

*A King for "All Things Now Living"*

Lessons: Jeremiah 23:1-6, Luke 23:33-43

The chosen people saw the destruction of their holy city and a forced march to captivity in Babylon. Their past was glory, and now it was slavery and suffering. The prophets condemned the rulers of Judah who got them into this mess by a history of bad alliances and battles with the wrong enemies. Kings for generations had manipulated their own people to save their own thrones. They were bad shepherds who had no interest in caring for the sheep. Their own rulers faced judgment for trusting might more than God, for faithlessness that destroyed the nation.

Jeremiah the prophet still trusts that the Lord will save them! He is committed to the *who* in spite of all the *what*. The Lord is the Faithful One who will bring back a remnant and give them a new start with different shepherds. Jeremiah gives thanks in the defeat, not because the people were duped and deserved the destruction, but because the Lord Jehovah is still Lord and Redeemer. God is king beyond national boundaries, and God will save them. They can sing the songs of Zion's praise in a strange land.

They waited a long time for the new and different Son of Good King David. They waited longer than our country has been a nation for the promised Good Shepherd to come and save them. Four centuries was long enough to learn some wisdom and patience

...But they really had not learned all that much. Evil shepherds in religious power and evil royal powers who were supposed to shepherd the nations saw the threat that Jesus was to their living. They liked what they had going on, and they were not content just to keep it going. They wanted more of the same, and this man who called himself Messiah and Shepherd would hurt their doing and maybe end it. So, they railroaded him into a quick-fixed trial and crucified him between a couple of common criminals. The message was clear – he was all hope and no power. In that touch of irony that power always needs to add salt to the wound when they win, they tacked up a sign on the symbol of his defeat that read "King of the Jews." That should add sting to the defeat. They never thought that who they executed would turn the cross into a symbol of victory.

The real question is NOT why powers felt threatened by a prophet or a Messiah. The truth is they are threatened by any opposition and will defame and defeat any decent leader, especially someone who faces up to them.

The real question for me is still why the followers quit following? They saw miracles and signs of divine power; they heard Jesus speak with the authority of faithfulness; they knew he was different from the powers they did not trust. Why didn't all those people who saw Jesus as Lord rise up to save him?

The question is worth thinking about this week – and most weeks – because the answer comes in thanksgiving.

What did the chosen people of Judah in the fading days of glory and the defeated people of Judaism in Roman domination have in common? They sang songs of praise and thanksgiving the same way. Even when they were full of spiritual or material blessings, they gave thanks more for *what they had* than for *who gave the blessings*. Whether counting their blessings or asking for more blessings, their focus was on the blessings more than on the giver.

Leaving the rubble of Jerusalem to march to captivity, the people of Judah were singing the psalms of lament. They forgot the favorite chorus of their hymnal: “O give thanks to the Lord, for God is good. God’s steadfast love endures forever.” It was a remnant – a few faithful like a frayed scrap of what used to be a beautiful garment – who sang the old song of Isaiah we used in last week’s call to worship: “Surely it is God who saves us. We will trust in him and not be afraid. ...for the Lord will be our Savior.”

Centuries later, the people of the rebuilt Jerusalem came for holidays and feasting, and they cheered the hope of better times with a parade for a new Messiah. But by Friday, his promises were memories, and they retreated to wait for another. The followers were a scared and scattered band who still had faith in their unfaithfulness. They gathered in a hidden room and still asked, “Where else can we go? He had the words of eternal life.”

They did not need to go anywhere else! He came to them. He told them he would not leave them, that he was a shepherd who would never forsake the flock. And when nothing appeared to have come to success or victory or even a better day than yesterday – when he was hanging on a cross and people were shouting insults and taunting him, when they read the sign and yelled, “You trusted in God, let God deliver you now!” He did trust God, and he realized that a good shepherd and a very different king would wear a different kind of crown.

The truth is, I’m not all that surprised that the followers quit following. And I know the answer to my own question. They quit following because they are a lot like me. I sing the Doxology and “praise God from whom all blessings flow.” I’m not in it for the *what* of the flowing blessings, and I’m not as quick to quit as some. But trusting “come what may” is different from trusting when no *what* comes at all. I’m still asking for blessings, I’m singing for the protecting and the guiding and the pillar of fire in the night. It’s like I have to think of all the blessings I have received to keep giving thanks. I’m still focused on the *what* as much as, maybe more than the *who*. I am a follower of the *giver*, but is it because of the *giving*? I call Jesus “Lord” and sing praises to Christ the King, but am I in it for the blessings of the Thanksgivings?

