

Gratitude Foundation



*“Were not ten cleansed? Where are the other nine?
Has only this foreigner returned to give thanks to God?”*

(Lk. 17:15-17)

The Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time—Year B

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“In all things give thanks, it is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus”

(1 Thess: 5:18)

Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Reading 1

Jeremiah 23:1-6

Woe to the shepherds
who mislead and scatter the flock of my pasture,
says the LORD.
Therefore, thus says the LORD, the God of Israel,
against the shepherds who shepherd my people:
You have scattered my sheep and driven them away.
You have not cared for them,
but I will take care to punish your evil deeds.
I myself will gather the remnant of my flock
from all the lands to which I have driven them
and bring them back to their meadow;
there they shall increase and multiply.
I will appoint shepherds for them who will shepherd them
so that they need no longer fear and tremble;
and none shall be missing, says the LORD.

Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD,
when I will raise up a righteous shoot to David;
as king he shall reign and govern wisely,
he shall do what is just and right in the land.
In his days Judah shall be saved,
Israel shall dwell in security.
This is the name they give him:
"The LORD our justice."

Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 23:1-3, 3-4, 5, 6

R. (1) **The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.**
The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
In verdant pastures he gives me repose;
beside restful waters he leads me;
he refreshes my soul.
R. **The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.**

He guides me in right paths
for his name's sake.
Even though I walk in the dark valley
I fear no evil; for you are at my side
with your rod and your staff
that give me courage.

R. The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.

You spread the table before me
in the sight of my foes;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

R. The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.

Only goodness and kindness follow me
all the days of my life;
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
for years to come.

R. The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.

Reading 2

Ephesians 2:13-18

Brothers and sisters:
In Christ Jesus you who once were far off
have become near by the blood of Christ.

For he is our peace, he who made both one
and broke down the dividing wall of enmity, through his flesh,
abolishing the law with its commandments and legal claims,
that he might create in himself one new person in place of the two,
thus establishing peace,
and might reconcile both with God,
in one body, through the cross,
putting that enmity to death by it.
He came and preached peace to you who were far off
and peace to those who were near,
for through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.

Alleluia

John 10:27

R. Alleluia, alleluia.
My sheep hear my voice, says the Lord;
I know them, and they follow me.
R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel

Mark 6:30-34

The apostles gathered together with Jesus
and reported all they had done and taught.
He said to them,
“Come away by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while.”
People were coming and going in great numbers,
and they had no opportunity even to eat.
So they went off in the boat by themselves to a deserted place.
People saw them leaving and many came to know about it.
They hastened there on foot from all the towns
and arrived at the place before them.

When he disembarked and saw the vast crowd,
his heart was moved with pity for them,
for they were like sheep without a shepherd;
and he began to teach them many things.

Exegesis

Jeremiah 23:1-6

The Prophet Jeremiah faithfully served Yahweh for about a 40-year period beginning with his call in the year 627 B.C. As he began his career Judah was under the political control of the Assyrians. Judah as a vassal of the Assyrians drifted from Yahweh in a wave of idolatry in the form of a syncretic fusion of the Mesopotamian astral gods and the Canaanite fertility gods.¹ Shortly after Jeremiah entered the scene the Book of the Law was discovered in the Temple in 621. King Josiah of Judah led a sweeping religious reform in Judah that extended even to the northern regions of Israel. Josiah was killed in battle at Megiddo on 609. Jehoiakim followed as king of Judah and under his leadership the people quickly returned once again to idolatry. Jeremiah who had been silent for some time reenters the scene.

Jehoiakim proved to be an idolatrous leader who served himself with lavish buildings and extravagant living. In short, he was a bad shepherd. Jeremiah often contrasts Jehoiakim with his predecessor Josiah who was a good shepherd. Jehoiakim reigned until his death in 598. His 18-year-old son Jehoiachin took over briefly for 3 months until he was carried off to Babylon when Nebuchadnezzar first took Jerusalem in March 597.

