

PENTECOST 9

Proper 11 - Year B

Jon Achée is a first-year seminarian at General Theological Seminary in New York, and a postulant to the priesthood canonically resident in the Diocese of Los Angeles. Jon's sponsoring mission church is St. John Chrysostom Episcopal Church in Rancho Santa Margarita, Cal. Jon resides in Seattle, Wash., where he recently relocated with his wife, Kelly, to take a job as the director of finance and operations at a K-8 independent school for gifted students. He attends St. Mark's Cathedral in the Diocese of Olympia. Jon continues to work in ministries that focus on feeding and serving the unhoused. Jon and Kelly have two grown adult children and enjoy hiking the many beautiful trails near Seattle.

Note: During the 2024 Season after Pentecost, Sermons That Work will use Track 2 readings for sermons and Bible studies. Please consult our archives for many additional Track 1 resources from prior years.

Jeremiah 23:1-6

23 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 no longer fear 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."

Commentary from Jon Achée

The book of Jeremiah, named after the prophet Jeremiah, was written for the people of Judah who had just survived three invasions by the Babylonians that resulted in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple and exile from their homeland. They were a people trying to understand how this destruction, death, and separation could have occurred to the faithful children of God. The prophet Jeremiah places responsibility for this misfortune squarely in the hands of the kings of Judah: "Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the Lord" (v. 1). As explained in Chapter 22 of Jeremiah, just preceding the assigned reading for today, the kings of Judah, God's shepherds of his people, have only been concerned with

enriching themselves and have forsaken the needs of the people. They have not acted with justice and righteousness, they have not attended to the people, delivering all from the hands of the oppressor, and they have not avoided doing wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shedding the blood of the innocent (Jer 22:3). Clearly, leadership matters, and the realization of the Kingdom requires leaders of the people and stewards of the land that exemplify the righteousness of God, our ultimate shepherd - a righteousness that brings about an equitable social order, where the most vulnerable are protected, justice and inclusion prevail, and all can flourish.

Jeremiah leaves the reader with the hope that God will "raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall no longer fear or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing" (v. 4). None shall be missing, all are included in the kingdom of justice, peace, and love that God wants for us. We must play a part in this work, by ensuring that we demand from any who seek to lead us that they never forget that they are but shepherds in service to the people that they lead. They should always put the flock before their own needs and always work for justice and peace where all are included, and the alien, the orphan, the widow, the poor, and the oppressed are raised up and allowed to flourish alongside the entire flock. Leadership matters.

Discussion Questions

In an election year where division and "othering" by each political side seems to be the norm, how do the words of the prophet Jeremiah speak to us?

What actions does Jeremiah call us to, and how should we play a role in the realization of the Kingdom?

Psalm 23

- ¹ The Lord is my shepherd; *
I shall not be in want.
- ² He makes me lie down in green pastures *
and leads me beside still waters.
- ³ He revives my soul *
and guides me along right pathways for his
Name's sake.
- ⁴ Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of
death, I shall fear no evil; *
for you are with me; your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.
- ⁵ You spread a table before me in the presence of
those who trouble me; *
you have anointed my head with oil, and my
cup is running over.
- ⁶ Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all
the days of my life, *
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for
ever.

Commentary from Jon Achée

Psalm 23 is probably the most beloved and well-known of all the psalms. It is often used and recited to provide comfort at funerals and other times of great hardship. The psalmist reminds us of God's steadfast and comforting love for us in the very first verses: "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters" (v. 1-2). This introduction pulls us into a beautiful prayer of recognition and thankfulness for how God abides with us every day. God's love and mercy "pursue" us every day of our lives; the psalmist ends the psalm with, "Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life" (v. 6). God wants to be in relationship with us. God wants us to flourish and have peace in our lives. We can respond to this deep, abiding love by not only loving God back but also by passing on this deep, abiding love to our family, friends, communities, the other, and the stranger. In this way, we ensure that all know that God is pursuing them, too.

Discussion Questions

Psalms are poetic prayers that are often sung or chanted in the liturgies of The Episcopal Church. Does singing or chanting Psalm 23 change your emotional response to the psalmist's words? If so, how?

