

The Hopeful Christian
November 24, 2019
Jeremiah 23:1-6

When I was going through the ordination process, there was one part that I feared above all else: the examination for ordination. This particular exam happens when a candidate has found a church to take them on as a first call and just needs to be ordained to fulfill his/her duties. At this exam (usually held at a presbytery meeting), the members of presbytery are allowed to ask the candidate any question they want, within reason. I've heard of people being asked questions like being asked to describe a stranger they see out on the street theologically or how they seek to address the greatest issue facing Christianity today without being told what that issue is. The one question I was asked that I hated was "What does it mean to be a Christian?" This is a question that has as many answers as there are people. However, it is an important question to consider, because in answering it, you have two options. The first option is to give an honest answer, no broadening of the answer or falsifying information, in which case you are forced to self-reflect on whether you are living up to that definition. The other option is to give an answer that is either a lie or a very broad definition so as to say, "I fit that description," in which case, some part of you begins to ask *why* you feel the need to lie or tell a half-truth.

I ask this of you all because today's reading (along with all the other suggested readings) give us an answer to this question. While it is in no way *the* answer, it is *an* answer, a cornerstone on which to further consider the question and build. The last couple weeks have touched on it a little bit, but this week "hits it on the head": to be a Christian is to have hope. In the reading today, the prophet Jeremiah relays the words of God to a particular group: the kings of Judah. As Jeremiah says, "Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of [God's] pasture." In other words, "beware to those who, though appointed to care for God's people, have not done so." As a result of the kings' self-centeredness and misguidance, the people of Israel and Judah have been scattered, sent to foreign lands far and wide. Now they are in foreign places, among strangers, potentially facing very real danger because of who or what they are. Yet, there is hope.

There is hope that soon this time of living in fear shall come to an end. God talks about scattering these bad shepherds as they have scattered the flock. This image of scattering those who scatter, essentially repaying one's actions in equal measure, calls to mind: whom have I scattered? Though we may not be kings or queens, though we may not all have had high positions such as CEOs or government officials, we have all had some level of influence over others. It could be your own children, nieces or nephews, or grandchildren. Maybe it was the people you guided as a teacher, social worker, nurse, or the like. Then again, maybe it was someone you viewed as an equal; a sibling, a coworker, someone that, though you did the same things and were equals, they still looked up to you for guidance whenever they got stuck. Thinking that there are people you lead without knowing you lead them is a heavy weight to bear, especially if there is the risk of having misled them, scattering them instead of helping them. Well, what hope is there for us then if *we* are these bad shepherds, these ones that have scattered?

Then, the tone takes a complete U-turn and God says, "Then 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." This is a very dense image. Therefore, let us break it down. First, we have the image of God doing the leading. Up to this point, God has sent

prophets to guide the kings and the people and allowed the rise of kings so that they might guide the people. Now, God takes the reigns back and steps into the position of shepherd once more, something that hasn't happened since before King Saul was anointed king hundreds of years prior. So, we have hope simply based on the fact that it is not just another human doing the guiding, but God with the shepherd's crook this time.

Next, God says He will gather the remnant of the flock, meaning all that remains. All persons who have been scattered, they shall be brought back. Not one will be left unguided or unattended to. This also includes the descendants of the kings, for God says, "the lands where *I* have driven them." God only ever talks about personally driving out the "bad shepherds" but a verse prior. So, there is hope not just for the original flock and their descendants, but the shepherds and their descendants, who themselves rose from the flock. There is hope for *all* God's children, no matter their past.

We then see this hope reflected in the psalm for today, Psalm 46. "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear." It then goes on to talk about, though there are these natural disasters like the shaking of mountains and the roaring of rivers, though nations quarrel with one another, God puts them at an end. The second to last verse then says, "Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth." In short, God is present and active in our world, and no one need fear anymore. However, this hope doesn't just stop here.

Returning to the Jeremiah passage, the last part of it talks about a coming savior. "The days are surely coming . . . when I will raise up from David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety." We hear this passage, and immediately we recognize this as the Christ child, fully God and fully human, the one we eagerly await the arrival of with the Advent season. Well, as promised, this Christ child arrives, born of a virgin, lives for 33 years, and meets an unfortunate end. He is tried, and during this trial, is asked, "Are you the King of the Jews?" He says, "I am." At his crucifixion, the gospel reading for today, he is hung on the cross, a sign over him reading "King of the Jews." At this point in Jesus' life, Judas has betrayed him, Peter has thrice denied him, and the grand majority of the populace have called for his crucifixion over not having done anything wrong. Being fully God, he could rain down fire upon them for such insolence and betrayal, but no. As he hangs there, he prays, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." This is probably one of the most curious parts of Jesus' ministry: he hangs on a cross, moments from death, horribly beaten, but yet, he has mercy, as if he has hope that all shall be saved and "gathered in." It gives us hope as well, knowing that, though we might commit sin, if God can forgive hundreds, even thousands, for executing an innocent man, God can forgive our sins as well, and that we will never be cast from the flock.

This is what it means to be a Christian: to be hopeful. We hope that one day we will all be led to greener pastures where we will be one "flock" again, we hope that we can be as merciful as Jesus was to us while facing his death, and we hope that we will be able to fulfill our calling as followers of Christ: to make disciples of all nations, to love our neighbors as we ourselves have been loved, and to serve as we have been served. In addition, we are also called to spread that hope. In serving as we have been served, loving as we have been loved, in making "disciples," we spread hope that not only may others find the light in the darkness but that we may be manifestations of that same light. In closing then, I ask, whose shepherding light are you?