

The First Reading is from Jeremiah 23:1-6

¹ Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the LORD. ² Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So, I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the LORD. ³ Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. ⁴ I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the LORD.

⁵ The days are surely coming, says 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. ⁶ In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness."

The Second Reading is from Colossians 1:11-20 (Translation from *The Inclusive Bible*)

And by the might of God's glory you'll be endowed with the strength needed to stand fast and endure joyfully whatever may happen. Thanks be to God for having made you worthy to share in the inheritance of the holy one's light! God ***rescued*** us from the authority of darkness and brought us into the reign of Jesus, God's Only Begotten. And it is through Jesus that we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Christ is the image of the unseen God and the firstborn of all creation, for in Christ were created all things in heaven and on earth: everything visible and invisible, Thrones, Dominions, Sovereignities, Powers – all things were created through Christ and for Christ. Before anything was created, Christ existed, and all things hold together in Christ. The church is the body; Christ is its head. Christ is the Beginning, the firstborn from the dead, and so Christ is first in every way. God wanted all perfection to be found in Christ, and all things to be ***reconciled*** to God through Christ - everything in heaven and everything on earth - when Christ made peace by dying on the cross.

The Message is entitled, *Rescued and Reconciled*

Today, is called "Christ the King" or the "Reign of Christ Sunday," and our text from Colossians contains an ancient hymn of Christ. The words sweep us from before time to all time, from the heavens to earth, from the firstborn of creation to the firstborn of the dead, from the lowly stable to the excruciating pain of the cross. The hymn declares that through Christ all things are reconciled to God, for humanity has been rescued from the authority of darkness. This is a heady piece of scripture that theologians often describe as "High Christology," given its emphasis on the divine nature of Christ Jesus.

Yet, to paraphrase the great womanist theologian Delores Williams, the truth of this "High Christology," or of the "Divine Reign of Christ" is actually found more clearly through the whole gospel story, both its dissonance and harmony. She suggests that we imagine the whole story of Christ by singing hymns from Christ's passion and resurrection as well as from Christ's birth and

then to sing these songs in a call and response fashion. Imagine singing: “Lead On, O King Eternal” or “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross,” with the sung response being “Silent Night” or “What Child is This?” Imagine shouting triumphantly, “Kings of kings, Lord of lords,” and then whispering “poor little Mary’s boy”. On this last Sunday of the liturgical year this dissonance and harmony stand in close proximity. Christ is King, but Christ is also born in a stable. Therefore, today we stand in the midst of this dissonance and harmony, only to realize that these divergent hymns need each other for the whole truth of Christ Jesus to shine through.

Yes, this text is a heady text, yet Paul is actually writing a pastoral letter of encouragement. He is writing to a congregation in the Lycus River Valley, even though he has never met this congregation in person before. We find in this letter that Paul is urging the congregation to continue steadfastly in the faith they have received from Epaphras, a coworker in Christ. Here are Paul’s words to this congregation after his opening salutation, “We always give thanks to the Abba God of our Savior Jesus Christ whenever we pray for you, ever since we heard about your faith in Christ Jesus and the love you show toward all the holy ones, because of the hope stored for you in heaven... Epaphras, who taught you, is one of the closest coworkers and faithful laborers of Christ on our behalf and it was he who told us all about your love in the Spirit.”

“Thanks be to God for you!” said Paul. Can you imagine receiving such a letter as a congregation? A letter that speaks of our visible love in the Spirit because of the hope we have in Christ Jesus? A letter that speaks of the fruit we are bearing together and how we are growing in the knowledge and wisdom of God? Would a letter like this encourage us to keep on keeping on? Would a letter like this help us remember that it is Christ Jesus who endows us with the strength we need to stand fast as we joyfully endure all that is before us?

Paul wrote this letter of encouragement because the congregation was struggling under the influence of the earthly kingdom of Rome. The pressure to submit themselves to the culture of the Roman Empire’s systems of domination was significant. Even though those who believed had been transferred to a new kingdom under the rule of Christ, some religious teachers suggested that the believers in Colossae could just incorporate Christ Jesus into their existing cultural worldview.

This teaching was made possible because of Gnosticism, which taught that the spiritual realm was separate from the physical realm. If Jesus could merely be considered the ruler of the spiritual realm, then the cultural worldview of Rome’s earthly powers was separate from their spiritual wellbeing. The consequences of this teaching were significant, for by focusing only on the spiritual realm and the condition of one’s soul, the individual believer as well as the gathered church was freed from the responsibility of challenging the powers of domination of the Roman Empire and the organized church. The bottom line of this teaching was the Christian community could be formed without thought of transformation of the physical realm that ruled their daily lives. The principalities and powers of the Roman Empire were separate and apart from their life in the Spirit.

I wonder if this sounds familiar in our day and age? Who hasn’t heard this statement, “Religion and politics don’t mix” or that our nation’s constitutional separation of church and state means the church should stay out of the business of the state? Yet, Apostle Paul reminds the

believers at Colossae that Christ Jesus isn't just Lord of the spiritual realm. Christ Jesus is Lord of all, the spiritual and the physical realm. Listen again to what Paul writes to the gathered believers, "In [Christ] all things in heaven and earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers." All of life, not just some of it, is ruled by Christ.

