

Heavenly Father, may the words I speak be those You want spoken, may the words we hear be those You want heard, and may we live to Your glory through hearts, minds and lives that are ready to be challenged, and changed, as you lead us.

Our first reading today was from the prophet Jeremiah. So, I thought it would be helpful to give some context regarding prophets. Prophets universally and repeatedly remind God's people of 4 things – 1. God still owns the world 2. God controls history 3. God has a special claim on the children of Abraham and 4. God expects obedience. So, a prophet's primary goal is to continually call people back to God – to love God and to obey his commandments. In fulfilling this call, prophets give people incentive to be obedient, by warning people that if you are faithless you will be judged and if you are faithful you will be rewarded with salvation. Additionally, prophetic messages include three parts – 1. Commands to forsake evil and follow God in righteousness 2. Warnings of coming judgements and 3. Promises of hope and future predictions with the intent of making people obedient in the present time.

Okay, now that we understand what prophets hope to achieve and what our responsibility is relative to their message, let's look specifically at Jeremiah's message. In simple terms, Jeremiah is warning shepherds who destroy and scatter God's people or "sheep", that he will "attend to [them] for [their] evil doings"...Yikes, I sure would not want to be one of those shepherds, would you?!? But, thankfully Jeremiah goes on to reassure the people that if shepherds understand the call and live into it, as God intended, those shepherds will be raised up and in so doing, the sheep will no longer have fear, be dismayed, or be missing! And even better, Jeremiah prophesizes of the coming of Christ, by saying "I will raise up for David a righteous Branch" and this "Branch" will be a wise king who will execute justice and righteousness. So, here in lies the motivation for God's people to remain obedient.

Jeremiah's message really resonates with me because of the challenging transition our parish has undergone this year. We were blessed to have a wonderful ordained shepherd for almost 15 years who worked tirelessly to protect and herd her sheep. But, the fact is that once there is no shepherd, it is very easy for sheep to wander. Sometimes this wandering is unintentional, but sometimes it is intentional. I am sure we are all familiar with the saying "When the cat's away, the mice will play". So, when there is not a shepherd to reign in the sheep, sheep can run amuck, not only physically, but emotionally and spiritually as well.

So I asked myself, given that we are currently without an ordained shepherd, have we entered a stage in which we are truly shepherd-less? The message I immediately heard, loud and clear in my head was “NO”!. So, if I am to believe this voice, and we are not shepherd-less, then who are these shepherds amongst us? And are they destroying and scattered our sheep or protecting and herding them? In discerning this question, I was greatly reassured that we have many lay shepherds at Messiah, and they include our wardens – Dani and Debbie, our officiants - Hans, Bernadette, and Kathy, our music director - Laura, and our inreach leader - Susan, just to name a few. But, do not fret if I did not name you specifically, as I realized Messiah is extremely blessed in that we have many shepherds, each of whom has unique, God-given gifts that they thankfully use to inspire and nurture those around them. But, I think that Jeremiah’s message is an important one that our parish needs to hear and to continue to consider because, as I already mentioned, it is very easy for sheep to wander and we should all recognize our responsibility to shepherd each other. We need to consider the childhood “buddy system”. No one person at Messiah should be responsible for being the sole shepherd, neither should the wardens or the vestry solely fulfill this role, we must reach out to one another so that we ALL remain a part of the mighty Messiah flock and thus are rewarded with salvation.

So, now I move to our second reading from today, which was from Paul’s letter to the Colossians and this reading offers us an amazing and timely message as well. Wherein Jeremiah, Christ was but a prophesy, Paul is speaking of Christ who had come and dwelled among his people and ultimately returned to heaven to sit at the right hand of the Father.

