

Rev. Dan Welch Pentecost 7 7-18-21 Text- Jeremiah 23: 1-6 Title: "It's Good to Be a Sheep"
The text for this morning's message is our Old Testament Lesson,

Jeremiah 23:1-6 and the title I've chosen for this message is "It's Good to Be a Sheep." Now, as you probably know there are *lots* of places in the Bible that compare God's people to sheep, and with the Lord Himself being our Good Shepherd. But just "How Much Do *Ewe* Know *about* Sheep?" I'd like to challenge you to a pop quiz! Are you ready?

Question #1: If sheep aren't directed to suitable pasture and water, what do they do? A. Order Chinese take-out B. Look it up on Google Earth C. Send around a petition to be given to their shepherd D. Fail to eat and drink correctly.

Question #2: Which best describes the intelligence of domesticated sheep? A. Top of the food chain B. MENSA material C. Sly as a fox D.

Mutton heads

Question #3: How do sheep keep cool in the hot summer months? A. They visit a "Bah Bah" shop B. They wear lighter clothing and drink lemonade C. They stock up on "Instant Relief Cooling Towels" as seen on TV D. They count on their shepherd to shear them at the right time.

Question #4: If a sheep gets separated from its flock, it: A. Stops & asks for directions B. Finds a wolf, kills it, & eats it C. Runs off and becomes a Tik-Tok video star, D. Most likely will die from predators or exposure.

The answer to all of these is, of course, D.

Sheep are definitely dependent and vulnerable creatures. They need help if they're going to survive, and so do we. Thankfully, our God truly is the Good Shepherd Who loves us and promises to take care of all our needs of body and soul. He even sends under-shepherds to tend to His flock. The problem, as we see from today's Old Testament reading, is that those under-shepherds of the Good Shepherd are not always faithful as they should be.

Let's take a look at our Old Testament text. In verse one, God says, "Woe to the shepherds destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!" He spoke these words in regard to the kings of Israel. They are condemning words spoken in gloomy times to unfaithful shepherds.

The days of Jeremiah the prophet were *very* dark days for God's people. God had given them these shepherd-kings for one purpose: to tend the flock. The Lord told the kings of Judah how to do just that. In verse 3 of Jeremiah 22 He said, "Do justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor him who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the resident alien, the fatherless, and the widow, nor shed innocent blood in this place." The Lord had told the kings how to tend the flock, but they failed. They *did* do wrong. The shepherd-kings had not tended the flock in the way God instructed them. Shallum, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin—one after another, these kings during Jeremiah's day were a disaster.

The problem of poor shepherding wasn't just way back then for the people of Judah, though. Still today, too many sent as shepherds fail to tend the flock. Like Judah's kings, too many of *our* leaders are anything but faithful shepherds. Elected officials often fail to model morality and integrity, to say nothing of faith. This certainly damages the public view of

right and wrong, but this really shouldn't be all that surprising, since we don't live in a theocracy like that of Old Testament Judah.

Much worse though, is the failure of too many leaders in Christian churches to be faithful shepherds. Again, this includes *moral* lapses when leaders don't practice what they preach, but it *also* includes the teaching of all false doctrine, compromise with false teachings, and the failure to clearly declare God's Law and Gospel when it is needed.

Whatever the setting, when the shepherds fail to tend the flock, bad things *will* happen, both to the flock and to those wicked shepherds. In verse two of today's text God announces His judgment against bad shepherds: He says, "Because you have scattered my flock and have driven them away and have not attended to them, behold, I will attend to *you* for your evil,' declares the LORD." Again, in chapter 22 of Jeremiah, the one right before our text, the LORD announces that one by one captivity and death will come for Shallum, Jehoiakim, and Jehoiachin who had acted wickedly in their roles as shepherd-kings.

How sad and disgraceful it is today too, when political and religious leaders fall from grace because they've been dishonest and unfaithful, and, if they're misdeeds warrant, are led off to jail. What's worse is when because of their wrongdoing, the sheep are scattered, driven away, their faith damaged or destroyed. That's what upsets God most of all: These shepherds have scattered the sheep of His pasture.

For the people of Judah living 600 years before Jesus' birth, the consequence of poor shepherding was the decay and death of their nation followed by 70 years of captivity in faraway Babylon. When a shepherd of God's flock today, namely a pastor, leads God's people astray-either through sinful actions or false teaching-the results can be even more devastating, faith in God can be damaged or destroyed. God's sheep can be driven away from Him and into sin, death, and the devil's power. The sheep can be lost forever.

God will not stand for this kind of disaster brought upon by faithless shepherds. That's why He sent us a Shepherd who **does** tend the flock-perfectly: "The days are coming," declares 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 (v.5).” He is a righteous Branch from the house of David. David was Israel’s greatest king, who interestingly enough, started out as a *shepherd* and had been raised up to be king in order to tend a *new* flock, God’s people. David’s line at the time of the prophet Jeremiah, though, looked like a lifeless stump with weak and self-serving kings on his throne. But Jesus, the eternal King and David’s greatest descendant, would arise from that stump and reign not for His own glory, but righteously for His flock.

He does what the failed kings of Judah would not do. He cares for the people by dealing ‘wisely and executing justice and righteousness in the land (5).’ The kings, the shepherds, failed to do this. But Jesus fulfills those commands perfectly. During His public ministry Jesus displayed deep compassion toward the helpless, the widow, the fatherless, the weak, the overlooked so-called “nobodies” of society. Jesus saw the people of Israel as sheep without a shepherd, and He gathered them to Himself. He continues to do that today.

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, unites His people together like a shepherd unites his flock of sheep. And He adds even more to His flock, those **beyond** native Israel. Through Holy Baptism, He has brought even us Gentiles into His sheepfold. He gathers His own from around the world and brings us to God His Father. Jesus is **the** long-awaited Shepherd-King of Israel, who is better than any of the preceding kings of Israel. In fact, this Shepherd-King does something surprising, He lays down His life for His sheep -for you, for me- to take away our sins, which would stand in the way of enjoying eternal life in His pasture of heaven. Then God raised our Good Shepherd up on the third day and highly exalted Him. And because He lives, we shall live also!

Now, today, Jesus the King descended from David rules over His flock, His church, throughout the world. He does this by His Holy Spirit working in the places He promised to work: As part of His flock, He tends and nourishes us with His Word and with His sacred meal, the Lord's Supper, to forgive our sins and to keep us spiritually strong and healthy sheep of His pasture. By His Spirit, He pledges to lead us in His paths of righteousness for His Name's sake. Our Good Shepherd calls out to us through His Word, when we are tempted to stray from

Him. With His Law, He shows us our sin, leading us to repentance. With His Gospel, He forgives us and helps us to keep following in His paths of righteousness. And even though we may walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we will fear no evil, for He is with us! Always!

Yes, when you belong to the Good Shepherd, it really *is* good to be a sheep! Now, by faith, continue to follow His paths, the righteous paths of your righteous Shepherd. And wait with eager anticipation for when Jesus comes again in glory to gather you, me, and all His flock together into His glorious, eternal kingdom.

There we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever! Amen.