

Jeremiah 23:1-6 (NRSV)

Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the LORD. ²Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the LORD. ³Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. ⁴I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the LORD.

⁵The days are surely coming, says 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. ⁶In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness."

Colossians 1:11-20 (NRSV)

¹¹May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully ¹²giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. ¹³He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

¹⁵He is the image of the invisible God,
the firstborn of all creation;

¹⁶for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created,
things visible and invisible,
whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers
all things have been created through him and for him.

¹⁷He himself is before all things,
and in him all things hold together.

¹⁸He is the head of the body, the church;
He is the beginning,
the firstborn from the dead,
so that he might come to have first place in everything.

¹⁹For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,

²⁰and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things,
whether on earth or in heaven,
by making peace through the blood of his cross.

Today, we celebrate the kingship and the caring of Jesus Christ.

We often lift up Jesus both as the Good Shepherd and as King. Indeed, as Robert Hasley would be happy to tell you, had he gotten his way twenty-one years ago, St. Andrew would be called Church of the Good Shepherd. Yet the problem with the images of both shepherding and royalty is that few of us have any direct experience with either. Though I actually met a few shepherds long ago, I've never lived under a king.

Good Shepherd

The imagery of God as the good shepherd and we as his flock is one of the dominant portraits of God in the Bible.¹ It is not a very complicated or intellectual portrait. God cares – that's it. He cares for his flock and for each sheep in it. Even in a flock of a hundred sheep, the good shepherd will search high and low for the one who is lost (Matt 18:10-14). God finds for us the green pastures and the still waters.

¹Allen Coppedge helps us to see that Scripture paints more than a few portraits of God, including one of God as the Good Shepherd. In all Coppedge identifies eight portraits of God: Transcendent Creator, Sovereign King, Personal Revealer, Priest, Righteous Judge, Loving Father, Powerful Redeemer, and the Good Shepherd. All are found in the Old and New Testament and all are revealed in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Coppedge's book, *Portraits of God: A Biblical Theology of Holiness* is excellent, though more of a reference book than a read-from-front-to-back book.

The fact that we need a shepherd seems to be a lot harder for us to learn than it is for the sheep. We cherish our supposed independence, whereas the sheep are perfectly content being wholly dependent on the shepherd. In fact, sheep need the shepherd's caring and protection in a way that other herd animals do not, for sheep have lost the ability to defend themselves. They are an easy meal for the wolves.

We think we don't need a shepherd when, in truth, we do. We can't accumulate enough wealth to forestall sorrow. There is no doctor who can prevent our death. We can't have enough police to stop crime or armies to prevent war. We imagine that the wolf is our problem to fix, when it actually the shepherd's. God knows better than we do that a good shepherd is exactly what we need.

Kings of old

The kings of old were not like the kings and queens of today, who are largely figureheads, stripped of any real power. In the ancient world and up to the time of the Magna Carta,² the kings, as well as the occasional queen, were absolute monarchs. Some exercised their total sovereignty with the good of the people in mind. Most used the power to satisfy their personal desires. But in nearly all cases, their rule was absolute. This is why assassination

was such a popular way of dealing with an errant king, such as King Amon of Judah (641-639 BC), who we met in last week's background study. He lasted only two years on the throne!

Throughout the ancient Near East, including Israel, the shepherd was a metaphor for the kings and their responsibilities to guide, protect, and care for their people. Jeremiah 23, like Ezekiel 34, opens with God's indictment of Israel's shepherds, their kings. Both prophets promise that God will raise up proper shepherds, culminating in "a righteous branch" (see the page three textbox).

This shepherding King will be, as Peterson paraphrases it, "A ruler who knows how to rule justly. He'll make sure of justice and keep people united. In his time Judah will be secure again and Israel will live in safety" (Jer. 23:5-6).

The Shepherd King

The Shepherd King, the King of all kings, the lord of all Lords, is, of course, Jesus. The imagery is also wrapped around David, but he had been dead for centuries by the time of Jeremiah and Ezekiel. The prophets point ahead to a day when God will raise up a shepherd king from the house of David who will usher in God's reign. In other words, a messiah.

It is good that on this last weekend before Advent, we remind ourselves of exactly who it is that was born in a manger more than 2,000 years ago, who lives still and always shall. Paul helps us in this with the glorious Christ-hymn from his letter to the Colossians. Jesus, born in a humble manger in the most obscure of places, is the shepherd King in whom "all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell" (Colossians 1:19). Long live the King!

Colossians 1:11-20 *A Christ Hymn*

If you look up today's passage from Colossians in your pew Bible, you'll see that I've rendered verses 15-20 somewhat differently than did the NRSV translators. I've written it out in the form of a poem or hymn. Why?

In the years after Jesus, his first followers struggled to understand what they had witnessed or had been told. They tried to make sense of Jesus' teachings, actions, crucifixion, and resurrection. What did it all mean? Who was (is!) Jesus?

Our earliest peeks into these struggles are found in Paul's letters which are the oldest writings in the NT. In them, we witness many arguments around the shaping of Christianity. Some of Paul's letters were written no later than 20 years or so after Jesus' resurrection.

Even within Paul's letters, there are still older hymns and creed-like passages. The "Christ Hymn" of Phil. 2:6-11 is one and is presented in poetic form in most translations. In 1 Cor. 11:23-26, Paul explicitly passes on the tradition about the Lord's supper that was given to him by others. And in Colossians 1:15-20, we have another of Paul's hymns. Its language and structure suggest that Paul has incorporated an early Christian hymn. We can be sure of the passage's power, which is easier to appreciate when written out as a poem. I urge you to read it aloud as a poem and a proclamation of the supremacy of Christ.

