

“While Shepherds Watched . . .”

Jeremiah 33:10-16

You have today’s text in your Order of Worship; however, I’m going to read something different. I’m going to preach from what you have in front of you but I’m going to read from Luke chapter 2.

2:8 And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. 10 And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. 11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. 12 And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, 14 “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!” 15 When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.” (ESV)

I trust that you had a good Thanksgiving. We had a great Thanksgiving, and if you’ve been around here more than a year you know my family’s favorite part of Thanksgiving is not the turkey and the stuffing and all of that (which is something we look forward to). The thing we all really look forward to is watching *The Muppet Christmas Carol*. The kids talk about that for weeks. They’re in their teens now and they still talk about it. We watch *The Muppet Christmas Carol* on Thanksgiving Day. Sometime after Thanksgiving Day dinner we all sort of cuddle up in the TV room and watch *The Muppet Christmas Carol*. We watch it a few more times before Christmas and then put it away for the rest of the year. Fewer and fewer people are accepting Thanksgiving invitations to our house because they hate watching it with us because we all know the words and the songs and they can’t hear what’s going on. One thing about *The Muppet Christmas Carol* is that it is remarkably true to the actual text of Charles Dickens’ original story. The story of Dickens’ *Christmas Carol* is that basically Ebenezer Scrooge is a terrible old sinner, as solitary as an oyster. He’s just a mean guy. The spirits come to him: the ghost of “Christmas past,” the “ghost of Christmas present,” and the “ghost of Christmas yet to come.” They come to him, and from his perspective, they torment him. He says as much. In the Muppet version at least, the cute ghost of Christmas past comes to Scrooge at night and he says, “Why do you come to torture me?” She says, “For your welfare.” He says, “I think my welfare would be better served by letting me get back to sleep.” She says, “For your salvation.” You see, when someone brings you salvation, most often it hurts before it feels good. Most often it’s bad news before it’s good news. Why did the spirits torment Scrooge? Why did they point out his sin, basically, over and over and over and over again? Because only by pointing out his sin over and over again would he have some idea of what it meant to be delivered and the joy of that deliverance.

We’re going to look this morning at the book of Jeremiah, chapter 33 specifically. Part of the problem when you have to preach through a book like Jeremiah is that you almost have to study the whole thing. It’s fifty-two chapters long. Jeremiah is also difficult because if Jeremiah were a cartoon character who would he be? The answer that immediately comes to mind is that Jeremiah would be Eeyore. “Oh, it’s probably going to rain today.” “Oh, something horrible is probably going to happen.” Frankly, that’s how I am. Why is Jeremiah like Eeyore? Because as Jeremiah writes to Israel the first forty-five chapters out of this fifty-two chapter book are about judgment. Do you ever have trouble reading Jeremiah? I do, because by about ten chapters of judgment I’m tired of it. Yet for forty-five chapters over and over and over again he tells Israel that God is judging them. He doesn’t tell those outside, he saves the last twelve or so chapters for those outside of Israel. But really he says that judgment is going to come to Israel, specifically Judah. In Jeremiah chapter two he explains why. He gives you a summary of what the whole book is about. “This is how my people sinned against me. Number one, they have forsaken me, the spring of living water. Secondly, they’ve tried to dig for themselves cisterns that are broken and don’t work.” In other words, “They’ve forsaken me, the only one who can fulfill them, and they’ve tried to fulfill themselves.” Then he spends forty-three chapters explaining what that looks like.

The Pacific Northwest and south Florida have something in common, only in photo-reverse. When I was growing up in south Florida, every day for about nine months out of the year it would be completely sunny. Then, at some point, the clouds would come over and it would just dump rain for twenty or thirty minutes and then the clouds would go away. Sun shower. Out here the same thing happens, only it’s exactly the opposite. It will be completely overcast for most of the day and then for ten or twenty minutes in the middle of the day, the sun will peek through the clouds and then go back to the way it was. It’s called a sun break, I think. The Book of Jeremiah is one big gloom and doom. The Book of Jeremiah is to the Bible what the Pacific Northwest is to weather. It’s extremely cloudy the whole time except for chapters thirty-one, thirty-two, and thirty-three in which you find a sun break where, all of a sudden, you see the glory of God. All of a sudden you see the promises of God. All of a sudden you see hope and joy. It’s not going to be like this all of the time, I’ll be honest with you. As a side note, I like the gloom and the clouds much more than I like the sun. But, when I see those sun breaks and I know

my wife is down I say, “Judy, July is coming. Eventually it’s going to be like this all the time.” That’s usually enough to get her through. That’s what Jeremiah is doing here. Jeremiah is gloomy, gloomy, gloomy, gloomy and he says, “Let me show you this sun break, and eventually it’s going to be like this all the time.”