How do we express our relationship with God in our relationships within our own communities? What about in our relationships with the Other and those strangers we might interact with in our daily lives?

Ephesians 2:11-22

¹¹ So then, remember that at one time you gentiles by birth, called “the uncircumcision” by those who are called “the circumcision”—a circumcision made in the flesh by human hands— ¹² remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us, ¹⁵ abolishing the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶ and might reconcile both to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. ¹⁷ So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near, ¹⁸ for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. ¹⁹ So then, you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, ²⁰ built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone; ²¹ in him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord, ²² in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

Commentary from Jon Achée

This portion of Ephesians appointed for Proper 11 strikes the heart of the theology of the book. Through Christ and through the cross, we are bonded together in love and unity. There is no longer “us” and “them,” we are called to be one Body, “for he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both into one and has broken down the dividing wall” (v. 14). Christ has created “in himself one new humanity in place of the two” (v. 15), and all “have access in one Spirit to the Father” (v. 18). The writer also calls us to remember our past and the separation from the Holy that we came from, and how we “have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (v. 13). In the time that this letter was written, this would have been a challenging theology, not only in rejection of the barriers that had led to much hostility and calling for full inclusion of the Gentiles into the Body of Christ but also by pointing out that it is Christ who came to proclaim and provide, “peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near” (v. 17) and not the peace enforced by the ruling empire of the time. This would have been a direct challenge to the Roman empire and Caesar himself, who was the one to be lauded for bringing and keeping the peace (albeit through militarist rule and repression). This letter could have been viewed by the empire as a threat to their authority. However, the peace that Christ brings is not the peace Rome would have been so proud to boast of. Not the peace resulting from zero tolerance for resistance, but the deeper peace of knowing that we are all one in Christ, fully included in divine love and belonging. No one is left out, and no one is alone, for we are all beloved and “brought near” through Christ and within the community of Christ.

Discussion Questions

What role should today’s church and the followers of Christ take in addressing the partisanship and divisions so prevalent in today’s world?

What does it mean to you to be part of the Body of Christ?

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

³⁰The apostles gathered around Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught. ³¹He said to them, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.” For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. ³²And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. ³³Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. ³⁴As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd, and he began to teach them many things.

⁵³When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. ⁵⁴When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him ⁵⁵and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. ⁵⁶And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak, and all who touched it were healed.

Commentary from Jon Achée

It would be understandable to wonder why the lectionary for today's Gospel skips over two of the “big” miracles in the Gospel of Mark in jumping from verses 30-34 to verses 53-56. Namely, the feeding of the five thousand (Mark 6:35-44), and Jesus walking on water (Mark 6:45-52). It seems that, by skipping these verses, we are being reminded of the fact that although the “big” work is important to do, Jesus recognizes the need for rest and solitude in our busy lives. He wants this for us. In our human brokenness, we need to take a break, to take Sabbath time to recharge, to eat, to pray, to listen for the quiet voice of God and Spirit, so that we do not travel down a wrong path while distracted by our busyness and tiredness. The work of compassion takes a focus and energy that is fueled by times of rest, reflection, and prayer. Still, we see in verse 34 that Jesus does not always practice what he preaches if confronted by the needs of the people! This demonstrates compassion for others that passes all understanding and reminds us of how Christ's divine nature always abides with us.

It could also be viewed that in skipping the two “big” miracles, the lectionary points us to the deep truth in verses 53-56 that the ministry of Christ was often focused on and occurred in the “small” moments – just healing the people, one by one, being present to each suffering person and bringing healing to all. Mark writes in verse 56 that Jesus healed “Wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms.” The “big” miracles are important, but let us not forget the daily “small” miracles that Christ conducted in his day-to-day ministry – “small” miracles that we can also perform by addressing the daily needs of our world and by being present to what Dr. Martin Luther King called the “fierce urgency of now.”

Discussion Questions

What “small” miracles have you recently witnessed? Were you involved in making any of them occur?

How does the thought of taking time for rest, reflection, and prayer make you feel? Why?