²The Magna Carta, signed in 1215 AD, marked the beginning of limitations on the king's power. King John agreed that his will could be limited by the law. This was a very different arrangement than the ancient kings had with their subjects.

God's Anointed – “a righteous Branch”

The Christian calendar begins with the first Sunday of Advent (next week) and ends with Christ the King Sunday, which is this weekend. It is a special day that was instituted by Pope Pius XI in 1925. The Second Vatican Council set it on the last Sunday of the church calendar in 1969. It is a day that is now on the church calendar of many Protestant denominations including the UMC. The day is an opportunity to celebrate the kingship and kingdom of Christ before we begin Advent, which prepares us to celebrate the birth of Christ. You can think of Christmas celebrating Jesus' birth and Christ the King Sunday as celebrating his exaltation and dominion over all creation.

The passage from Jeremiah reminds us that centuries before Jesus' birth, God promised that one day he would raise up a king from the house of David who would restore Israel and rule the land with justice and righteousness. This king would be anointed as all the kings of Israel were. Thus, the Jews came to speak of this coming king and rescuer as the “anointed one” or *masiah* in Hebrew and *christos* in Greek.

To claim that Jesus was this long-awaited King, this Messiah, was not to claim that Jesus was divine. “Messiah” was a royal term, unrelated to deity. The Jews of Jesus' day awaited the arrival of a human king who would be raised up by God to restore Israel and free them from their Roman oppressors. This Messiah would usher in God's kingdom and serve as a sort of vice-regent under God's rule.

When the Romans hung the sign reading “King of the Jews” on the cross above Jesus, they meant it as mockery but it carried truth that probably escaped even the Jews, for they expected a human king like their idealized King David. But earlier in Israel's history, they did not have a human king. Their king was God! The early Christians came to understand that their proclamations of Jesus as Messiah *and* God brought back together what had been separated. Jesus was King, Lord, and Savior. In the beginning he was with God and was God (John 1:1). In Jesus, the Father had put all things right.

READING WITH HEART & MIND, NOV 25 – DEC 1

Sunday, 2 Samuel 18:19 -19:8a This is one of the poignant and heart-wrenching scenes in all literature. What do you think accounts for the depth of David's grief, even going so far as to neglect its effect on those who achieved the victory, winning David back his throne? In our lives, how is every event bound up with what came before? How much of this do you think goes back to David's sin with Bathsheba and all that followed?

Monday, 2 Samuel 19:8b-43 David now returns to Jerusalem. What is the theme underlying all these encounters as he crosses the Jordan river and heads to the city? What is the significance of the river in this?

Tuesday, 2 Samuel 20 Why would the northern tribes follow Sheba the troublemaker? This foreshadows the coming division of the kingdom after the death of Solomon. Joab kills again! This time his victim is Amasa. On his deathbed, David will instruct his son Solomon to make Joab account for his murders of Abner and Amasa. What has David done right through all this?

Wednesday, 2 Samuel 21 A grim and tragic story, that reminds us that the world of 3,000 years ago was in some ways very different from our own. And we get some more heroic exploits.

Thursday, 2 Samuel 22 This is a psalm of thanksgiving and is a duplicate of Psalm 18. A commentator wisely notes that this psalm declares God's reign in the midst of circumstances that suggest God does *not* reign. What meaning is there here for us and our world?

Friday, 2 Samuel 23 Here, we get another song, this time cast as David's last words, as well as some exploits of David's men. These last chapters (beginning with 21:1-14) are often seen as appendices to the book Samuel. What could be their purpose?

Saturday, 2 Samuel 24 This story definitely seems like something tacked on at the end. What do you think is the point of this unusual story? What does it reveal to us about God or about Israel or about ourselves?

Sermon Notes

A Dickens of a Christmas

Are you hoping for a Christmas season with more joy and less stress?

If so (and who isn't!), we hope that you'll join us for a special Advent series in Scott Engle's Sunday morning class. We'll look at the world-transforming coming of Jesus Christ through the familiar Charles Dickens' story, *A Christmas Carol*. Without ever referring to Jesus by name, Dickens created a memorable story about the power of Christmas (hint, Christ!) to transform lives.

This four-week series will begin on Sunday, December 2.
Scott's class meets every Sunday in Festival Hall at 11am.

Coming in January: *Exploring World Religions* at 11:00, as well as two Sunday morning Bible Academy classes at 9:30!

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Christ the King. We often use royal language when we speak of Jesus – King, Prince of Peace, King of kings, Sovereign, Lord – but do we really consider what it means? You might begin by discussing what kings are and what kings do. What would make a good king? Or a bad king? When we speak of a king's power, how far does it extend? Certainly, *authority* is basic to our notions of kingship. Kings get the last say. What does it mean to speak of Jesus' authority over us, his subjects (to stay in the kingly language)? What sort of authority does Jesus exercise? Over what portions of our lives? What are our responsibilities as Jesus' subjects? Does this language seem appealing to you? If so, why? If not, why not?
2. The content of the Christ Hymn from Colossians (v. 15-20) is powerful, but I wonder how much it actually staggers us! How can we read such a passage and truly embrace, intellectually and emotionally, the immensity of its claims? A man who died in humiliation upon a Roman cross is the image of the invisible God. All things were created in him, through him, and for him. He is before all things. . . . How could this be!? This is about far more than my inner peace or the forgiveness of my sins. This is a cosmic story. What are some steps we could take to reconnect with the sheer enormity of Jesus Christ?
3. Who wants to be your good shepherd? There are always lots of folks lobbying for the job. Who tells you that they want to protect and provide for you? To show you the way to the life you've always wanted? You might share some stories of times in your life when a seeming "good shepherd" let you down, when you discovered that the shepherd wasn't as good as you thought or as able. And you might share some stories of times when Jesus the Good Shepherd cared for you, provided for you, and lifted you up.