Yet, if we are honest with ourselves, the gathered church throughout the ages has not always acted as if Christ Jesus is Lord of all. We have relegated Jesus to the things of the Spirit, being overly concerned with saving souls, while ignoring rampant injustices not only within the state, but also within the church.

Biblical commentator Elizabeth Barrington Forney suggests that we could counter this oversight by adding a simple question to our processes of discernment, both individually and communally: "Does this [decision] allow Christ to have first place?" Or my paraphrase, "Does this decision allow us to walk evermore faithfully in the way of Christ?"

In order to know whether we are giving Christ first place or walking more faithfully in Christ's way, we need to understand the contours of Christ's reign. We need to understand how Christ's reign is different than the reign of the Roman Empire or any other human empire, for that matter.

Human empires do not always attend to all the sheep of God's pasture. Instead they feed their self-focused desires and increase their power at the expense of the sheep, causing destruction and scattering. All we need to do is read the headlines or listen to the rhetoric of people in power who are bent on keeping their power.

Eleven-year-old Udai recalls, "We had dinner and were getting ready for bed when we heard a 'booooooom,'" Udai recounted that fateful December. "And we started looking for each other. I was shouting, 'Dad!' No one was answering. People came in with flashlights, and they found us." By the time Udai and his four siblings escaped Aleppo, Syria, in mid-December of 2016, they had lost both of their parents and their 7-year-old sister in bomb attacks." In Syria alone, nearly 13 million people have been forced to flee their homes because of war, with half displaced inside of Syria and the other half fleeing as refugees to neighboring countries. A battle for power rages between opposing leadership groups and the sheep suffer.

Or what about closer to home where cities, states and our nations struggle to house the seemingly ever-growing population within a population here in America known as the homeless. Are we concerned with all the sheep in God's field, even those without homes? I know from a recent meeting with the mayor and other city officials that the city has no city funds or property it can commit to helping house the homeless. They are willing to support the work of non-profits, although the City reminded those of us present that they represent the **all** citizens of the city and not all citizens want us to address this issue with compassion.

Woe to the shepherds who lead my people astray, who do not attend to their needs, who destroy and scatter the flock. Through Jeremiah God reminds us that God will gather the scattered... God will then raise up shepherds for the them, and they shall not fear any longer. Imagine a world where fear would not cause people to flee from their homes? Imagine a world where everyone has a seat at the table and a place to safely call home. Imagine shepherds who gather, who tend, who lead, so that all the sheep flourish and prosper.

“⁵The days are surely coming, says 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.” Christ is this king and Christ’s reign is a kingdom ruled not by domination, but by servanthood; not by humiliation, but by kindness; not by cruelty, but by mercy. It is a kingdom where the hungry are fed, the naked are clothed, the sick are visited, and the captives are set free. It is a kingdom where kindness, justice and humble service are embodied and enacted. It is a kingdom where enemies are transformed into friends, where lions and lambs will lie together peacefully. It is a kingdom where weapons of war are transformed into life giving tools. It is a kingdom where the blind and the lame, the outcast and the forgotten are welcomed and embraced. It is a kingdom that does not use coercion, intimidation, bribery or violence. It is a kingdom where truth is spoken to power. It is a kingdom where perfect love casts out all fear. This is the kingdom that was ushered in through Christ Jesus, but in the face of the reality of the world we live in we know that it is not yet fully among us now.

This is exactly why we, too, need to hear Apostle Paul’s words today. We need to be reminded that there is another way of being in this world. We do not have to emulate the shepherds of our time that destroy and scatter, for we belong to another realm whose signature witness is love. We belong to a realm that cultivates joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control among us. We belong to a realm that tears down the dividing walls of hostility and does the difficult work of reconciliation.

Do we remember as we make our way through each day, each thought, each action, each moment that we are citizens of such a glorious kingdom? Is Christ first and foremost in our lives? Is Christ on the throne of your life and of our life together as church?

Let me close with an admission. I confess that Christ is not always on the throne of my life. More often than not, what is on my throne is self-interest, for it seems our nature is to want what we want now. Yet, when I pause, if even for a millisecond, to remember that Christ is to be on the throne of my life, I notice my priorities shifting and my ego taking a back seat. I hear Apostle Paul’s words reminding me that “all things are to be reconciled to God through Christ - everything in heaven and everything on earth.” All things, not just some things. All people, not just some people. This realization reminds me that my life is not just about me. My life is part of a greater whole.

How might we remind ourselves that we belong another kingdom? Richard Rohr wrote in his Saturday devotion this simple phrase, “by remembering it’s all a gift.” We didn’t earn life. We don’t deserve life. Yet, we have been generously given the gift of life of God and we have been rescued and reconciled through Christ alone. Will we use our lives in such a way that our love in the Spirit is visible? I pray so, Amen.