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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
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Jeremiah 23:1-6, Mark 6:30-34, 53-56  
The Communion of Saints

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

<sup>31</sup>And he said to them, “Come away by yourselves to a lonely place, and rest a while.” For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. (Mark 6:31, RSV)

Jesus had recognized the signs of weariness in his disciples. They had been out and about on a preaching mission. They had called people to repentance, cast our demons, and healed many folk. Now they have returned to Jesus and told him all they had done and taught, and though they were no doubt thrilled to speak of these things and of their adventures in his name, still they were weary. Things had become so hectic that, as the text puts it, “they had no leisure even to eat.” And so, Jesus, who was not only their Master, but also their Maker and who therefore knew the needs of their bodies, bid them slip away on a retreat.

<sup>31</sup>And he said to them, “Come away by yourselves to a lonely place, and rest a while.” (Mark 6:31, RSV)

But it was not to be, for the same reason then as obtains now: It was the way of Jesus that he moved amongst a people who needed him, who were often afraid, often dismayed, and compassion compelled him to minister to that crowd.

So, Jesus gently laid aside his plans for a retreat for his disciples. They had set sail in a boat for a lonely place, but the people had hastened to that place ahead of him. You might have been blessed during the course of your lifetime to know someone whose goodness never seemed to fail, whose kindness rallied his strength, rallied her strength, even though he be tired. Jesus was such a one:

<sup>34</sup>As he went ashore he saw a great throng, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things...

St. Mark, who tells this story, is persuaded that Jesus is the answer to Jeremiah’s ancient promise that one day this world would be blessed by a true shepherd. We find such an ancient promise in this morning’s First Lesson.

<sup>4</sup>I will set shepherds over them who will care *for them*, and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall any be missing, says the LORD. (Jeremiah 23:4, RSV)

A good shepherd cares “for them” -- not so much for himself, but for them! Indeed, he is willing to risk his life, even to lay down his life, for them.

Along with St. Mark, the whole Church is persuaded that Jesus is the Good Shepherd above all good shepherds on this earth. The crowds sensed it back in the days of his earthly ministry, and they hastened to him. Likewise, people still sense that Jesus is their Good Shepherd, and so they hasten to him even today.

I believe that this is why you and I are here in church. We have heard that Jesus is *here* -- to be touched in Body and Blood -- and so we have come a-runnin’. If not running, at least we have come strolling toward him on this fine summer day. Marie Kohl comes running here from New Jersey, as do Susan Weber and Edward Blatnik. Kathryn Weidmann comes from Tuckahoe up in Westchester County and Karen Bazik and her children from Chappaqua, even farther north in Westchester. Many of us come from nearer by. But in any case, from all over the place, people come running to the churches to gather around Jesus. We are part of that throng that ever desires to draw close to Jesus. One way or the other, here we are, in church, where he has promised to be wherever “two or three are gathered together in my name.” (Matthew 18:20) As it was in olden days, so it is even still: a happy rumor has spread concerning Jesus of Nazareth, and we have hastened to him, like chicks hastening to their mother hen. We have gathered around him this day, in hope.

And it was with the folks in the Gospel story, so it is with us too: *we have cause*, we have good reason to move toward Christ in his holy Church, for like that throng of old in the Gospel story, we too are like sheep without shepherd, often in fear, too often disoriented and dismayed.

Think of the “new poor,” for example, in this tough economy. Never before had they been unemployed. Never before had they been without health insurance. Never before had they despaired that they would be able to send their children to college. But now they have lost their jobs, and in losing their jobs, they have sometimes lost *themselves*. They hardly know what step to take next.

Even when financial times are good, there are still countless causes for us to need a good shepherd. Some people live with a sense of dread all their days. As long as they remember, they have been expecting the other shoe to drop. It is as if peace continually escapes them.

For some people, life has been good *until now*. Now their heart is broken, now their health is threatened, now they are lonely, now they are conscious of getting older, getting weaker.

It is said of Jesus that he is stable, that his character never changes, his goodness never wearies. He is...

Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever. (Hebrews 13:8, KJV)

But we are like that too. Our whole sad, suffering human race, we are like that too: Till God's kingdom comes, we stand in need of a Good Shepherd. We are the same "yesterday, and today, and forever." We need some Help, and I do believe that in coming to church we have come to the right place for it.

