

Therefore this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says to the shepherds who tend my people: "Because you have scattered my flock and driven them away and have not bestowed care on them, I will bestow punishment on you for the evil you have done," declares the LORD. ³ "I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and will bring them back to their pasture, where they will be fruitful and increase in number. ⁴ I will place shepherds over them who will tend them, and they will no longer be afraid or terrified, nor will any be missing," declares the LORD.

⁵ *"The days are coming," declares the LORD,
"when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch,
a King who will reign wisely
and do what is just and right in the land.*

⁶ *In his days Judah will be saved
and Israel will live in safety.
This is the name by which he will be called:
The LORD Our Righteousness. (Jeremiah 23:2-6)*

What Kind of Leader do we Need?

You may have noticed that a few weeks ago, we had an election. I had more anxiety about this particular election than any other one in my lifetime. I made up my mind how I was going to vote, but there was no outcome that was going to make me happy. I stayed up until something like 1 am to find out who won. And when I couldn't stay awake any longer, I still didn't know for sure. Today, of course, we all know the result. Now we're waiting to see what comes next. Whatever opinion you hold about our president-elect, we all have ideas about the kind of president we want – what he or she should do, or should be like.

As Christians, though, we look beyond human elections and governments to a far greater power at work in our world. We entrust our country to the Lord because we entrust our entire lives to him. He tells us that he raises governments up and he tears them down. No matter how much anxiety we may have, we know that he is working. We also know that this world, this country, this government is not all there is. We Christians are not just Americans. We're citizens of another kingdom, a greater and more important kingdom, the only kingdom that will last forever. We are citizens of the kingdom of God even while we're US citizens. What that kingdom needs is not always the same as what our country here in this world needs. What's the difference? When it comes to God's kingdom, **what kind of leader do we need?**

I.

That's the focus in our Old Testament lesson for today, the last Sunday of the church year, the Sunday we call Christ the King Sunday. The whole point of this Sunday is to look behind the curtain, if you will, and see by faith what we can't see by sight. What we see above all else is our King, Jesus. Kings and presidents in this world have a tough job. We expect them to overcome the challenges our country faces. Not all of those challenges come from enemies outside this country. Some come from the very people he leads, both those who oppose him and even those who support him. As long as this world is sinful, Jesus has to overcome challenges, too, challenges that come from the sinful hearts of his own people. **What kind of leader do we need? One who overcomes our sin.**

The words that Jeremiah recorded for us today are about our citizenship in heaven. But to understand what he says, you have to understand one big difference between the way God dealt with his Old Testament people and the way he deals with us: the kings of Israel were really ministers in the Old Testament Church, because the kingdom of Israel was the Old Testament Church. So they were charged with making sure the people were faithful to the Lord and with keeping Israel free from false gods. That's just not true for us today. We live in the New Testament and God separates the kingdom of faith from the political world. It's not the government's job to make sure we get to church or that we believe in Jesus or that we live Christian lives. That's the church's job.

But in Old Testament Israel, all that was the government's job. Jeremiah calls those kings shepherds of God's people. That's what we call our pastors. Sadly, those kings were pretty disappointing. They put idols in God's temple and bowed down to every false god of the nations around them. Some of them even sacrificed their own children to idols. Of course, the people did what the kings did. So God says, **"Because you have scattered my flock and driven them away and have not bestowed care on them, I will bestow punishment on you for the evil you have done."** Within Jeremiah's lifetime, what was left of God's flock was going to be conquered and driven into exile.

But God promised to bring back the remnant, the faithful believers among his people. He promised that he would give them new shepherds who would truly care for his flock. In one sense, this was fulfilled when they came home from exile seventy years later, and had more faithful leaders. But in a greater sense, this was only fulfilled in Christ. Jeremiah says, **"The days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch."** David was their greatest king. God was promising him an heir, a true King who would care for his people. He says, **"This is the name by which he will be called: The LORD Our Righteousness."**

When God says, "This is the name by which he will be called" he's telling us, "This is who and what he will be." Who and what is Jesus Christ? Our righteousness. God was going to solve the problem that the unfaithful kings brought. Instead of leading God's people into sin, the true King was going to give them righteousness. Of course, you and I know today that that's exactly what Jesus did. He lived a perfect life. Every day that he was here, he did exactly what God commands – and not just in his actions and his words, but in his heart and mind, too. He was perfect and holy in our place. That matters because we just can't be holy. On your best day, how many times do you sin? Ten? Fifteen? Could you ever really get it down to once or twice? Not if you remember that God hears what we think and sees what we feel. He knows our lusts even if we never say a word about them. He knows when we're discontent with what he's given us and jealous of other people's money and spouse. He hears the angry and hurtful thoughts that never come out of our mouths. He calls it all sin.

God told Jeremiah that the kings had driven his flock away. But he also said that he himself had driven the flock away. The exile was his punishment for their sin. The people couldn't say it was all the kings' fault. They had to answer for their sins just as their unfaithful shepherds did. So do we. It's certainly true that you could have a better pastor. You could have better teachers in our schools. You could have better lay leaders. But you still have to answer for your sins. If you claim, "But at least we didn't bow down to false gods!" God will answer, "Every time you chose to sin instead of choosing to follow me, you did worship a false god. You worshipped yourself and your sinful desires. When you taught your children to do those things, you sacrificed them to those idols. For all that you deserve more than exile. You deserve death and hell."

But that's not what we get. Because God did raise up to David a Righteous Branch. Jesus is the LORD our righteousness. That perfect life he lived counts for us. Every time Jesus put his Father first, it's as if we put our Father in heaven first. Since he never sinned, in God's eyes, we never sinned. Jesus made us holy and perfect in God's eyes, by living in our place and then by dying and washing all our sins away and then rising and declaring that all we owe is paid for and forgiven.

Only he could do that because he is the LORD. Jesus is God himself, the Son of God, equal to his Father in every way. That means that his perfect life and his innocent death are enough to pay for all the sins of all the world. You can't sin more than Jesus paid. His life and his death will always be enough for you. And it will count for you because he is the Branch from the line of David. He is a real human being, born just like you and me, under God's law. He lived in the world we live in. He faced the real temptations we face. He died a real death just like we do. And he really rose from the dead just like we will. He became human to stand in our place. Because he is God and man, we are now his true kingdom. We will live with him forever.

II.

What better leader could we ever have in God's kingdom? Every four years, we have this national debate about the qualifications to be president. Some people make the point that there really is no job like being president of the United States so no one is truly prepared for it. But on day one, the new guy has to start figuring out how to do it. And the job is enormous. Be commander in chief and keep America safe. Be the leader of the government and formulate economic policy and health care policy and run all the different entitlement programs so we have prosperity. Be the chief law enforcement official and guarantee justice for all.

What a job, huh? But is there a clearer picture of what it is Christ came to do? **What kind of leader do we Christians need? One who gathers and protects his people.**

Only a very wise person could be a good president. God called the coming Christ “**a King who will reign wisely.**” I imagine that in Jeremiah’s day, as the enemies were closing in around Jerusalem and the situation was getting more and more desperate, the people longed for a king that would rule wisely. So do we. In this life, we won’t always have that. But in Christ, we always do. He is the Son of God. He is Wisdom personified. There is no one better to guide and control your life as you try to navigate all the hurts and sorrows of this life and all the challenges to your faith and all the temptations to sin. Jesus is in control. He won’t let anything touch you except that which serves to bring you home to live with him. Trust him.

Jeremiah said he would “**do what is just and right in the land.**” Does it feel like that’s what Jesus is doing? In a world where millions of unborn children have been murdered, in a world where we’re not even supposed to ask that our daughters be allowed to use a bathroom where no man could come in and embarrass or assault them, in a world where money and power run the ordinary guy over, how often don’t we cry out for justice? When we don’t see it, how can we say that Jesus is doing what is just and right? By faith, only. Faith is being sure of what we can’t see. We can’t see it now, but Jesus is coming in judgment. He will set all things right. He will punish all those who opposed our faith and trampled righteousness down. He will undo their sin.

While we wait, he will guard and protect us. Jeremiah promised that Israel – God’s people – would live in safety under Jesus’ rule. Again, it doesn’t always feel like that’s true. But Jesus is with us to the very end of the age. Wherever two or three of us gather in his name, he is here with us. He sees us in every danger and he helps us. He rescues us day in and day out, sometimes from dangers we never realized we were in. He answers our prayers. Even when life hurts, he only allows those things to touch us which will strengthen our faith and bring us home to heaven. There, we will be free. There, we will live without danger or hardship or sadness. There, we will see with our physical eyes what we only know by faith today. And we will agree that he always did what was best for us here even when we couldn’t see it.

All that is ours in Christ. He is the true King and we are his true people. Right now, he is doing all things to bring us home to heaven. Trust him. Trust that he is working even when you’re puzzled by what he’s doing. If the last election discouraged you about the state of American democracy, if you wonder where our country is headed, remember that God is still in charge. America is not Israel. God does not make the same promises to us that he made to them. The United States is not his chosen people. So we have no promise that democracy will always work. We have no promise that our country will overcome every challenge or even continue to exist. But we do have God’s promise that he always works for the good of his true people, the Christian Church. No matter what happens in any election, that will always be true.

God raises up governments. They are his chosen instruments to give us peaceful and quiet lives. Whether you voted for the president we elected or not, whether you support the goals and policies of the party in power or not, we Christians respect and obey the government as God’s representatives on earth, even while we work in the political process for the things we believe in. And we recognize that God puts the rulers that he wants in power to accomplish his purposes. We trust that he will do what is best. Because in the end, Jesus is the King. He rules our hearts through his word. He rules this world for the good of his Church, even when he does things we don’t understand. Finally, he will return and we will live with him forever. Trust him while you wait for his kingdom to come. Amen.