This is the backdrop of our scripture passage. The people of Judah and Israel are being scattered throughout the Near East as their leaders are being carried off in captivity to Babylon. The image of God as shepherd enters the diaspora through the words of the Prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Warnings of woe to the bad shepherds who led the people astray are followed by the promise of God to shepherd His people. The flock is scattered, and God will one day shepherd them back. From the line of David, a Good Shepherd will arise. The longing for the Messiah will begin to emerge through the words of the Prophets.

Psalm 23:1-3, 3-4, 5, 6

This beautiful hymn portrays Yahweh as a Good Shepherd and a caring and generous host. It is believed to have been composed during or shortly following the Exile. During the time of the Exile the people of Judah and Israel are scattered all over the Near East and they long for Yahweh to gather them together and lead them home. References to kings and political leaders as shepherds is common at this time in the Near East. Political leaders were also known to be generous hosts of lavish feasts from time to time. In the wake of incredible political turmoil and unrest there is a longing for Yahweh to intervene, to shepherd, to lead and to feed His flock.

Certainly the 23rd Psalm is one of the most famous and oft quoted passages in all Sacred Scripture. It resonates with every human soul as we wander through the darkness and uncertainties of this life. It also portrays the reality of God who is always on the horizon of our lives calling us to follow Him. God wants to walk with us to lead us and guide us. God wants to feed us, to fulfill the deepest longing, the hunger and thirst in our hearts for God Himself. The table of plenty, the fulfillment of all our desires, His love, is always set before us. It is up to us to come to recognize the voice of the Shepherd and to follow that voice. That is the challenge today amid the noise of so many conflicting voices.

1. Brown, Fitzmyer, Murphy; The New Jerome Biblical Commentary; P.H.; Englewood Cliffs, N.J.; page 265.

Exegesis (Continued)

Ephesians 2:13-18

The paragraph that our passage is taken from today begins with verse 11 and is entitled *One in Christ*. It is clear from verses 11 and 12 that the author is referring to the division between Jew and Gentile. Many God-fearing Gentiles worshiped in Jewish synagogues and even in the Temple. They were however segregated by barriers, relegated to an outer courtyard in the temple for example. The author of Ephesians is emphasizing that in Christ all are one and the barriers placed by human hands are now destroyed.

At a deeper level, God is speaking to all of us. Beginning with the Fall there has been a barrier in the world caused by sin. With the abuse of free will we are able to separate ourselves from God. We can cut ourselves off from the ground of our being, i.e., the Holy Spirit that was breathed into our nostrils at creation, the Holy Spirit that poured upon us at our baptism.

The Good News is that Jesus took our sins with Him to the Cross. He becomes the New Adam. In the Upper Room that first Easter Sunday He breathed the Holy Spirit upon the apostles and upon us, and again at Pentecost. Now through Him, through the Spirit of the Risen Lord, we once again have access to the Father.

Mark 6:30-34

Following His rejection in His hometown synagogue at Nazareth Jesus began to go to the surrounding villages teaching, preaching and healing. He sent out His apostles two by two ahead of Him. Mark then turns to the story of the death of John the Baptist. Our selected passage today then captures the return of the apostles from their missionary journey, their departure with Jesus to a deserted place, and the gathering of the crowd that follows them. Verse 34 falls into the next paragraph and introduces the story of *The Feeding of the Five Thousand*. Next Sunday the Lectionary substitutes John's version of the feeding miracle story and then continues for several weeks pulling Gospel passages from the *Bread of Life Discourse* in Chapter 6 of John's Gospel.

Therefore, our pericope today transitions from Jesus and His apostles teaching, preaching, driving out demons and healing, to feeding the hunger of the people. They traveled by boat to a desolate or deserted place. Presumably they were still on the West side of the Sea of Galilee as the crowd was able to follow them on foot. A deserted place would be a place where there is no food. The original Greek for deserted place is *eremos topos*. It describes more of desolate place or a desert. *Eremos* is the word that is used when speaking of John in the desert (1:3-50), Jesus being led into the desert to be tempted by the devil (1:12-13), and the place where Jesus retreated to pray (1:35, 45).²

The apostles are invited to come away and to rest for a while. The Greek word for rest is *anapausasthe*. It is the same word that is used in the Greek translation of the 23rd Psalm to speak of restful (*anapauseo*) waters. Mark would seem to refer to the 23rd Psalm again in 6:39 as he describes the green grass. Jesus and the apostles are along the Sea of Galilee in a desert area with fertile green grass along the shoreline.

