

Jeremiah 23:1-6
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Good Shepherd Lutheran Church • Boise, Idaho
Pastor Tim Pauls
Prophets, Priests, Kings and Shepherds

I. Destructive Shepherds and Jeremiah

“Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!” declared the LORD. He was speaking specifically about the kings of Judah, who—for the most part—led the people of Israel further and further away from His truth, His Law and His promised Savior.

Rulers are a savvy bunch: that’s how they get to be—and remain—rulers. Rulers understand the importance of religion in the lives of people. Therefore, rulers—and those who wish to rule— will naturally want the religion of their people to express support for their government. There are two ways to go about this: one is for the ruler to make sure that his policies and laws reflect and support the religion of the land; if they do, then the ruler can be sure that his citizens will support him. The other is to co-opt the religion of the people and change it until it agrees with what the ruler wants: when a ruler has changed the religion to agree with him, then he can count on that religion’s support!

Jeroboam is an example of blatant action in 1 Kings 12. The northern tribes had just split off from the southern tribes, and Jeroboam was king. The temple was in the southern kingdom—in Jerusalem. Jeroboam reasoned that, if his subjects continued to worship a God headquartered in the south, they wouldn’t be his subjects very long. So he set up two golden calves in the north and declared to the people, “You have gone up to Jerusalem long enough. Behold your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt” (1 Kings 12:28). With one declaration, Jeroboam declared that Moses and Yahweh were wrong, and that God had been a golden calf all along. No doubt, this new religion attracted priests who liked what Jeroboam had to say, while those who objected were ostracized or wanted nothing to do with it. Thus Jeroboam got a religion that supported his sinful agenda, which the people supported while rejecting the repentance that God sent prophets to proclaim. Eventually, for rejecting the LORD, the northern kingdom disappeared from the face of the earth.

In the southern kingdom, the decay was more gradual; but it was still decay. As time went on, citizens built an altar here and there to a false god; and the kings of Judah normally looked the other way, or had bigger fish to fry, or actually gave their approval. The trouble increased. Some kings openly embraced idolatry and sponsored false gods; and by the time of Jeremiah, kings had commanded that the altars of idols be built in the temple—the temple in Jerusalem of the one true God!

Where was the uproar? Where, indeed. People are reluctant to speak against authority, especially when the authority is your king for life. There were still faithful believers in Judah, but they’d apparently gone underground. Furthermore, corrupt rulers attract corrupt advisors who agree with the agenda. Therefore, those priests who served at the temple had no problem with idol worship. Furthermore, the prophets whom the kings favored declared the false religion to be good and the king to be just.

That left Jeremiah, and a few other prophets—true prophets sent by God to speak the truth, to call upon the people of Judah to repent and return to the Lord. But put yourself in Jeremiah’s shoes. He’s speaking a message of judgment that is very unpopular to most of his hearers; bad enough, but it’s not like all the priests and prophets are saying, “Phew! We’ve got a leader to rally behind.” Instead, the

priests who preside at the temple and the prophets who visit the king's court are both declaring, "Jeremiah is wrong. He speaks lies just to cause trouble. We are the ones who speak the truth." People *want* their rulers and their religious leaders to be right—the consequences if they are wrong are frightening to imagine. So picture this, if you will: Jeremiah preaches Jerusalem's doom if its citizens do not repent. The king responds with a slick press conference in which several kindly-looking religious leaders with gravitas declare that Jeremiah is a nut-case, perhaps one who needs to be silenced for the good of the people. (It's always for the good of the people, after all.) Who are you going to believe? Who do you *want* to be right?

Jerusalem sided with the false prophets, priests and kings. Thus, they were sheep without a shepherd: the king and his advisors were not shepherding them to peace, but leading them to slaughter at the hands of the Babylonians. Jeremiah was dismissed, despised, scorned, arrested, imprisoned, tortured and more for what he said. But what he said was true, because he spoke the Word of the Lord. And even for those who still reject Jeremiah's message in our present day, there is no debate that Jerusalem fell in a bloodbath in 580 B.C., just as the prophet had said.

But the Lord did not end His message with doom: He also declared salvation. The time of these wicked prophets, priests and kings would come to a violent end. But someone else was coming:

⁵"Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. ⁶In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: 'The LORD is our righteousness.'"

The righteous Branch of David was coming. In other words, from King David's family tree would come one who would reign as king. This King would execute justice and righteousness in the land, and He would bring salvation. In fact, He would be called "The LORD is our righteousness."

This is a prophecy of Jesus, of course; and ponder the words carefully. Jesus came to execute justice and righteousness, to bring salvation. How did He do it? He executed justice by submitting to execution on the cross. To execute, to bring about, justice is to punish evil: it is to judge and condemn the sinner. But rather than condemn sinners, this King willingly accepted their condemnation on Himself. Rather than condemn you, this King willingly accepted your condemnation on Himself. How did He execute, or bring about, righteousness? By taking away sin, and by bestowing righteousness on all who believe in Him. Thus your King has taken away your sin and clothed you in His righteousness in your Baptism. He continues to cleanse you, keep you holy, by His Word and Supper. Therefore, this King has brought salvation to you.

