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The Leaders God Desires

23Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the Lord.
2Therefore thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the Lord. 3Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. 4I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the Lord. 5The 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. 6In 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 23:1-6

30The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught.
31He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. 32And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. 33Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. 34As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. 53When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. 54When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, 55and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. 56And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed. Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

Let me preface my reflection on this morning's readings by stating what should be accepted and obvious to us: none of the Scripture we hear today makes any sense at all -- or is of much use -- unless one believes in a God who is present in human history writ large and each one of our lives writ small. Let that settle in a bit. That should sound pretty obvious, right? If and when we believe this to be true, then these sacred stories can guide and teach us and draw us closer to the One who is the beginning and the end. If not, they remain just good stories.

What is God saying to God's people through the prophet Jeremiah this morning? The concern that rises to the top: leaders that bring communities together, and leaders that tears them apart.

You will notice that in our prayers most weeks, we pray for our leaders. We pray first for our church leaders: our bishops, priests, deacons and lay leaders. Today we pray that they may faithfully lead us in our calling to be a light to the world.

And next we pray for our civic leaders: the president, Congress, courts and local authorities. What do we pray that they do? Reflect God's justice and strive for peace.

All good and right things to pray for.

Why do leaders get prayed for so often? Why do we pray for those who lead before we pray for those of us who follow? And why are shepherds brought up again and again throughout Scripture?

We say this morning the 23rd psalm that begins with the familiar "The Lord is my shepherd I shall not be in want." It is the psalm prayer many believers reach for when troubled, frightened or tired. As the saying goes: "it never gets old." In the scene from Mark's gospel, Jesus looks out with compassion on those who rushed to be close to him and said they were like sheep without a shepherd.

It is the shepherd who is tasked to guide, to watch over and to protect the flock. For a largely pastoral people whose livestock was their livelihood, they were essential to the survival of a community.

We know that young David was a shepherd before he defeated Goliath and became a great king, and it was an image that Jesus claimed for himself: "I am the Good Shepherd."

Yet the prophet Jeremiah speaks God's warning of the darker side of those who lead. Those who destroy and scatter.

Nicole in her sermon last week spoke about the how the decisions of people with power -- Herod, his wife and daughter -- were all missing the grace that could have caused them to make a different choice about the life of John the Baptist. They chose vengeance and death, forgiveness and life.

History has given our nation and the world good and strong leaders: Washington, Lincoln, Winston Churchill in wartime Europe, FDR during the depths of the Depression, MLK, Jr. and Gandhi preaching non-violence, Harriet Tubman -- born into slavery yet leading many out of slavery into freedom -- a right choice for the \$20 bill in my view that is long overdue.

There were and are great church and religious leaders -- flaws and all. St. Benedict who created a monastic system and rule of life that continues to this day. Martin Luther

reformed a church much in need of light and air, and Francis of Assisi showed the world a simpler way to live and care for the poor.

The Bible is full of leaders: Moses rises to the top. St. Paul, inspired by his experience with the Risen Christ, gave us the church and religion we know today.

They are the good ones.

What happens when leaders turn bad and rotten? When they become corrupt, self-absorbed, cruel and vengeful? Jeremiah had it right about the consequences: the sheep scatter. They are driven away when no one attends to them.

Where do we fit into this story?

Our response can be to lift up what it is we believe again and again.

We believe in a God who created and blessed a creation and called it good. We believe in a God who hears the voices and cries of the people even down to our own day.

What does God do about terrible leaders?

This is where it gets tricky. Destructive leaders are alive and well in today's world and not just in Biblical times.

Consider the madness of the leadership of Hamas in Gaza. This is my personal view and I share it not to get overly political per se, but to try to draw a current throughline to our readings. In taking their fateful and reckless decision to attack Israel on October 7 of last year, going on a killing rampage and taking innocent hostages, they had to know that the response would be overwhelming. Thousands of their own people have died as a result. Both sides are now locked in a war that sees no end. Putin's decided on his own apparently to invade Ukraine and target civilian populations -- bombing children's hospitals and apartment buildings and killing by the thousands. Closer to our shores and dearer to my heart: Cuba. The Castro brothers ushered in decades of long neglect and decline of that island nation that has caused millions of Cubans to emigrate. The same is going today in Venezuela, Sudan, Myanmar and so many other lands. The Exodus of the Israelites that we read about in the Bible was not the first or last time God's people have fled violence and oppression. Bad leaders destroy and scatter.

We hear in Jeremiah how God promises to raise up for David a righteous branch to execute justice and the people will live in safety. Christians see the beginnings of the work of Christ in these words. It will be Christ, God with us, who will inspire believers to dream of a different way of relating to one another. Love over hatred. Peace over war. Gathering rather than scattering, raising up instead of tearing down.

In the life of Jesus, we can see a better way to lead.

When his followers came to him with news of what they had done and seen out in the mission field – he knew enough to say: “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest awhile.” He saw that they were spent and tired: had no time even to eat.

I return often to this verse from Matthew that is an ongoing prayer and invitation for me.

Matthew 11:28-29: ‘Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.’

Jesus watched, listened and acted. He saw the basic human need we all have for renewal and rest.

Gentleness and humility must always be present in the heart of the leader.

Let me draw you to the prayer we say together after Communion, inspired by the Iona community in Scotland.

Take us out into the world
to live as changed people
because we have shared the Living Bread
and cannot remain the same.

Ask much of us,
expect much from us,
enable much by us,
encourage many through us.

God may be calling you to step forward and take a leadership role for the good of the larger community and world. It could be something very small and seem insignificant in the moment. But someone has to organize, plan, reach out, challenge and speak out. We need to demand more from those who lead and not squander or take for granted the power and agency that we do have.

Ask much of our leaders. Expect more from them. And may we, as we say in this Iona prayer, dedicate our lives to God’s glory.