2. Donahue, S.J.; Harrington, S.J.; Sacra Pagina Series; The Gospel of Mark; L.P. Collegeville, MN; page 204.

Exegesis (Continued)

Mark 6:30-34

We are told that people followed in great numbers. The count of five thousand would have just included adult men. Experts estimate that inclusive of women and children the crowd could have been as large as twenty-five or thirty thousand. Obviously, the fame of Jesus was beginning to spread. A deep hunger within them seemed to be moving them to seek out Jesus.

Jesus sees something in their eyes and “His heart was moved with pity for them.” Some translations are that “He was moved with compassion” and others that “He was moved to the depth of His being.” The Greek word is *esplanchnisthe* which is the verb form of *splanchnona*. *Splanchnona* is a word used to describe the inner parts of the body, the guts, and to describe the seat of emotions and the heart. The term is a virtual synonym for *oiktrimoi* (Hebrew *rahum* and *rahamim*, “merciful love”), which in the OT is a quality of God (Isa 54:7-8), “with everlasting love I have compassion on you.”; (Pss 86:15; 111:4; 112:4; 145:8). “Compassion” is the bridge from sympathy to action (see Luke 10:33; 15:20).³

For they were like sheep without shepherd: This evokes the OT image of Israel as in need of protection and guidance (Num 27:17; 1 Kgs 22:17; 2 Chr 18:16). God is the shepherd of Israel (Zech 11:17)⁴. God promises to shepherd His people (Jer 23:3; Ezek 34:13). God also promises to feed His people through the Prophet Isaiah: “Like a shepherd He feeds His flock; in His arms He gathers the lambs.” (Isa 40:11). This imagery leads quite naturally to the *Feeding of the Five Thousand*.

3. Donahue, S.J.; Harrington, S.J.; Sacra Pagina Series; The Gospel of Mark; L.P. Collegeville, MN; page 205.

4. Ibid.

Reflection

The image of God as Shepherd became prominent in sacred scripture during the time of the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel. The Jewish leaders were carried off to Babylon in captivity and most of the people were scattered all over the Middle East as Jerusalem was destroyed and the temple laid to ruins. We have the promise of God through the Prophet Jeremiah in today's first reading, "I Myself will gather the remnant of my flock.... and bring them back to the meadow." (Jer 23:3). In a parallel passage we have the promise of God through the Prophet Ezekiel, "I Myself will shepherd My people." (Eze 34:13). The promise of God is fulfilled in Jesus, the Good Shepherd.

As powerful as the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd is, it is strangely missing from Christian art for the first four or five centuries. Perhaps it is because the shepherd had such a negative image in the ancient world. A shepherd would live on the open range with the sheep for months at a time. Consequently, they would take on the smell of the sheep. When they came into the towns they were avoided and shunned. Many shepherds for hire carried with them a reputation for being dishonest and self-serving. In a word, there were a lot of bad shepherds. The Prophet Jeremiah points out that there were a lot of bad shepherds of people as well. The reality of our fallen human nature applies to people in leadership positions, civil and religious.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd. He will lay down His life for the sheep. The purpose of the shepherd is in fact the life of the sheep. One of my favorite Gospel passages is John 10:10. As part of the famous Good Shepherd discourse Jesus says, "I came so that you might have life and have life to the fullest." How long would a sheep survive on the open range without the protection of a shepherd? Jesus is not a shepherd for hire who would abandon the sheep at the first sign of a hungry wolf, but a good shepherd who would stand in the face of death, and in fact die for the life of His sheep.

The promise of God is in fact fulfilled in Jesus the Good Shepherd. The questions are: Do we belong to His flock? Do we know and are we able to recognize the voice of the Shepherd in our lives? Are we willing to follow that voice through the dark valleys of this world? Are we willing to allow Him to guide us to green pastures and restful waters? Our life, our eternal life depends on our answer to those questions.

In today's Gospel scene Jesus looks out at the crowd and His heart is moved with compassion for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd. The Good Shepherd is right in their midst, but they have strayed from Him. I personally feel that we need a shepherd as never before in human history. We live in a world darkened by evil, a world with many conflicting voices. There are many wolves in sheep's clothing seeking to derail us from the fulfillment that comes from a relationship with the Good Shepherd. I pray that each one of us will grow in our personal relationship with Jesus, the Good Shepherd.

I would like to share with you the prayer that I chose for my ordination card 25 years ago. "May the God of peace, who brought up from the dead the great shepherd of the sheep by the blood of the eternal covenant, Jesus the Lord, furnish you with all that is good, that you may do His will. May He carry out in you what is pleasing to Him through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen." (Heb 13:20-21) The Good Shepherd is with us now, the question is, are we with Him? Come Holy Spirit fill the hearts of us Your faithful and enkindle in us the fire of Your love. Amen.

In Christ the Good Shepherd,



Personal Witness

In April of 1999 I was in my final month of seminary. I was an ordained transitional deacon. It was a Tuesday morning, and I was sitting in my room preparing for a homily that I was scheduled to deliver that week. The Gospel was our Gospel selected for this Sunday. I was focused on the image that Jesus gives us, "They were like sheep without a shepherd." I recall reflecting on my childhood experiences when my grandfather had a small flock of sheep on his farm. They seemed so helpless when unattended. I remember the level of care that my grandfather afforded them; leading them to new green pastures to graze and bringing them to the river bend to drink. He had a small corral adjacent to the barn that he would often lead them into at night for protection. I was trying to imagine what it would be like if they had no shepherd to care for them

That thought led me to recall a time when a pack of coyotes were in the area and being very vocal at night howling at the moon. Their presence was making the sheep particularly skittish. I vividly remember the fear that I could see in their eyes late one evening as my grandfather led them through the gate into the corral as the pack was nearby in the adjacent woods. We camped out that night, shotgun ready, as the coyotes seemed embolden, perhaps driven by early Spring hunger. Our presence kept them at bay.

Deep in thought, someone knocked on my door and told me to turn on the news. As I did the Columbine High School tragedy was unfolding in real time. My first image was that of a student falling from a blood-streaked window of the school. Then the camera moved to crowds of students running from the school. I will never forget the look of fear in their eyes. It reminded me of the look in the eyes of the frightened sheep. The image of the faces of those innocent children is indelibly etched in my brain. Now whenever I read or hear this Gospel proclaimed that image replays. I was moved to the depth of my being, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.

Twenty-five years have now passed, and that image is as vivid as it was on that Tuesday morning in 1999. It has replayed in my mind and heart hundreds of times over the years. In the wake of school shootings and other senseless acts of violence I see that look of fear in the eyes of those left behind. I see that look in the eyes of many people today. There seems to be a heaviness and a darkness that has a grip on our world. With that comes fear and discord.

Saturday evening, I was just sitting down after I put dinner on the stove. I turned on the news and the Trump rally in Butler, PA. was being broadcast live. As I turned on the television former president Trump was just taking the stage. A few short minutes later I was watching in real time the assassination attempt. Like millions of viewers, I watched in disbelief and shock. As cries and screams reverberated from the crowd people began to scatter. I could see the fear in their eyes and the image again surfaced; they were like sheep without a shepherd.

Personal Witness (Continued)

Rachel Joy Scott was one of the first students killed during the Columbine massacre. She was praying with Scripture with another girl in the library. A few months later her father Daryl Scott testified before Congress. He began with this poem:

*Your laws ignore our deepest needs
Your words are empty air
You've stripped away our heritage
You've outlawed simple prayer
Now gunshots fill our classrooms
And precious children die
You seek for answers everywhere
And ask the question "Why"?
You regulate restrictive laws
Through legislative creed
And yet you fail to understand
That God is what we need*

Mr. Scott went on to say: "Men and women are three-part beings. We all consist of body, mind, and spirit. When we refuse to acknowledge a third part of our make-up, we create a void that allows evil, prejudice, and hatred to rush in and wreak havoc."

As a fallen human race, we have always needed a shepherd to guide us through the dark valleys of this life. Perhaps that need has never been more pronounced than it is today. God is truly what we need.

F. Glenn