The wicked kings who persecuted Jeremiah died a long time ago. This King, Jesus, died and rose again. And because He reigns forever, there will never be a time where He does not pour out His salvation for you.

The wicked priests who denounced Jeremiah and encouraged idolatry are dead and gone. Your King, Jesus, is also your Priest—He has made the Sacrifice for your sin. And because He lives forever, your sins are forgiven forever.

The wicked prophets who contradicted Jeremiah's true Word from God, and instead spoke lies, are dead. Jesus is also your Prophet who speaks the true Word of God for you. He has fulfilled God's

promise of salvation by His death and resurrection; and because He lives forever, He will not cease to speak His Word of life to you.

Jesus is your Prophet, Priest and King for eternity. That is your hope, your salvation. Now, note carefully His title, “The LORD is our righteousness.” Jesus is our righteousness. Apart from Him, we are only sinful and lost. But because of His death and resurrection, He has made—and keeps—you righteous. May you never believe, “I am my own righteousness;” that is the confession of evil kings, wicked priests and false prophets who go to the grave with no hope. Christ is your righteousness. In Him, you have life forever.

II. The LORD Is Your Righteousness

Hold fast to this Good News; for at times in this life, your lot may resemble that of Jeremiah.

Throughout your lifetime, you will encounter different rulers. Some will express support for what the Lord declares in His Word. Some will express tolerance. Some will promote policies that contradict God’s Law, dispense with His Gospel and cast aspersions on His people. All of this will happen because you live in a sinful world. We should not be surprised when we encounter rulers who are at odds with the Word of God.

What are you to do? For one thing, you pray for your rulers, whoever they are, whether they confess the Christian faith or speak against it. You pray for them, that they might rule honestly and justly, providing peace for those citizens entrusted to their care. You pray for their souls, that the temporal power they hold does not corrupt them so that their souls are lost from God.

For another, you submit to them. That is what St. Paul says to do in Romans 13, when the Caesars of the time were hardly godly, pro-Christian types. “Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.” Why—because of cowardice or a desire to avoid trouble? No, but because rulers are put in position by God, for His purposes and according to His will. This submission holds unless your rulers demand that you violate God’s Word; at that point, the Christian must say, “We must obey God rather than man.” This happened to Jeremiah. It happens today all over the world. Should it happen to you, you suffer for Jesus’ sake. And you know that rulers in this world come and go; but your King is “The LORD our righteousness,” and in Him you have eternal life.

You will encounter plenty of false priests in your life. Beware and be prepared: for a false priest is anyone who tells you that you must make some sacrifice in order to be saved. Sometimes, it’s actually a sacrifice of blood, like the imam who tells his follower that he must blow up himself in a crowd in order to earn “paradise.” Sometimes, it’s a far more subtle message, like “you must earn God’s favor by a sacrifice of good works and avoiding trouble.” But such messages are false, because the entire Sacrifice has been made for your sin: Jesus, your High Priest, has done it all by the shedding of His blood on the cross.

You will encounter your share of false prophets, too. These are those who would water down God’s Word, declare that some sins are now acceptable to God, criticize you as intolerant for saying that sin is sin. But Jesus, the only-begotten Son of God, is the Prophet who speaks truth to you; and only His Word makes you righteous.

It goes on inside of you, too. You'll also want to be your own false king. Every time you sin, you are saying, "I want the Lord to support and agree with my personal agenda, contrary to His Word;" and that is no different than the sins of the kings in the time of Jeremiah. That is why you repent of such sins and rejoice in the grace of the King who is your righteousness.

You will also want to be your own false priest, too. You'll keep thinking that you have to earn God's grace, that He loves you more when you behave better, that He hears your prayers more because you've avoided this or that sin. No: God forgives you, loves you and hears your prayers all for Jesus' sake already. When you believe you must offer such sacrifices to earn His love, you repent and run back to the Priest who has made the total sacrifice to make you righteous in Him.

You'll want to be your own false prophet, too. You'll want to water down God's Word to make your own sins acceptable, to make it easier to get along with others. But this is sin: and so you repent and run to the Prophet who speaks His forgiveness to you.

And don't be fooled. Like the people of Jeremiah's time, at times you will want the false kings, priests and rulers to be right. It is far from easy to warn of sin, to speak of judgment, to endure mockery and even anticipate persecution. It is far easier to bow the knee and say, "Maybe I've been too narrow-minded after all." That's the pressure of the devil and the argument of a dying world, preying upon the weakness of your flesh.

But devil and death are not for you. Jesus is your King, and He is the LORD your righteousness. As the LORD—as Yahweh, He is God Himself. As your King, who once wore the crown of thorns and was enthroned on the cross for you, He reigns forever and His righteousness for you never ends. As your Priest, He has made the Sacrifice for your sin, that you might be numbered among God's holy people. As your Prophet, He still speaks His life-giving Word of grace to you.

He is your true, eternal Prophet, Priest and King. He is the LORD, and He is your righteousness. And because He is your righteousness, you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen