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“Bad Shepherds or No Shepherd at All”

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16th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B)

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Jeremiah 23:1–6; Psalm 23; Mark 6:7–10; 30–44

Beware Psalm 23—that magnificent poem that made tears streak our cheeks at mother’s and daddy’s funerals, those words that took some of us parents who lost sons and daughters as far as we could possibly go with them through the valley of the shadow of death, that psalm of comfort that our congregation recited in unison when Ed Kwon died. Beware Psalm 23 because when the Lord leads us in the paths of righteousness, or a better translation is the paths of “justice,” we cannot get far down that path until we run into economics. I mean, for sheep, green pastures and still waters have to do with economics, and when we leave the metaphor of sheep behind, it is a table prepared for us—food, provisions, and a super-sized cup that in the Greek Septuagint version provides the very best intoxication. Beware Psalm 23—it’s about economics and politics. Yes, politics! For one thing, the table is set over against political oppression—“in the presence of my enemies.” For another thing, it’s about shepherds, and that’s code for politicians—a little more about that in a moment, but first, a word about economics.

French economist, Robert Boyer, turns most economic theory on its head. Most of us presume that normality in economics means a smooth balance between income and expenditures, even if occasionally we trip into a hole and have to climb out on the other side. But for Boyer, crisis is what is normal, like when the hole into which some of us fall is the bottomless pit of unemployment, perhaps homelessness, even hunger. Crisis is normal, like wide-spread famine over a 50-year period in the 19th century when people worldwide starved to death: 1 million

in Ireland's potato famine, 2 million in Brazil, 30 million in India, 30 million in China. Crisis is normal.

Jeremiah and Jesus never read Robert Boyer. But they knew a crisis when they saw one. Jesus spoke of the crisis of his time as sheep without a shepherd; for Jeremiah, it was bad shepherds, and we could argue about which is worse: Bad shepherds? Or no shepherd at all? Of course Jeremiah and Jesus were not talking about sheep, but about God's people. And Israel's rulers were supposed to serve God like good shepherds caring for their sheep. There it is again, shepherds as a metaphor for politicians. Though Jeremiah and Jesus lived 600 years apart, the setup was virtually the same. Israel's political fortunes had gone sour. Israel was a vassal state of empire, and Israelites had to pay tribute to the empire, and Israel's rulers had to be collaborators or lose their heads. Good news, collaborators maintain some sense of national identity. Bad news, they hold on to national identity by exploiting peasant farmers to pay the tribute. That is the economic crisis. The grain fields, olive trees, vineyards, flocks, and herds do not feed the farmer's own family, but the top 2% of the imperial elite, including Israelite collaborators. Tribute paid through collaborators meant some grandmother got no bread and some child had no milk. Those Israelite collaborators were what bad shepherds look like. Which is worse, bad shepherds or no shepherds at all? And this is what is so subversive about Psalm 23. The Lord is my shepherd, my king is not. When I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, my king's rod and staff do not comfort me. My king does not prepare a table for me in the midst of my enemies.

But wait, it gets worse: rulers may act as if they were God. Of course, we would quickly recognize that farce if the claim were made directly, but watch out, it's indirect. The ruler may claim to be motivated by religion, motivated by something like biblical values. There may be just this enormous difference. Religion may not be the reason for public policy, but an attempt to justify politics. Not the reason, but the justification. A Christian doctrine of manifest destiny that Christians were the light of the world to civilize the savages of the world was not the cause of conquering and slaughtering Native Americans but the justification of it. Biblical references were not the reason for slavery, but the justification of it. Religious freedom is not the reason for discrimination but the justification of it.

Of course religion plays a major role in political discourse today. Back in April when the Supreme Court heard arguments about marriage equality, one presidential candidate invoked prayer as the best thing constituents could do in face of the Supreme Court's consideration. Mind you, he did not enter his closet to pray in secret, as Jesus advised, but appealed to prayer as a not too subtle way of choosing sides in an election campaign, a way to sway voters. Religion as the justification for politics.

In 2012 Tennessee gynecologist Scott DesJarlais, member of the US House of Representatives, was running for reelection. He campaigned on the platform of biblical values of marriage and family and in opposition to abortion. But shortly before the election, court proceedings of his divorce were made public in which he himself testified that he and his soon-to-be ex-wife had mutually agreed that she would have an abortion to end two of her pregnancies. The divorce proceedings documented DesJarlais' multiple affairs with female employees and patients, and DesJarlais himself acknowledged that he had urged a patient with whom he was having an affair to get an abortion. Appealing to religion for politics indeed! It worked. DesJarlais handily won reelection in 2012 and in 2014. Which is worse, bad shepherds or no shepherd at all?

But with all of this bad news about shepherds, Psalm 23, Jeremiah, and Jesus all have good news. Instead of bad shepherds or no shepherd at all, the Lord is. The Lord is my shepherd, God cares, God cares about economics and politics. So in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus proclaims, God's kingdom is at hand—a remarkably political claim. Jesus' preaching is about how things are here and now when God rules. It is a different kind of world from the world in which politicians use our religion not as the basis for economics and politics but to justify economics and politics. And Mark shows immediately what this different world under God's rule looks like. We usually call it the feeding of the 5,000, but we usually also miss the point because we neglect a couple of details. First, Jesus sent his disciples on a mission to the villages with instructions to live off of the hospitality of the villagers—"take no provisions for yourselves." They come back with a sterling report, and then Jesus and his disciples go out in the wilderness. And that's where the 5,000 find them. This time, the disciples do not go to the people. The people from the villages come to them. These are the people who, according to Jesus, live

under economic and political systems like sheep without a shepherd. Then suppertime comes, and the disciples want to send the people back to the villages to buy something to eat—again economics. And the point of this story is what Jesus says to his disciples: “You give them something to eat.” Now the shoe is on the other foot. “You give **them** something to eat.” They are as dumbfounded as we would be. “The task is too big,” they said. “Can you imagine how much it’s going to cost?” And some disciples today might say, “Do you not know that there are 50 million people in the US below the poverty level? Can you imagine how much that is going to cost?” Mark does not waste his breath describing how the food is multiplied, which we usually take to be the primary point. He portrays two things Jesus did: he lifted up his eyes and gave a blessing. Two simple acts that embody the way things are when God rules. “You give them something to eat.” But the task is too big. Or is it? Jesus comes proclaiming, “The rule of God is at hand.” His disciples object, the task is too big. But then the way things are when God rules makes it possible. The feeding of the 5,000 is not just a feeding story. It is an enabling story. Jesus enables his disciples to live under God’s rule. When we live under God’s rule, the Lord leads us in the paths of justice for God’s namesake, and it is possible to prepare a table. It is possible. And this is good news for all of us.