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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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Jeremiah 23:1-6, Psalm 23, Ephesians 2:11-22, Mark 6:30-34, 53-56
The Compassion of Reality

Some opening remarks by Pastor Fryer:

I have prepared this morning's sermon in my usual way. I started writing early in the week and it is ready to go. But before I turn to that, let me speak of two things on my heart. One is sorrowful; the other, happy.

The sorrowful thing is this past week's massacre at the movie theatre in Aurora, Colorado. It is hard to comprehend and leaves me wondering what this world is coming to. I found my mind moving in similar directions as it did back in the terrible days of 9/11. I prepared a collection of readings and prayers in those awful days – readings and prayers from our Lutheran tradition. I have reprinted them for you now. They rest on one of the poor boxes near the narthex. When it comes to matters of peace and justice, Martin Luther taught what is called the “two kingdoms doctrine.” He was convinced that our God rules his creation in two ways: with both the preaching of the Gospel and the rule of law. Furthermore, Luther believed that these two ways are both divine, both the passionate concern of the Lord, and that they must never be confused nor permitted to cancel each other out. Luther believed that it was the duty of the Church to preach the holy Gospel, to calm the fears of the human heart, to give us hope, and to transform us in the direction of Jesus Christ. And he believed at the same time that it is the divine duty of government to restrain the evildoer and protect the innocent. This is the priestly vocation of government, for which those who hold civil authority will be held accountable at the Last Judgment. So, that is the sad part, thoughts about peace and justice brought on by the horrors in Colorado.

The happy part is that I have heard from my wife, Carol. She is safe and sound after climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro. It was hard, especially the final summit, but her heart rate and oxygen content remained good throughout the climb, and now she is on her way to Bukoba to visit Bishop Buberwa and others. So, I am awfully grateful that she is okay and I want you to know that I have been grateful for your prayers.

Now, to the sermon.

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

As [Jesus] 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. (Mark 6:34, RSV)

There is a kind of logical flow to this morning's Bible Lessons. Our First Lesson teaches us that sometimes earthly rulers can be disappointing. I wonder whether that is so. I fear it is. Our Psalm then says that the true Shepherd of this world is the Lord. The rest are under-shepherds who must give an account of themselves someday to this Good Shepherd. And then our Gospel Lesson points to the concrete person who is the Lord and King and Shepherd of all creation. I mean Jesus, our Saviour. Let's look at this sequence of Bible readings.

OUR FIRST LESSON

In our First Lesson we catch the prophet Jeremiah midstride in his evaluation of the kings of Judah. One of them was good, in his opinion: good old King Josiah, who ruled Judah from 640-609 B.C. But that was a while ago. Since then, his descendents have been pretty bad. They are of the House of David, true descendents not only of Josiah, but also King David. Still, their royal lineage does not guarantee that they will be good kings. That is up to them. Sadly, in Jeremiah's judgment they have been bad kings, not because of their heads, but because of their hearts.

For example, the prophet rather tears into one of the bygone kings -- Jehoiakim (609-598 B.C.), the son of good king Josiah. Jehoiakim seems to have loved luxury. He caused a scandal by building himself a lovely house with conscripted labor. That is, he forced people to work on his house, but then paid them no wages. Jeremiah does not much like this fellow. The prophet says this:

¹³“Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness,
and his upper rooms by injustice;

who makes his neighbor serve him for nothing,
and does not give him his wages;

¹⁴who says, ‘I will build myself a great house
with spacious upper rooms,’
and cuts out windows for it,
paneling it with cedar, and painting it with vermilion.

¹⁵Do you think you are a king
because you compete in cedar?
Did not your father eat and drink
and do justice and righteousness?

Then it was well with him.

¹⁶He judged the cause of the poor and needy;
then it was well.

Is not this to know me? says the LORD.

¹⁷But you have eyes and heart
only for your dishonest gain,
for shedding innocent blood,
and for practicing oppression and violence.” (Jeremiah 22:13-17, RSV)

Such things are an old, old story. Too often it is the lot of the common folk to have rulers who are too much concerned for themselves rather than for the people. This is the stuff of the movies, like the series on *The Tudors* and *Borgia*: rulers who seem to have only a passing interest in their flocks.

PSALM 23

Next we turn to the beloved Twenty-third Psalm. Much could be said about this Psalm, for it is a kind of pinnacle of poetry and confidence in the Lord. Here, let me lift up simply the tone of defiance in the opening line of the Psalm:

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want (Psalm 23:1,
KJV)

I might have to want aplenty under earthly shepherds. They might make me conscripted labor. They might make me fight unjust wars for their own glory. They might tax me till I'm skin and bones. But in the end, my true shepherd is the LORD -- not those hardhearted rulers. And it is because the LORD is my shepherd that "I shall not want." I shall not be left empty and miserable because I have the LORD as my shepherd -- the very Maker of Heaven and Earth. He does all kinds of good things for me. His care is tender. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures by still waters. He restores my soul. He prepares a feast for me and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

It is good to have the LORD for a shepherd, I say. That is my theme. Earthly kings and earthly shepherds are fine and dandy, or they might be awful and cruel. But we are headed for a kingdom in which the LORD himself is our king and our shepherd.

OUR GOSPEL LESSON

Now let's take a look at our Gospel Lesson for today. Sure enough, there is a bad king on the scene. He is Herod Antipas -- that half-measured man we heard about last Sunday. He has some good qualities, but his virtues are variable and unreliable, so that in the end, he proves cruel: he orders the beheading of John the Baptist.

So, that is King Herod Antipas. Now, let's look at a real king: let's look at Jesus. Today's story of what a real king is like immediately follows on the miserable story of the slaughter of John the Baptist.

