. The priesthood was the family business, and while there certainly were good priests recorded in the Bible, the problem Jeremiah was sent to prophesy against was the lack of ethical behavior among the priesthood.

Jeremiah spoke in metaphor. The priests were the shepherds God put in charge of God's flock, the Israelites, and they had done a terrible job.

Shepherds are to gather the sheep to keep them safe. The priests were supposed to guide the people in faithful living and trust in God, but they drove them away to other pagan religions with their careless faithless behavior.

God told Jeremiah to tell the priests that they were the problem! Furthermore God, God's self, would fix the problem by raising up leadership that would gather and restore God's people and so much more:

<sup>5</sup>The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. <sup>6</sup>In his days Judah will be saved and

Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: “The LORD is our righteousness.”

Jeremiah’s ministry began in about 627 BCE, in other words, it would be another 627 years before the angels would proclaim the birth of God’s final solution to this problem to the shepherds on the pastures above Bethlehem. God’s timing is different than our too, isn’t it.

I chose “The Need to Retreat” as the title for this sermon. I thought I was being clever. Carol and I just got back from a short vacation. It was good to get away from our routine for a couple of days.

The Disciples just came back from their first missionary journey without Jesus. They were all excited about what they had been able to do themselves “in his name.”

Maybe you aren’t grasping the significance of the event. Those twelve bumbling, including Judas the betrayer, and Peter the denier, and Thomas the doubter, came back and could hardly contain their excitement for all they had been able to do – heal the sick, exorcise demons, all of which they were able to do “in Jesus’ name.” They were not confused at that moment. They got it. There is power, wonder-working power in the name of Jesus.

And as exciting as that teaching would be, there is a little throw-away verse in this passage that I would like to direct you to. The disciples were excited and Jesus wanted to hear their stories and give thanks and praise to God with them for what they had been able to accomplish. Jesus wanted to take his Disciples on a little retreat. They needed it. He needed it. I think we all need it from time to time. But his own notoriety had become a problem. People were coming to him with their loved ones in need of healing, and to hear him preach and teach. They just kept coming so that his hoped-for retreat with his Disciples was just not going to happen, and so, here comes the little throw-away verse:

<sup>34b</sup>he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.

See! Even Mark correctly discerned what was going on. The Temple in Jerusalem still existed at this point. The priesthood was thriving – sort of. They had managed a peaceful coexistence with the Romans and they saw it as their primary role to manage that tenuous relationship – and Jesus was messing up their deal. God’s people, now known as the Jews, were coming out to them, Jesus and the Twelve, for spiritual leadership – not to the priests and the rabbis.

Jesus discerned his role as God’s Messiah to be the spiritual shepherd to guide the people back to a right relationship with God their Father. Jesus was ... and is ... God’s final solution Jeremiah prophesied about.

When I worked for Parker Hannifin in Hillsborough NC, our tool engineer was a guy by the name of Jimmy Morris. The guy knew his Bible. He could refer to stories and quote passages – I was quite impressed by this. But after I got to know him better, I was disappointed to learn that he was not a Christian, not a believer, he just found the book interesting, and since it was popular in American culture he read it – but it meant nothing to him.

Friends, if historians only teach facts without context, dates without significance, we become a nation that only remembers its wars. We lose sight of the serious issues that precipitated our wars. We fail to reflect on lessons learned so that we are better people going forward.

In the same way, these Bible stories are fascinating, but without faith, they are just fascinating *folkloric* stories.

### **Raisin’ the Bar Challenge**

Yes, the Old Testament Reading is a gut-check for those of us in the vocation of ministry. Though I try to do my best, I often fail. And while I apologize to you and God, I’m just a man. I am not confused about my mortality. I am not the messiah and I never claimed to be.

What is at the heart of the Readings today is that we human beings have always had a problem with faithfulness. The metaphor of *sheep without a shepherd* is a good one for us because we constantly wander off distracted by everything. But God sees our problem differently. God sees our problem as a spiritual problem.

God has sent leaders in the form of priests and prophets, judges and kings, and when they all failed, or we failed them, God remained faithful to us by sending us Jesus, God's Messiah and final solution to our spiritual problem.

All creation should look to him and listen to him because he is the Good Shepherd. He has the words of our salvation.

### **Prayer**

Faithful One, though we try to be faithful, we are often distracted and pursue other interests. Continue to send us your Holy Spirit to inspire us always to return to you. We give you thanks for Jesus and for the salvation he gives us even though we are often weak in faith. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen