



Pentecost 8-July 18, 2021
Baltic and East Nidaros Parish
Jeremiah 23:1-6, Psalm 23, Ephesians 2:11-22,
Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

“Brought Near”

- Sermon by Pastor Randall J. Questad

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

*Pastor. This word is derived from the Latin noun which means shepherd. It is also derived from the Latin verb pascere which means to lead to pasture, to set to grazing, or to cause to eat. The word pastor and pasture even sound alike. The beloved 23rd Psalm which we just recited together certainly describes the work of Jesus the Good Shepherd who leads his flock to green pastures. Not very long ago, on April 25th, the Sunday we recognize as Good Shepherd Sunday, we recited this Psalm together. I never get tired of hearing this psalm as it reminds me of what Jesus will do for us in this life and in the life to come. The scriptures today not only point to Jesus, the good shepherd, but they point to what all shepherds, all pastors are called to do. They are to **bring near** those who are far off by speaking God’s word.*

Apparently, there were shepherds in Jeremiah’s day who were doing the opposite of what shepherds were called to do. They were scattering flocks rather than gathering them. They were driving flocks away rather than attending to their needs. Jeremiah, himself was a shepherd in the pastor sense of the word. But you knew he was a good shepherd by where he got his words. When he spoke, he always began by saying, “Thus says the Lord”. Jeremiah was not offering his perspective or opinions. He was speaking the words that the Lord gave him to speak. And the word that he was delivering for the shepherds who weren’t doing their job was not good. He declared, “Woe to you who scatter the sheep of my pasture.” Jeremiah prioritized what would happen next. The shepherds who did not bring the flocks near would be dealt with later by the Lord, but the first priority was to tend to the flock by sending different shepherds that would gather the flock that had been scattered. Jeremiah, who was also a prophet, announced the coming of the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ who would come from the family of David, who was once a shepherd of sheep who became a pastor who pastured people with his words of peace.

There are some Sundays when it is difficult to find the connection between the lessons that have been assigned to us. However, every lesson for today tells of the work of shepherds to bring those that are far off and bring them near. The second reading for today from Ephesians is no exception. Paul writes to the congregation at Ephesus reminding them of the time when they were aliens and strangers. Sheep that were far off. The Jewish people were chosen by God through physical circumcision. The Gentiles, that group which includes everyone else, like you and me had no hope of being chosen. No hope, that is until Christ brought us near with his word of promise.

Paul asks the people if they remember when they were aliens, the outsiders looking in. I am thankful that I don’t. I do not feel that I am more privileged than others by never remembering a time when I was uncertain if I had been chosen by God. I simply am thankful and give thanks often that now for many generations our family made

it a priority to bring each member near to Jesus as infants in the waters of baptism. What circumcision did for the Jews, baptism does for the Gentiles. In early Sunday School classes, I was brought near to Jesus, and I never questioned if I was in or out. My confirmation Pastors Al Goldammer and Martin Haase brought me even closer to Jesus. I am thankful to have had shepherds who did what they were supposed to do and brought me near to Jesus rather than causing me to question my faith.

In the gospel for today, Jesus' disciples had been at work and now had returned and were telling Jesus of their shepherding success stories. They were not chasing people away. Instead, people were flocking to them. They were flocking so fast that Jesus encouraged them to take a break by going to a deserted place so they could at least take time to eat. Jesus who could turn water into wine, calm a stormy sea with his word, heal the woman who had suffered from a flow of blood for 12 years, raise a little girl and his friend Lazarus from death to a new life simply by saying "Get up" always failed at one thing in his ministry. Jesus would never rest when there was work to be done. He could not be a shepherd that would send sheep away, regardless of if he were tired or hungry. The deserted place that he sent his weary disciples ended up being full of people who wanted help before they even got off the boat.

When Jesus looked at this group of people, he saw a flock of sheep. A flock of sheep who did not have a shepherd. It doesn't say in our reading from Mark, but it would not be hard to imagine that Jesus may have sent his disciples away to get a break from the crowd. But Jesus didn't go anywhere. Jesus had compassion. The compassion that Jesus had was more than a fleeting thought about these people like I am guilty of having when I hear about a tragedy on the news about people I really don't know. I confess that I can't imagine what some people go through like the families who haven't heard from loved ones who likely perished in the collapse of the building in Florida. I can say that I have compassion for them, but to be truthful, I have not lost a night of sleep because of it.

This is not the kind of compassion the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ had when he saw the flock of sheep. These people were not buried under the rubble of a building. Jesus knew that their situation in life was worse. They were far off from Jesus and wanted to be brought near. The compassion Jesus had was a gut-wrenching compassion that would not go away by sending the people away. Jesus might have sent his disciples to bed, but Jesus would not go to sleep until these sheep were brought near to him.

*It might seem that these people were attracted to Jesus and his disciples and made up their minds to receive something from them, so they raced around the sea to get close to Jesus. If that were the case Paul would have said those that were far off, came to Jesus. However, Paul's choice of words makes a big difference. He said, those that were far off were **brought near**. The 23rd Psalm does not provide sheep with choices. The 23rd Psalm is about a good shepherd who chooses to bring his sheep near to him. A shepherd who makes his sheep lie down where he decides they should lie down. A shepherd who leads his sheep not only by streams of still waters, but also feeds his sheep in the very presence of enemies. The role of the good shepherd is never to scatter, but to bring near.*

How close do you need to be, to be near to Jesus? The people that were brought near to Jesus needed to just be close enough to touch the fringe of the cloak of Jesus. This was close enough so that they could hear Jesus speak to them.

You might be farther than an arm's reach of Jesus today. But if you have now heard about the compassion he has for you, you have been brought near. Brought near, not by your movement toward Jesus, but by Jesus bringing you near after shedding his blood on the cross for you. Amen.