Jesus has sent his twelve disciples out on a mission. We heard about that a couple Sundays ago. He had sent them out two-by-two with meager possessions -- just a staff, no bread, no money in their purse, no secure lodging. He sends them out poor in pocket but rich in soul, for he has given them power over unclean spirits, power to preach that people should repent, power to anoint with oil and to heal many that were sick (Mark 6:7-13).

Now the Twelve have returned to Jesus. I picture them eager to tell their stories to Jesus. Even Judas had a good story to tell, I like to think, about healing souls and bodies.

For two reasons, Jesus has reason to take his disciples on a retreat. First, he is being a good shepherd to them, wanting to guide them to green pastures. He wants them to be able to withdraw for a while from the haste and press of the world and to rest:

³¹And [Jesus] 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)

The second reason Jesus could desire this retreat is for his own sake. He could well have desired the fellowship with his disciples, to have time to hear their stories and to give them what instruction and encouragement he could. And besides that, he might have desired this retreat for the sake of his sorrow over the death of his kinsman, John the Baptist. It is not unusual for those who grieve, especially at such a sudden and gruesome death as John’s, to desire some time apart for prayer and for trying to regain strength to go on.

But it was not to be, for when they took boat and traveled to what they thought would be a lonely place apart, there were the multitudes waiting for him. Another king might have said, “This is too much. I know you have needs, but so do I and so do my disciples. So, please leave us in peace for a while.” But Jesus gives no such answer to the crowds. It is as if for *this* shepherd, compassion trumps all -- even other good causes. And so we have today’s beautiful text:

³⁴As 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. (Mark 6:34, RSV)

Such compassion for the multitudes receives its eternal confirmation on the old rugged cross, when Jesus beholds those who mock him and crucify him and prays, “Father, forgive.”

MAGNIFY THIS COMPASSION

Consider that line I just used about Jesus: “It is as if for *this* shepherd, compassion trumps all.” Now, try to reckon with the wonderful idea that *this* shepherd is King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Indeed, these titles are insufficient. He is not simply “King of kings.” He is “King Eternal.” He the Second Person of the Holy Trinity. He is God! And you and I and all reality rest in his hands.

And so it is that we arrive at this tremendous thought: To be able to say that this shepherd is God is also to be able to say that reality is compassionate toward us. Reality smiles with affection upon us.

Later in this liturgy, during the Offering, soprano Tiffany Rosenquist de la Torre is going to sing one of my favorite songs: Leonard Bernstein's "Simple Song," from his *Mass*. The opening verse speaks of the simplicity of God:

*Sing God a simple song, lauda laude
Make it up as you go along, lauda laude
Sing like you like to sing, God loves all simple things.
For God is the simplest of all, For God is the simplest of all.*

There is truth in this! "For God is the simplest of all." The word "simple" here does not mean "lightweight" or "superficial," but rather "pure, unalloyed, focused, entirely dedicated." Our God is simply compassionate, with no shadow or variation or departure from his compassion. This divine simplicity is compatible with truth and wisdom and complexity of deeds and plans. But the wonderful idea is that we are in compassionate hands whose concrete presence we might not always feel, but which are nonetheless holding us up even this moment and always will. To say that for Jesus, compassion trumps all else, is to say that err long, we are going to see and feel that we are the beloved sheep of the Lord's good pasture and always have been.

I do not see how an atheist can arrive at such a conclusion. I do not see how an atheist can look at the sin, sorrow, and calamities of this world and conclude that in the end, reality is filled with compassion for us. How can an atheist ever arrive at the notion that reality sorrows over our suffering and means to make things better? I just do not see how the atheist can ever arrive at such a hopeful idea. And that is why I think it is so very sad to be an atheist. Pity the poor atheist.

THE CONTENT OF COMPASSION

I conclude with a few words about the content of compassion. Notice how St. Mark phrases things. He speaks of our Lord's compassion, and immediately turns to our Lord's teaching:

³⁴As 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.* (Mark 6:34, RSV)

What did he teach them? Well, I think we can put it this way, speaking to both you and me: Look, Jesus says, you can do better than this. No matter how good you are, you can do better than this. For you were not made for covetousness or lust or revenge or for any low manner of life. Rather, you made for compassion,

for compassion is the very fabric of this world. Altogether, you are meant to become new. Ye must be born again. You need a profound reorientation of your lives toward the compassion which the Lord believes in and which he himself practices.

We have the whole Bible for the details on what Jesus taught the multitudes. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament are filled with the Word of the Lord. But we can get a feel for what Jesus taught the crowd by skipping back earlier in the Chapter to St. Mark's summary of what the disciples did when Jesus sent them out on their mission two-by-two:

¹²And they went out, and preached that men should repent.
(Mark 6:12, KJV)

This is what Jesus taught the multitude: "Ye must be born again."¹ It is as St. Mark described the ministry of Jesus:

¹⁴Now after that John was put in prison, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, ¹⁵And saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel. (Mark 1:14-15, KJV)

Jesus taught a new manner of life. It was a way of life that mirrors his compassion. And so it is the way of life that fits with reality:

⁴³Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. ⁴⁴But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; ⁴⁵*That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven:* for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust. (Matthew 5:43-45, KJV)

And so it is that Jesus regards the throngs of people before him. He pities them because they seem to him like sheep without a shepherd, and he puts his compassion in concrete form by bidding them to become new persons -- persons of compassion like his.

The good news of the Gospel is not affirmation but transformation. True compassion does not say to the sinner, "You are fine just the way you are," but rather, "You must be born again." You must become new. You must be transformed. Altogether, you must become more like Jesus, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.

¹ As in John 3.