Let’s take a little lesson from those more-reformed pilgrims of Plymouth who gathered with the natives for that great fall feast to celebrate their survival in a bad year and their hope of better survival in the next winter. They had a table piled high with deer and ducks, with corn from the new friends and berries from the woods. Like them, we will look at our own tables come Thursday and think of cornucopias of more than enough “stuffing” of all kinds, and we will give thanks, too. ...But not like they did.

They were full of thanks from a different direction. They were thanking *who* had gotten them through, and how “the Lord of all things now living” deserved a song of thanksgiving. When we gather this Thursday and remember Plymouth pilgrims, we should remember who filled their hearts more than what filled their table.

They were a remnant – a tattered scrap of a beautiful cloth of hope and dreams for a new life in a new land. Over half of them had died from disease and cold and starvation that first winter. In their desperation they had looked to strangers they had thought were enemies, who turned out to be more than friends. The natives were generous and giving, and became saviors like their generous and giving Savior. The pilgrims saw Christ in those gifts. They said thanks to the natives, because they gave thanks to God. They gave thanks to the *who* more than the *what*.

Gathered for a harvest feast and looking to the unknown of another cold future, they gave thanks because they felt like that scared and scattered band in an upper room a long time ago. “Where else can we go?” they asked themselves in prayer. “We have been cold and hungry, sick and dying, and you have never left us. You have the words of eternal life.” In the desperation of all the dying in that first winter, they had held on to a King who had suffered and died and rose to live, because he would never leave them. In the hard realities that challenged their dreams, they knew that they would find their steps in his footprints in the long and winding road, and the good shepherd himself was their hope. “Surely it is God who saves us. We will trust in him and not be afraid.”

I love the reminder of the *who* every Thanksgiving when I spend so much of the rest of my time worrying about the *what* of wants and needs all year. I think we have lived with so much blessing for so long, that we think we are less blessed with hard times. We live imagining scarcity when we are surrounded by abundance. We focus on the *what*, and forget how much we think we need that makes us think we have so little. We would do much better if we focused less on both the scarcity and the abundance, and focused more on the one who is Lord of all in all, and of all things now living.

I like the way the season of Stewardship and the season of Thanksgiving coincide. Thanksgiving cannot be given *to* things, and it is half-empty when we give thanks *for* things. Thanksgiving is pure thanks we just give thanks to *who*. The thanks in the giving is in giving to the *who!*

Stewardship season the reminder that church is not about *what* we get in blessing, but *who* we serve in living. In the world of all the messages about what we want and what others need, about scarcity of much and blessings too few, we listen to the other voice of the father Spirit who says to us prodigal children, “I am the Lord of All Things Now Living, ...and all I have is yours.” The thanks in the giving is in giving to the *who!*

We are like a pilgrim band in a lot of ways, so long as we remember who binds us to each other more than we calculate the blessings we have received. We do things backward at church when we trust the Good Shepherd. We do not cry about how bad things are, and we do not sell you on how much the church can do. We remind you to remember the *who* at the heart of all your living, who gives you all things of your living, and we ask you just give your whole-hearted promise of thanks in your praise and your living to the *who* – your gracious King and loving Savior.

We are like a pilgrim band in a lot of ways. We at Northwood will look at whatever promises are put on the table as a feast, and we will trust that we will make it through another winter, mild or hard. We will sing praise to the Lord of all who saves us in love, and we will give thanks in all things that God has given. The thanks in the giving is in giving to the *who!*

We will NOT look on this church like it is a torn and tattered scrap of its former glory. We will never forget that over and over and over again the Good Shepherd stayed with the flock and guarded them from the wolves and led them through valleys of the shadow to green pastures and still waters. When we focus on the *who* and all his love and grace, we give thanks that remnants are still durable and beautiful – and make warm quilts. All the patches of faithfulness scattered about and sown together by a faithful Savior are enough. The Lord is King, and we in our churches will keep singing praises “for all things now living” to the *who* more than for the *what*.