You and I are part of a great throng of people who have drawn near to Jesus. I am speaking of an immense multitude of folks. In fact, this throng has a name -- a lovely theological name: we are part of what is called "the Communion of Saints." It is a crowd of people drawn to Jesus, and it is a multitude so vast it extends beyond sight, even beyond the years. I mean this: The differences of time, generations, even centuries do not matter in the eyes of the resurrected Jesus, for he never forgets a face, never forgets a need. We are one vast folk before him, and he looks on each of us with compassion, for it remains true now as it was long ago: that we are harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

The happy truth is that we are part of that Biblical throng. That multitude we read about in today's Gospel story, where folks come hastening from village, town, and countryside, bringing their sick friends on pallets, longing to touch even the hem of Jesus's garments, well, that throng includes you and me.

Over yonder in this multitude, in this vast Communion of saints, we see, for example, a grieving mother and father. The mourners having gathered around creating a tumult of weeping and wailing, for a very sad thing has happened: a twelve-year-old girl has died. But wait! Behold what happens. Jesus sends the mourners away, and Savior that he is, he awakens the girl from death:

<sup>40</sup>And they laughed him to scorn. But when he had put them all out, he taketh the father and the mother of the damsel, and them that were with him, and entereth in where the damsel was lying. <sup>41</sup>And he took the damsel by the hand, and said unto her, Talitha cumi; which is, being interpreted, Damsel, I say unto thee, arise. (Mark 5:40-41, KJV)

We read that story just a few Sundays ago.

In upcoming Sundays, we will read about that comparatively small crowd over there -- the five thousand folks who have followed Jesus out into a lonely place to hear him preach. Now they are hungry and the Twelve desire to dismiss them and send them home. After all, they have only two small fish and five loaves of bread and what is so little among so many? Well, come back next week and find out what Jesus will do for those folks. (John 6:1-21) I'll tell you this much in advance: he will treat them according to his everlasting nature, which is to have compassion on them, to have compassion on us.

And over there in this vast Communion of saints is a quiet case that touches me heart. You have heard mention of this case in our church intercessions. I mean Crystal -- Crystal Ramdeen. She lies in a hospital in Brooklyn, living and in remarkably good spirits, but no longer with her leg, for it has been amputated to this hip. I have not yet seen Jesus heal her, but I know he has done similar wonders. Why, think of that man who lay on his pallet at the pool of Bethsaida for

thirty-eight years. Surely his muscles had atrophied, certainly hopes had weakened and his memories of walking had faded, yet Jesus never forgets a face and never forgets a need, and so in due time he reaches the man and says to him:

<sup>8</sup> Jesus saith unto him, Rise, take up thy bed, and walk. <sup>9</sup> And immediately the man was made whole, and took up his bed, and walked: and on the same day was the sabbath. (John 5:8-9, KJV)

Then, forget the atrophied muscles, forget being out-of-practice in walking. The man jumps up, takes up his bed, and walks. He has met his Good Shepherd -- the one who cares for him, the one who cares for you and me.

Dear brothers and sisters in the Lord, I am persuaded that you are in a good stage in your life. I do not mean that you have left your fears behind you, nor the things that threaten you. You might still have your injuries, even missing limbs, I am very sad to say. And you might still be beset by temptations, like storms churning on the sea. Still, I am persuaded that you are in a good stage in your life, for you are here, in that blessed throng of people gathered around Jesus. And as St. Peter once put it, so you can echo it in your life: It is good for us to be here!<sup>1</sup>

I cannot say *how* the various lambs of this flock will be cared for, but I can say *Who* means to care for them. I do not know how the burdens and setbacks and sin's confusion will be overcome and made into building blocks of God's Kingdom, but I know Who is at work doing it, and he is a good man -- a man of compassion on a humanity that is too often harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd. I mean, Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> And Peter answered and said to Jesus, Master, it is good for us to be here: and let us make three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias. <sup>6</sup>For he wist not what to say; for they were sore afraid. <sup>7</sup>And there was a cloud that overshadowed them: and a voice came out of the cloud, saying, This is my beloved Son: hear him. (Mark 9:5-7, KJV)