

Holy God, we rejoice to gather around Your Word, because in You is life! Teach us to listen for Your voice, that we may follow Your ways in a violent world that yearns for peace. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

They had been frustrated for so long—disempowered, bitter, afraid.

Everything was a struggle.

They'd console themselves by recalling glorious times of old,

a “golden age” when things hadn't been like this—

hadn't been so hard.

Back when you didn't pass the lavish homes of the super-rich

on your way to a job that barely paid enough to feed your family.

Back when you weren't afraid of being incarcerated for a minor infraction

or for nothing at all.

Back when you could talk about politics

without every conversation turning into a diatribe.

But anxiety and conflict had become the norm. And the people were restless—

impatient to make things go back to the way they were.

Naturally they'd follow anyone who said they could solve this:

“solve” their despair, their rage at how life had turned out.

Some charismatic populist would arise, a “messiah” claiming to have been anointed

by God. ^{Mark 13:21–22} Happened over and over again. The resentment of disaffected

workers would shift into something else, something bladed and sharp: an aggressive

energy to make this be the solution, no matter the cost. Over time, it would become clear that the new “messiah,” whoever he was, was manipulating them for his own profit. Nothing changed, and the people’s despair would deepen.

They were hungry, exhausted, and fed up with being disregarded.

Their fury boiled over. Factionalism was the worst it had ever been.

And Jesus saw them.

In the Temple, in the streets of Jerusalem, on the hill outside the city, Jesus spoke to throngs of people disenfranchised by poverty and worn down by hopelessness. Folks stigmatized by disease, exploited in the fields, in debt at home. Folks who were so angry, they’d have joined a revolution in a heartbeat. Jesus saw them. And “he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.”

Like sheep without a shepherd. Lost and vulnerable.

Now, I love sheep—I hope you do too—but sheep are helpless when predators come. They can run, sure, but often it’s too late. Sheep are sociable and intelligent; their chief joy is to be with their flock, so they are easily manipulated.¹

Sheep without a shepherd have no one to fight off the lions and wolves,

no one to guide them toward green pasture,

no one to lead them home as darkness falls.

In the ancient Near East, “shepherd” was a metaphor for “king.” Rulers in ancient Israel, in Egypt, and in many other cultures were supposed to protect their people as a shepherd protects a flock. The king, as shepherd, was a military commander

who protected the populace from attack; a political leader who guaranteed justice for all the people; and a wise guide who knew how to help the country flourish.

That's the ideal. But actual kings had failed, over and over again, ever since the time of Saul, Israel's first king.² From King David in the tenth century B.C., a mercenary schemer who relentlessly consolidated his power by any brutal means necessary, to the notorious King Manasseh three centuries later, whose decades in office were stained by child sacrifice and bloodshed, Judah's kings had failed.³ Every ruler is flawed, and so many of them, throughout history to—what time is it? to right now, our present moment—so many leaders are corrupted by their addiction to power. They seek their own gain, showing arrogance, greed, and brutality toward the powerless.

That's not who kings are supposed to be. The LORD thunders through the prophet Jeremiah, "Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!"
Jer 23:1 In Ezekiel, God rages at corrupt leaders, "You have not strengthened the weak ... you have not sought the lost.... [You] shepherds have fed [yourselves], and have not fed my sheep." God has to step in as Divine Shepherd, promising something that should make venal, narcissistic rulers everywhere quake with terror: God roars, "I will feed [my people] with justice"! Ezek 34:1-16

Jesus knows the prophets. He knows God's purposes for justice,⁴ and he sees his people as they struggle and lament, suffocated by inhumane conditions. He has

compassion. So he heals the people—body, mind, and spirit.⁵ He feeds them—4,000 and 5,000 at a time.⁶ And you know what else? Jesus builds their capacity to endure and to resist oppression by teaching them many things. That’s what our Gospel lesson this morning underscores for us. Jesus “had compassion for them... and he began to teach them many things.”

