***“Sheep without a Shepherd***” by S. Finlan, at The First Church, July 18, 2021

**Jeremiah 23:1–5**

1Woe 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.

5 The 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.

[**Mark 6:31-34, 53-56**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=211)

31 Jesus said to the apostles, “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. . .

53 When 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 market-places, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

We have been examining prophets in recent weeks. Here the great prophet Jeremiah says that Judah’s leaders have not been good shepherds, but ones who have allowed the flock to be scattered, probably a reference to the exile of Jerusalem’s leaders to Babylon in Jeremiah’s time, and also to the scattering of Israel’s ruling classes under Assyrian attack a century earlier. But God is promising to bring the scattered Jews back to the land, and to give them good shepherds for leaders, especially a Davidic descendant who will be a righteous branch, who will decide with wisdom and justice. I will come back to this important hope later in the sermon.

In the gospel story, Jesus observes the people rushing about, wanting to be near him, and he has pity on them, “because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them” (Mark 6:34). Teaching is what he intended to do with them, but they had heard about his reputation as a healer, and they mainly wanted healings and wonders. They were mostly concerned with the here and now, and were not so interested in his higher messages. Even so, Jesus took care of them, feeding them, healing them, giving them what good news they *could* understand. Jesus was known primarily as a teacher and healer, perhaps like another Elijah or Elishah, who were wonder-working prophets. Prophets often spoke out against bad leadership and false religion, and they gained many enemies among the priests, but became folk heroes among the common people. That was the case here. And Jesus did not look down on the common people, but felt compassion for them. They really did need a leader, a good shepherd.

We have a need for leaders. Sometimes we think we are self-made success stories, but really we need leaders, at least philosophically and spiritually. It was good for Jewish folks to have Jeremiah as a leader, who taught them that God would make a new covenant with them, and would write the law on their hearts (Jer 31:31, 33). Such spiritual hopes sustained the people for centuries while they awaited the coming of a good shepherd. How strong was their hope, that it was passed down through centuries!

And Jesus is certainly a good leader, also teaching about inwardly-rooted spiritual goodness, as when he said “Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water” (John 7:38). “He began to teach them,” but they mainly rushed about and brought their sick to him to be healed (Mark 6:34, 55). This is understandable, but it behooves *us* to put the emphasis on the teaching, as where, in the next chapter of Mark, he teaches: “there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile. . . For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come” (7:15, 21).

From within us come good things or bad things, depending upon what we are nurturing in our hearts. Related to this is the question: what are your spiritual hopes? Do you hope to see some kind of spiritual cooperation between certain groups? Do you hope to see peace within your extended family? So some of these hopes are very personal and down to earth, a little different from what I mentioned earlier, the Jewish hope for a Messianic leader who would change the world. Both kinds of hope matter.

So let’s look at hope itself. Hope is something that may lie in the back of your mind, and not be contemplated on every day. Yet it is deep and important. And when it seems there is a chance that the hope will be fulfilled, it becomes very motivating. It can make you run around the countryside looking for the healer. It can make you run and excitedly tell something to your family, as when Andrew ran to his brother Peter and said “we have found the Messiah” (John 1:41). Remember, they had been waiting, living on hope for centuries!

Hope is a great motivator, whether it lies in the back of your mind for long periods or comes to the forefront because you think it is approaching fulfillment. Hope is a little bit like love, that way. It guides the direction that your life takes over the long-term. It helps to define you and shape you. The Russian Andrei Sakharov hoped for civility and law and basic rights for his fellow citizens, and he fearlessly advocated for them his whole life long. He will not lose his reward. The poet Simeon longed for “the consolation of Israel,” remaining in the temple into his old age (Luke 2:25–32), and was rewarded when the Spirit told him that the baby Jesus, being presented in the temple for a purification ritual, would become the Messiah. Now that’s long-term hope, and it was rewarded. Perhaps Sakharov’s long struggle was rewarded when the Berlin wall came down a month before his death. That, and the series of non-violent revolutions that took place in Eastern Europe, an astonishing string of events, showing that sometimes hope can be fulfilled.

“And now, Lord,” asks one psalm, “for what do I wait? You are my only hope” (Ps 39:7 NAB). For what was Simeon waiting? Finally, he found out. For what was Sakharov waiting? He got to see a fraction of it. Perhaps, as we approach God, we are God’s hope, too!

I have a hope. Is it too much to hope that civilized discourse can come about in America, that conservatives and liberals can behave responsibly and learn to listen to each other? Is it too much to hope that political dialogue will be non-violent and non-hateful? Both conservatives and liberals can follow Jesus, and embody his values. Both can find a Good Shepherd in him. He understands all kinds. It would do us good to have him as our common leader.

That is my wild and crazy hope: that people currently deeply suspicious can come to understand each other, and that both sides can restrain the ones in their midst who are prone to extremism. I want to see both sides beat their spears into pruning hooks, and submit themselves to instruction in the ways of peace. It is what comes out of us that leads either to peace or to conflicts and hatred. Let us take in the Spirit, so that what we put out reflects peace and goodness. Let springs of living water come out of us. Let us shape our world in a loving way. My hope clings to my faith that “we have found the Messiah,” and that he has come “to unite the scattered children of God” (John 1:41; 11:52 HCSB), as the Gospel of John says.