

## Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle B

Jeremiah 23:1-6; Psalm 23; Ephesians 2:13-18 and Mark 6:30-34

Each of us is a funny mix: self-confidence, capability and independence on the one hand and self-doubt, inadequacy and dependence on the other. Look at me, for example. I can travel internationally alone, speak before a large audience, raise children, stand up for justice and welcome strangers. Yet, I wake up most Mondays not wanting to go to work because I feel unsure of myself. "This will be the day they realize I do not know what I am doing and they'd be better off with someone else." Deep down, I need someone to show me how to handle challenges, love better, balance my time, be wiser. I do not think I am alone in this. While all of us are talented and capable, none of us are omnipotent or infallible.

This needy side is why the Bible frequently offers us the image of sheep and shepherd to capture our relationship with God. Unsurprisingly, Ps 23 is one of the most popular psalms. Someone to provide all our wants and bring us to restful waters! Someone who is thoroughly on our side! When we walk through dark valleys, how reassuring to know God is at our right hand, with a rod and staff to protect us! It is also because of our neediness that God lambasts the leaders of Judah in Jer 23. These "shepherds who shepherd my people... have scattered my people and driven them away. You have not cared for them, but I will take care to punish your evil deeds." Jesus also uses this metaphor when he sees the unstoppable surge of people desperately running along the banks of the sea in search of healing. His pity supplants the apostles' and his need for rest, such is God's desire to care for us.

Yet, we are also strong and independent. A student once told me she resented this image because she was not stupid like a sheep. I appreciated her point. Human beings can fly to space, develop a vaccine for COVID in seven months, create artificial intelligence. We are adults who are responsible for our actions. Perhaps the world would have less suffering if we took more responsibility for ourselves.

However, this image of a shepherd and sheep gives us permission to take time off. We need vacations. We need a weekly Sabbath. We need time in each day for recreation. If we think we cannot take this time, we kid ourselves. We may think we are so capable or so important that we do not need time off, but really we are running away from something we fear deeply: loss of control or of the pride we imagine defines us or maybe the acknowledgement of a wound we fear will overwhelm us. Mindless time leads to mindfulness. It allows us to notice the rest of the universe. It inevitably leads to worship and prayer. Here is where the re-creation in recreation occurs.

Our passage from Ephesians contains a beautiful example of the insight that can be had when we balance work with prayer. "You who were once far off" means the Gentiles, who had been outside God's covenant relationship with Israel. The author wants the audience to know that Christ Jesus broke down the "us-vs.-them" wall between Jews and non-Jews by being "our peace." "He came and declared the good news of peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near." Jesus is peace for this writer. Grasping the impact of the resurrection on how social groups interrelate can only arise from restful time spent with God in prayer.

Yes, the apostles and Jesus are still ridiculously busy and cannot escape their work. We all know what that is like. Reality for responsible adults such as ourselves is a paradox. We have been commissioned for self-sacrificing service AND we need to be led to restful waters by the Good Shepherd. If we can hold both of these things in our hearts, if we can be okay with the mystery and not deny either side of it, our Shepherd will give us the strength to get out of bed on Monday morning with joy and confidence.

- ❖ Does something keep you from regular rest, play and prayer? Reflect with God on that barrier.
- ❖ What image in Psalm 23 is most comforting to you? Return to it when you get stressed today.