What’s that have to do with Advent, and what does it have to do with shepherds? Why did I open by reading that story about the shepherds? The answer is pretty simple. Most people who go to church are familiar with this story about the shepherds. If you’ve ever seen the Charlie Brown Christmas special, that’s the passage Linus recites and he says, “Lights, please.” He recites about the angels coming to the shepherds. Usually the way you hear that preached is that the angels came to the shepherds. It’s because shepherds were the lowest in society, and because God’s a shepherd.” Well, the reason the angels came to the shepherds, at least one of them, maybe the primary reason, is Jeremiah chapter thirty-three, I think. That’s what we’re going to look at today.

We’re going to look at three things this morning. Jeremiah talks about a time of restoration, he talks about the king of restoration, and he also talks about the result of restoration.

So, what’s the time of restoration? I read part of this to our staff this week as part of staff devotions and Sharon Carter, a women’s ministry person, pointed out to me that building up to chapter thirty-two you see all these “I wills” that God says. “I will gather them from the countries. I will bring them back to this place. I will be their God. I will give them one heart. I will make them an everlasting covenant. I will put the fear of myself in them. I will rejoice in doing them good. Just as I brought disaster so I will bring upon them all the good that I promised.” The issue is, “Why is he saying these things?” It’s because by the time you get to this point in Jeremiah, when he talks about a time of restoration, you’ve got to realize how completely out of context it is with the world that Jeremiah’s living in.

Basically Israel comes in two parts, north and south. The top part, north, is Israel. The bottom, south part is Judah. In about 722 B.C. the northern part of Israel was carried into captivity into Assyria. In the south, in Judah about one hundred years later a good king came along. I believe it was Jeroboam, who comes and began to reinstitute the law. They began to have some kind of restoration in Israel because Israel had fallen away quite a bit. Yet they hadn’t come far enough. They hadn’t really turned; they hadn’t really repented and followed after God. So Judah then, God said, was going to fall to Nebuchadnezzar. That was about 612 B.C. In other words, God tells Judah, “I’m going to come and destroy Jerusalem, and I’m going to destroy the temple, and carry you into exile.” So in the midst of all of this, that was what Jeremiah had to preach. How would you like to be the one to have to bring that news to people? Jeremiah does it. And then there are other prophets who are saying, “Peace. Peace. There is no problem here. They’re not going to come. God would not let them hurt us.” So in the middle of everything Jeremiah is the one who is seen by his comrades as rooting for the enemy. Babylon is outside the gates. They’re getting ready to destroy Jerusalem and Jeremiah is saying, “You need to surrender to them. You need to just give it up.” King Zedekiah says, “I’m going to put you in jail if you don’t shut up.” Jeremiah doesn’t shut up. Zedekiah puts him in jail and says, “Now what do you have to say for yourself?” Jeremiah says, “He’s going to carry you into captivity, too.” Jeremiah wouldn’t relent, and he couldn’t relent because he was only saying to them what God told him to say, that Jerusalem would be destroyed. So in the middle of Jerusalem being destroyed and all this stuff, God comes and says, “But I promise you that I’m going to restore it. One of the ways you can know it, Jeremiah, is that I want you to go and buy a field.” In the middle of an economic downturn, in the middle of being ransacked by the enemy, “I want you to buy a field so everyone can see.” Jeremiah buys the field and then God comes and promises restoration. “I’m going to restore things just how they were and better. I’m going to make things better. I’m going to rejoice to do good for my people.” That’s when Jeremiah says, “How do I know this is going to happen, or what’s it going to look like?” He says in chapter 33 verse 3, God says,

³ *Call to me and I will answer you, and will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known. (ESV)*

And he talks about Jerusalem in verse 6.

⁶ *Behold, I will bring to it health and healing, and I will heal them and reveal to them abundance of prosperity and security. ⁷ I will restore the fortunes of Judah and the fortunes of Israel, and rebuild them as they were at first. ⁸ I will cleanse them from all the guilt of their sin against me, and I will forgive all the guilt of their sin and rebellion against me. ⁹ And this city shall be to me a name of joy . . . (ESV)*

“How do we know when that’s going to happen, God? When are You going to do this? How will we know?” That’s when we get to our passage finally today. God says, “Here is what it’s going to look like when I’m ready to restore all things. There are basically three signs that you can look for, or three things that will be happening. Marriages will be happening,

thanksgiving will be happening, and shepherds will be watching over their flocks by night. When I'm ready to restore all those things you'll see those three things happening." Let's read verse 10.

¹⁰ *"Thus says the LORD: In this place of which you say, 'It is a waste without man or beast,' in the cities of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem that are desolate, without man or inhabitant or beast, there shall be heard again ¹¹ the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the voices of those who sing, as they bring thank offerings to the house of the LORD . . . (ESV)*

That's pretty big. The first sign is marriages happening. When your city is being ransacked, when the enemy is at the gate and they're conquering you and taking you and putting hooks in your nose and literally dragging you away into exile, that's not the best time to schedule a wedding. That sounds funny, but it's really not. Who would get married in that kind of situation? Who could even think about it? God says, "Here's what's going to happen. You're going to know because it's going to be so peaceful that the people can start getting married again. Not only that but there will be mirth and joy." Every now and then I'll be walking through the TV room at home where my daughters are watching a TV show called, "Say Yes to the Dress." Basically it's women fighting over wedding dresses. God says, "You'll know the time is right because women will be fighting over wedding dresses again." The only reason women fight over wedding dresses is because they know they're getting married and the reason you know you're getting married. There's enough security and peace here for it to happen. First sign.

The second sign is thanksgiving. The people will be giving thanks again. He says all the people will come

¹¹ *. . . to the house of the LORD: "'Give thanks to the LORD of hosts, for the LORD is good, for his steadfast love endures forever!' For I will restore the fortunes of the land as at first, says the LORD. (ESV)*

When you're being dragged away to Babylon with a hook in your nose, again I'm guessing you're not particularly thankful for that. God says, "You'll know that the time has come because the people will again be thankful. They will again be singing." I think that's Psalm 136 that's quoted here. They'll begin saying, "Give thanks to the Lord for the Lord is good." The question you have to ask yourself now is, "Why am I not thankful?" Why wasn't Israel thankful to begin with? God had given them everything. The reason I think they weren't thankful is because they had fallen so far away from God and they had gone and begun to follow idols and things that were made by their own hands, Jeremiah says, and those things always disappoint and always fail. You can only be thankful, or you will be thankful only to the extent that you know you've received something that you couldn't produce for yourself. In other words, if I have a full tank of gas and I'm parked on the side of the road and someone comes up and says, "Hey, Tommy. Here's five bucks for gas." "Okay, I guess. Thanks." You put it in your pocket and don't think twice about it. But if I've run out of gas and I'm on the side of the highway and I have no help, no hope whatsoever and a guy comes up and he says, "Tommy, here's five dollars for gas," or, "Here is a gas can," I'm extremely thankful, aren't I? God says, "You'll know the time is right when people are again thankful." You can't be thankful until you come to a point where you know that you are in great need.

The last thing that he says as a sign of the time of restoration is the shepherds. Look at verse 12.

¹² *"Thus says the LORD of hosts: In this place that is waste, without man or beast, and in all of its cities, there shall again be habitations of shepherds resting their flocks. ¹³ In the cities of the hill country, in the cities of the Shephelah, and in the cities of the Negeb, in the land of Benjamin, the places about Jerusalem, and in the cities of Judah, flocks shall again pass under the hands of the one who counts them, says the LORD. (ESV)*

In other words, he says, "You'll see shepherds counting their flocks." I don't want to be too simplistic and say, "Well, there are shepherds counting their flocks, therefore Jesus was ready to come." But when you think, "Why did God come to the shepherds?" it's because He said, "When the time is right it'll be a time when the shepherds are there counting their flocks. It's interesting because at that time Jerusalem and Israel were at peace. It wasn't the kind of peace they probably wanted. They were being oppressed by the Romans. They were basically slaves who were free to come and go as they pleased. But nonetheless there was peace. In the midst of that peace and quiet when no one was expecting it, God sent the Great Shepherd. That's when God sent His Son. All Israel expected that the Messiah would come with great power and great glory on the flaming horse and He would conquer whoever was over Israel and He would kick them out of the land and restore Israel to her rightful place. Yet God comes in the person of a Baby born in a stable. Why does He do that? Because He's the kind of king who will bring restoration. The only way the king can bring restoration is to heal this breach in shalom. This thing called sin has caused a downfall. In order for things to be restored, the king has to actually come down and get His hands dirty. The issue isn't one of just conquering those who oppress us from the outside. The issue is conquering those

who oppress us from the inside; that is our sin. He promises that He will give us a king who will do that. Let's look at the king of restoration. In verse 14 he says,

¹⁴ *“Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ¹⁵ In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David, and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. (ESV)*

We've been looking at I Samuel up to this point in the year. If you've been listening during I Samuel you shouldn't be surprised that Jesus came in the way He did the first time, that He was born in a stable to poor parents because He's the one who is from the line of David. When David was made king, was David the first choice for king humanly speaking? He was number eight out of seven. He was the number eight son and Israelites stopped counting at seven. He was a nobody as far as the sons went, yet he would be the one who would be lifted up. God would make a covenant with him forever.

One of his sons, this Jesus, this one promised, would usher in the new covenant. “New covenant” means new administration of the old covenant. The covenant that God made with Israel, they had broken. They had broken it because of their sin, because of their spiritual adultery, because they had offered their own children up to the fire. Because they had broken it, God was now giving them the covenant curses by kicking them out of the land. The only way that they could be restored is if someone came that was actually obedient to God's covenant, and not only obedient to God's covenant, but willing to actually bear the covenant curses on their behalf. God sends this king, this righteous branch from the line of David who will come and be the one who's obedient to the covenant again, the new administration of this old covenant who would completely obey God's law. And He would execute justice by bearing justice. God's justice must be borne. God's justice must be meted out. It can either be meted out on you or it can be meted out on Jesus. But it will be meted out. The question is, “Will you trust Jesus? Do you trust Jesus?” If you trust Jesus, this promised king, then you can also experience the righteousness of this king. Notice the last line here.

¹⁶ *In those days Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will dwell securely. And this is the name by which it (that is Jerusalem) will be called: ‘The LORD is our righteousness.’ (ESV)*

Earlier in the text, I think it's in chapter twenty-three, God is called by that name. His name is “The Lord is our righteousness.” Did you notice it didn't say, “The Lord gives us righteousness” or “The Lord demands righteousness?” It says, “The Lord is our righteousness” and those who dwell in that city are citizens of the heavenly city. For us it would mean those who have trusted Jesus. If you really have trusted Him you've undergone a change of name, that your name is no longer ‘sinful,’ ‘friendless,’ ‘faithlessness,’ but your name now is ‘righteousness’ because in II Corinthians chapter 5 it says of Jesus, “He who knew no sin became sin so that you and I might become the righteousness of God in Him.” If the Gospel is true, you not only have been forgiven from your sins, but you have received the righteousness of Jesus. In fact you've become the righteousness of Jesus. Now, is that something to be thankful for? It really is. Yet most of us are not thankful for it. The reason we're not thankful for it is because we're constantly trying to offer up to God scraps of our own righteousness, of our own goodness, and we want to say to God, “Look how good I am. I read my Bible five times this week. I didn't yell at my kids.” None of that is good enough. None of that is good enough to make me thankful. But what does make me thankful is when I really look at myself in the mirror, really consider who I am and realize that God has long ago, before the foundation of the world, planned and executed a plan to send this king of righteousness to give me His very name. He's given you that name as well. Think about that.