What did he teach? Mark doesn’t tell us. This is where Matthew and Luke have the Beatitudes: promises of blessing for those who are poor and diminished in spirit, those who weep, those who hunger and thirst, those who are excluded and reviled.⁷ Here in Mark, we know only that Jesus performs the role of shepherd by teaching his people: leading them back into the sacred traditions that show them who they are and where home is.

Which verses of Scripture are like home for you?

Which verses center you, energize you for justice, flood your heart with joy?

Perhaps some of the verses you love were among the “many things” Jesus taught the crowds. Maybe he started with,

“The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters.” Ps 23:1–2

As the crowd murmured their appreciation of that beloved Temple song, maybe Jesus said,

“Taste and see that the LORD is good!

Happy are those who take refuge in him,” Ps 34:8

and followed that with another teaching from the Psalms,

“Do not fret because of the wicked ...

for they will soon fade like the grass.” Ps 37:1

Maybe this is when he said, “Blessed are the poor! Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness! Blessed are the merciful,” as Matthew and Luke tell us.⁸

Just imagine the beleaguered and exhausted crowd listening to Jesus:

faces lined by care relaxing into smiles,

bodies bent by oppression straightening up.

Imagine folks revitalized, leaning forward to hear,

“Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land,” Deut 15:11 and,

“Turn to the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul!”⁹

Friends, as we stay present to the violence and factionalism of our own time,

as we strive to follow the God of love and justice,

REMEMBER: the teachings of Jesus heal you and feed you and guide you!

If you are overwhelmed by the violence in Gaza,

or bitter about the manipulative political rhetoric distorting our common life,

or disheartened by illness or grief or financial worries:

take heart:

You have a Shepherd—*we* have a Shepherd!

All we have to do is follow him into the green pastures of holy Scripture,
and drink from streams of love and justice.

When we are lost, we listen for his voice in prayer,
or come find him at this altar.

Never forget, in the cacophony of global suffering and political discord:

There is One who heals and feeds us, strengthening us for the journey.

One who lifts us up when we have fallen,
carries us when we are injured,
and leads us home.

All we have to do is listen for his voice!

And rejoice in the Good Shepherd ^{John 10:11, 14} who calls us each by name:

Jesus Christ, to whom be all honor, glory, and praise, now and forever. Amen.

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Proper 11B

Jer 23:1–6; Psalm 23; Eph 2:11–22; Mark 6:30–34, 53–56

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¹ Sheep behavior described per points in “Social Behavior of Sheep” by Gary M. Landsberg and Sagi Denenberg in the 2014 [Merck Veterinary Manual](#).

² For negative biblical traditions about kingship generally and particular kings, see, e.g., 1 Sam 8:11–18; Jer 10:21; Zech 11:4–5, 15–17.

³ Biblical traditions also evaluate a small number of kings positively, and two are presented as ideal rulers: Hezekiah and Josiah. See 2 Kings 18–20 // Isaiah 36–39; 2 Kings 22:1–23:30.

⁴ See Luke 4:16–21.

⁵ In the Gospel of Mark and other ancient witnesses, Jesus’s exorcisms are key signs of God’s power and the inbreaking of God’s kingdom.

⁶ Our passage from Mark 6 has within it—omitted in the Revised Common Lectionary verses assigned for today—the dramatic story of Jesus miraculously feeding 5,000 people. The political liberation, spiritual wholeness, and physical healing on offer through the power of Jesus demonstrate the abundance of God’s intention for the flourishing of all people—believers or not—and for all creation (see Mark 16:15).

⁷ See the Beatitudes taught by Jesus in two unique refractions that reveal the will of God: a set of nine blessings in Matt 5:1–12, and a set of four blessings and four woes in Luke 6:20–26.

⁸ Here I honor the lacuna in Mark 6 by purposefully blending a Lukan macarism with material from the Matthean Beatitudes, since we cannot know the content of the many things taught by the Markan Jesus here.

⁹ See Deut 6:4–5; 30:10; Joel 2:12; Prov 3:5; and many similar biblical passages.