When you consider prophetic messages, which as I mentioned earlier contain 3 parts with the third being promises of hope and future predictions, it is not at all surprising that the sheep were inclined to wander. Basically people were being asked to be obedient to God based on a predication for a king from David’s lineage that would come, not in their lifetime, but in the lifetime of future generations. I don’t know about you, but most sheep I know can hardly wait for the next I-phone release let alone a theoretical king who would bring salvation to all! So, how successful would it be for the sheep to follow Jeremiah’s message and remain obedient in preparation of the future king they would never meet? In reading Paul’s letter to the Colossians, it occurred to me that Paul is sending a similar message to Jeremiah’s in that that people should remain

obedient, but the benefit Paul has in sharing his message is that prophecy became a reality and thus people had the confidence that God fulfilled his promise of sending a wise king who executed justice and righteousness. So, in theory, one would think that Paul might have better success in getting people to be obedient, right? Jesus came, Jesus served as an example of how people should live their lives, he was obedient to God, so it should all be successful now, right? But Paul faces the same challenge that Jeremiah did in that people are being asked to be obedient for salvation that people can't experience until our earthly lives end. Yikes! You mean we still have to rely on faith? God, what are you doing to us?

Just as Jeremiah's message resonated with me, relative to our parish's current transition period, I realize that Paul's letter also resonates a powerful message for our parish. Paul is telling us to "endure everything with patience", while not forgetting to give thanks to God and the thanks should be done joyfully. And Paul goes on to remind us that God has enabled us to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. God is the one true shepherd. Eureka, we, as a parish have a built in ordained shepherd, Christ the King!

And Paul also reminds us that God has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into Christ's kingdom where we have redemption and forgiveness of sins. Jesus is the "image of the invisible God". So, Paul is emphasizing the fact that by witnessing Jesus on earth, we can be reassured of the existence of God and thus the promise that salvation is not hypothetical, but achievable! Paul even mentions that "in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and **invisible**." Paul is trying to reassure us that, unfortunately, we are not going to be able to directly see everything, but we need to go out on faith to believe they exist because God sent his son to earth as a reassurance of what is to come. And it is in Jesus that all things hold together, he is the head of the body, the church. So, although we don't have a physical ordained shepherd right now, we have the reassurance as is said in Matthew chapter 18, verse 20, "when two or three are gathered together in his Name, you will be in the midst of them". So, we have the one true ordained shepherd at Messiah and that is Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit lives and dwells in us and we need to grab our sheep buddy and our sheep buddy needs to grab us back in order for us to remind each other of this fact. We must allow our ordained shepherd and lay shepherds to lead us to the hope of the future of Messiah. We must

have faith in God's plan, faith in each other, and faith in the path ahead. Change can often be scary and the human instinct is to run back to safety, but it is through change that we evolve and grow.

Finally, our Gospel reading today is from Luke and we hear Jesus' plea of "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." Jesus has walked among the human sheep and has seen firsthand how easily sheep can stray, even when the holiest shepherd walks among them. Sheep are stubborn and often believe they know better than the shepherd. Can you recall a time in your life where you heard a voice nudging you to go a certain direction or to do a certain thing, but then another voice overpowers that nudge and you do otherwise? I am here to tell you that you are not alone! This is a common challenge all sheep struggle with and here's why. The nudge is God and the overpowering voice is freewill. But, how can you figure out which is the nudge and which is freewill? I recently attend a diocesan event titled "What does it mean to seek God's will and how do I do that" and it was while attending this event that I heard something very profound. The facilitator is a psychologist who worked in private practice providing counseling for ordained ministers. One of these ministers once asked her, "how do you know it's God speaking to you versus it being your own voice expressing it's wants or desires?" She said she told the minister, "try to remember a time before caller ID existed. You would answer your phone and would not know who was calling, but somehow you were able to quickly determine if it was your sister or friend on the line? How did you do this? The minister said, I recognized their voice, and the therapist asked them, how did you know it was their voice? And the minister said because I talk to them all the time and thus am familiar with their voice. Ah ha! So, the answer to your original question is that the same concept applies to speaking with God. The more you speak with God, the more you become familiar with God's voice and thus can recognize or discern when it is God speaking to you versus you speaking to yourself. And it is through prayer that we can have an ongoing dialogue with God. So, I urge my fellow sheep that during our ongoing transition, we speak to God as often as possible. In doing so, we will be reassured of the presence of an ordained shepherd amongst us. But if you falter, grab your sheep buddy and they will remind you and if that fails, our lay shepherds will gladly bring out their shepherd's crook and lead you back to the safety of the flock. Amen.