Promised Restoration

Purpose

To understand how God restores God's people

Hearing the Word

The background text for this lesson is Jeremiah 23:1-8; Isaiah 10:20-27.

**Jeremiah 23:1-8 (NIV)**

1 “Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture!” declares the Lord.

2 Therefore this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says to the shepherds who tend my people: “Because you have scattered my flock and driven them away and have not bestowed care on them, I will bestow punishment on you for the evil you have done,” declares the Lord.

3 “I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and will bring them back to their pasture, where they will be fruitful and increase in number.

4 I will place shepherds over them who will tend them, and they will no longer be afraid or terrified, nor will any be missing,” declares the Lord.

5 “The days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land.

6 In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The Lord Our Righteous Savior.

7 So then, the days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when people will no longer say, ‘As surely as the Lord lives, who brought the Israelites up out of Egypt,’

8 but they will say, ‘As surely as the Lord lives, who brought the descendants of Israel up out of the land of the north and out of all the countries where he had banished them.’ Then they will live in their own land.”

**Jeremiah 23:1-8 (KJV)**

1 Woe be unto the pastors that destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! saith the Lord.

2 Therefore thus saith the Lord God of Israel against the pastors that feed my people; Ye have scattered my flock, and driven them away, and have not visited them: behold, I will visit upon you the evil of your doings, saith the Lord.

3 And I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all countries whither I have driven them, and will bring them again to their folds; and they shall be fruitful and increase.

4 And I will set up shepherds over them which shall feed them: and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall they be lacking, saith the Lord.

5 Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will raise unto David a righteous Branch, and a King shall reign and prosper, and shall execute judgment and justice in the earth.

6 In his days Judah shall be saved, and Israel shall dwell safely: and this is his name whereby he shall be called, THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS.

7 Therefore, behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that they shall no more say, The Lord liveth, which brought up the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt;

8 But, The Lord liveth, which brought up and which led the seed of the house of Israel out of the north country, and from all countries whither I had driven them; and they shall dwell in their own land.
People don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.” This old adage, attributed to a number of people throughout the years, has guided my ministry for decades. I found it to hold true during hospital visits, funerals, and other crisis moments in people’s lives. Clergy are required by The Book of Discipline to meet educational requirements either through seminary studies or a course of study in preparation for ministry. The Board of Ordained Ministry that I served on for several years frequently reminded its incoming candidates that education and training do not negate or minimize God’s call upon their lives. However, the church believes in first a called ministry and then a trained ministry. We are to love people (in this case the congregants) enough to seek to be the best we can before God and those we serve.

Care and empathy are such common human traits that we sometimes overlook them. We just naturally assume that most people (especially Christian workers) have an innate and inherent care and love for other people. Right? Unfortunately and without condemnation, this is not always the case. What is clear, however, is that God calls us to care. God cares about us and we are to care about others. Caring does not always express itself in doing big things. Little acts of love often speak volumes to hurting people. A telephone call, a thank you note, a quick text message, or a gentle pat on the shoulder is often just the lift a person needs.

A mother and father were having an open conversation with their young daughter regarding her choice of boyfriends. The young man of choice in the eyes of the parents was simply not suitable for their daughter. His cultural background was different; he did not share the values of her upbringing; and he was from “the wrong side of the tracks.” Unfortunately, the young man had been killed in a questionable street incident a few months earlier. The daughter could not seem to turn loose of her affections for him. Frustrated, the puzzled mother persisted, “I just don’t understand what you saw in him.” Tearfully, the daughter said, “But, Mama, he cared about me. He really did care about me!”
Judah’s promise of restoration and comfort we find in Jeremiah 23 helps us to see that God cared about the remnant. Likewise, restoration is the evidence that God really cares about us.

**A Stern Warning**

The first verse in our text definitely speaks to me. It is a firm and unapologetic statement that calls for my undivided attention. “Watch out,” the prophet Jeremiah said to the shepherds of the nation. Other translations use the word “Woe,” which is even more attention-getting. It was a public indictment on all who were in leadership positions who gave little or careless regard to their duties and responsibilities. Although the word “shepherd” is commonly and figuratively understood today to refer to pastors and religious leaders, in biblical usage it can also refer to kings, prophets, and others who hold leadership responsibilities. Leadership (both religious and secular) must work together in a conscientious way to ensure that the needs of the people are met.

What was the indictment and open rebuke against these shepherd leaders? First, our text uses the word “destroy” and “scatter” to describe the severity and results of their actions. These are strong words to say the least. To destroy something or someone is to bring havoc or annihilation, to cast discord and ruin into a situation. The well-being or even loss of a person or a community is at stake. As a result of such destructive actions brought upon their community, God’s people scattered either in their beliefs or in threat of physical harm. The unity of the community of faith was under siege not so much from without but from within. It was a crisis that began at the top and filtered down among the people.

Charge conference was always a turning point for me during my pastoral tenure. I personally did not care for all the paperwork and forms required (though I understood), but I did like the idea that this conference was an opportunity to bring the congregants together, review the past year’s work, and chart plans for the incoming year. It was an opportunity to reflect, readjust if needed, and continue on the journey. Leadership was always a key concern of mine during this time. After nominating and voting in the new year’s leadership, I usually announced that at a future time, we would hold a short recognition ceremony during a morning service. Its purpose was simply to introduce the leaders to the congregation and impress upon the individual leaders the seriousness of their jobs. People need to know who and what their leaders do and how a leadership that works together is a blessing to the entire church.

Everything rises and falls on leadership! No, this is not to say that the leader of a committee or organization should do everything. Leaders are only as strong as those who support them. My point, however, is that over the course of the new year I saw firsthand the power and influence of a dedicated and conscientious
leader versus a leader who carelessly and irresponsibly carried out his or her duties. As a buffer against such lackadaisical behavior, my personal criteria was always commitment and love for the church over knowledge and experience. When people truly love the church and its ministries, we can find suitable training opportunities for them when they need them. The United Methodist Church provides numerous workshops and leadership training events that teach and equip people for service. Second Chronicles 34:33-34 reports that as long as Josiah gave conscientious and godly leadership to the people, “They didn’t turn away from following the Lord God of their ancestors.” Leadership makes a difference!

Specifically, the Lord’s indictment against these shepherd leaders was that they did not “tend to” God’s people (Jeremiah 23:2). The idea of “tending” to someone carries with it the notion of feeding or meeting that individual’s needs. The shepherd tended to the sheep by leading them to grassy meadows and calm and restful waters. Tending to their needs as they traveled along the barren and rugged paths was the shepherd’s highest concern. Psalm 23 gives us a beautiful picture of shepherd leadership on the human and divine level. God’s final word of indictment towards these shameful leaders was that on behalf of the people of God, revenge and judgment would come upon them. This indictment prompts us to thank God for the thousands of dedicated leaders across the land, both religious and secular, who hold the needs of the people in their hearts in carrying out their duties and responsibilities.

How do you encourage and support leaders in your church and in other arenas? If asked, will you accept leadership?

Hope for the Future

God never leaves the righteous without hope! What a marvelous and wonderful truth. After openly chastising and rebuking these misguided leaders, the Lord through Jeremiah spoke promise and hope to the people, solidified by repeated pledges of deliverance. The Lord declared, “I myself will gather,” followed by, “I will bring them back” and then, “I will place over them” (verses 3-4). Herein is another picture of God’s bountiful and unmerited love toward Israel and toward us. Although the people’s sins and disobedience had caused the Lord to disperse and drive them into foreign lands, divine love would eventually draw them back and restore them. The Apostle John’s words ring true here: “How great is the love that the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God” (1 John 3:1, NIV).

God’s promise of hope and restoration would bring tangible blessings for all to see. The people would become “fruitful” and “multiply” (Jeremiah 23:3). The biblical image of these words refers to God’s abundant and overflowing blessings upon them. In light of God’s earlier promises given through Moses, they would be
blessed in the city and blessed in the field. Their crops would flourish, seasonal rains would come, and their cattle would increase. Furthermore, the Lord would defeat the enemies that came against them (see Deuteronomy 28). Perhaps the best promise for these oppressed and ill-treated Israelites was that the Lord would set over them shepherd leaders with servant’s hearts. It would be a new day in the life of this war-torn nation. Restoration would come as an expression of a loving and merciful God toward the people of God.

Another exciting part of this promise was that in the fullness of time, the promise would surely come to pass. In two verses Jeremiah declared that “the time is coming” (verses 5, 7). Regardless of the current harsh conditions and circumstances, this prophetic promise of a new day was divinely destined to happen. Judah would be saved and Israel would live in safety. God would raise up a king from the lineage of David who would be wise, just, and fair to all the inhabitants of the land. While Zedekiah may be the object of this prophecy, many scholars see this promise not only as hope for the future of Judah and Israel, but as a glimpse of the coming Messiah who is The Lord Our Righteousness. God’s eternal promises go from generation to generation.

Hope is a mark of our identity as followers of Christ. In a world so often marked by hurt and hopelessness, we dare to market ourselves as a people of hope. We dare to look beyond the pain and confusion of the present moment and see a silver lining behind every dark cloud. This hope is not built on wishful thinking or a false and shallow sense of reality, but on the truth of a risen Lord who promises to be with us through the power of the Holy Spirit. This living hope is the inheritance of the righteous and all who believe (1 Peter 1:3). Judah’s faithful few captured this hope. It is through this blessed hope that the church reaches out into a broken world with the message that, “There a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole; there is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.”

What gives you hope for a brighter future? How can you live into this hope?

The Lord Our Righteousness

Political campaigns always intrigue me. I’ve never wanted to be a politician; however, I do try to take note of a candidate’s position on issues and his or her voting records in an attempt to make an informed decision. Politicians notably seem to love telling their constituents what they are going to do if elected. The follow-through of many of these politician candidates, however, is often predictable. Once elected to office, they confront the realities of political opposition and shortage of funding at the risk of gradually returning to the status quo. Obviously this does not happen in every situation but enough for me not to become overly excited in an election year. The frustration for many voters is that regardless of the complexities and cir-
cumstances that come in moving forward, people by and large simply want leadership to keep its promises.

The promise of a new king arising from a descendant of David was a promise that would be fulfilled. In other words, it would not be an empty promise. This promise gave hope to the people of Judah and Israel that God cares for people and specifically the people of God. The Lord had not forgotten them (although many of them forgot God). This future reality would show the faithfulness of God and radically change the hearts of the observers. Isaiah 23:7 says that the people would no longer hope and swear by the God who brought Israel out of Egypt, but by the God who delivered them from the nations of the world. This soon returning migration would be an event that would capture the attention of the world. The new king would right the wrongs of society and bring peace and prosperity to a broken nation. For some, it may have been a promise too good to believe, but for those who trusted in God, it brought empowering hope that enabled them to overcome the worst of life’s tragedies.

God’s timing and our timing is not always the same. As a youth growing up in rural Tennessee, I often heard people say, “God may not come when you want him, but he’s always on time.” Respectfully, this familiar saying at the time meant little to me until I learned later in life that there is a time and season with God. I recall a situation where I fervently prayed and sought God for an answer regarding a particular problem, only to be disappointed and let down when the answer did not come. Frankly, I got a little upset and even angry at God. However, and as time went by and maturity set in, I found myself re-praying my previous prayer, only this time thanking God for not answering the first prayer. An answered prayer when I first asked at such a young and immature age would have been disastrous for me. Thank you, Lord, for your perfect timing. Despite all the harsh realities and inconsistencies of the present time, Judah’s deliverance and restoration would come at the perfect time that would give glory and honor to God.

God cares about you and me. Ponder and meditate on this thought during the upcoming week. Knowing that God cares about you will change your life. Spiritual and moral inconsistencies will always exist in the world. However, the more we prayerfully study and reflect on God’s acts of grace, the more faith and hope begins to take shape in our lives.

How does God’s promise of restoration empower you in your daily living?

Lord, thank you for the promise and free gift of restoration. We love you because you first loved us; in Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.