

## BUILD Text Study – October 20, 2016

Jeremiah 23:1-6 (first lesson in revised common lectionary for Christ the King 11/20/16)

Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the LORD. <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>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. <sup>4</sup>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. <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup>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.' (NRSV)

### Some Commentary:

Our passage issues judgment to shepherds who have not upheld their duties to their flock. Jeremiah is not concerned with actual livestock and real shepherds. Instead, the prophet is using a common metaphor from the ancient Near East to speak of human kings and leaders as shepherds to the people. The ovine imagery is appropriate since the duties and responsibilities of shepherds would be well-known to ancient readers. Shepherds are supposed to take care of their sheep. Feed them; protect them; guide them.

But the kings have not been good shepherds given that the sheep now find themselves in exile, scattered among the nations. God blames these leaders for destroying and scattering the sheep. Given the use of the plural, shepherds, we are to assume that a whole set of Judah's kings is responsible, not just a single figure.

This judgment against the leadership brings up the question of responsibility and accountability. This passage from Jeremiah seems to want to place all the blame for the exile on the Judahite leadership (more specifically, the last few kings of Judah before the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem). But can we always blame the shepherds for the disastrous affairs among their sheep fold? What role might the sheep play also in this scattering? And how about other nations' shepherds who have held more political and military power? The theological and ethical perspective of Jeremiah 23 is quite narrow: woe to the shepherds!

... God's solution to this instance of poor leadership is forthcoming. The oracle of judgment becomes an oracle of salvation in verse 3. God takes the initiative. God will gather the flock from their scattering, bringing them back to the fold of the land of Israel, and raise up new shepherds, new leaders, for them. Verses 5-6 then move beyond the shepherd metaphor to speak of a righteous branch. God will raise up a Branch who will reign wisely so that Judah and

Israel will be saved. Jeremiah has in mind an earthly king or line of royal figures here, a future Davidic monarchy.

Finally, we get a glimpse of the characteristics of a proper leader or shepherd in verse 5: the execution of justice and righteousness in the land. The specifics of this type of wise leadership are still withheld, as these details are not a part of the rhetorical goal of this oracle of promise. Nevertheless, we have a promise of new leadership. God will begin again with the house of David to enthrone a sagacious shepherd. —Tyler Mayfield, Louisville PTS

But who is judged here? If it is primarily the leaders, preachers must first perhaps turn the text on themselves and ask to what degree they have failed in their call to give themselves for the sake of the people, especially the most vulnerable. Similarly, lay leaders and parishioners whose vocations place them in leadership roles should ask, "Is it I, Lord?" when hearing this text. In the present world, of course, no one is totally off the hook. While those with greater responsibility have greater accountability, all of us in democratic governments bear responsibility for the common good. All of us in a church, made up of the priesthood of all believers, bear responsibility for the well-being of all our brothers and sisters in Christ. Even more so than in ancient world, this text becomes for us an equal-opportunity accuser...  
...The primary work of transformation is done by God, of course, just as it is in the text. But what is our role in this? Back to the notion that, in Christ, we are all "kings" and "priests," no longer merely subjects and bystanders for whom others provide guidance and mediation; we are all shepherds, no longer merely sheep. Under God, of course, we never cease being sheep—tended and nurtured by a loving Lord—nor would we want to; but we are also sent out as shepherds to "attend to" the tasks of governance described in our text. More, we are empowered to do this precisely because God always provides the safe harbor where we can be "sheep" again, fed by word and sacrament, nourished by pastoral care and ministry, supported by the mutual consolation of the saints, loved and cared for even when we falter. Back and forth we go, in and out of the sheepfold, fed to feed, blessed to be a blessing, loved in order to love, strengthened in order to give strength. Not a bad way to run a congregation—or a world.  
—Fred Gaiser, Luther Seminary

#### Questions for Discussion:

- In what ways are our current times like that of the Babylonian Exile? How have today's sheep been scattered?
- What images of God can be drawn forth from the prophet's words?
- What do you hear here from a justice perspective? And how might that preach?
- What are some other angles from which this text might preach?

## BUILD Text Study – November 10, 2016

Isaiah 2:1-5 (first lesson in revised common lectionary for Advent 1 - 11/27/16)

1 The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. 2 In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. 3 Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. 4 He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. 5 O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord! (NRSV)

### Some Commentary:

Isaiah was a court prophet in Judea during the reign of kings Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah (701 to 740 B.C.) His court service began with a peaceful, independent Judea. But it ended with the domination of the small state by the rising Assyrians. Isaiah saw the glory and the shame of Judea under four different kings. His writings (chapters 1-39) reflect the extent of those experiences, but not in sequential order. This reading is a case in point. While the passages lay early in the book, the prophet's point of view seemed to be the destruction of Jerusalem. After an introductory title [5:1], Isaiah looked ahead into what scholars call the "theological passive." In later days (a reference to the Day of Yahweh?), the house of the LORD would be established on the highest of mountains [5:2b]. Who would establish it? God, of course (hence, the "theological" passive). After God raised up the house (a reference to the Temple or to the royal "house" of the king?), peoples from every nation would come to hear the divine teachings and learn the divine way of life [5:3]. His teachings and ways would be peaceful (in the famous verse about turning instruments of war into farming tools) [5:4]. Finally, Isaiah shifted away from his vision to an appeal to the king. The prophet appealed to the "house of Jacob" (i.e., the royal line) to live a pious life ("walk in the way of the Lord"). So, Isaiah wrote words of encouragement for a king and a people in a spiritual funk. "Look up to see what will happen," Isaiah seemed to say. "See what the Lord will do. Walk with him and he will bring you glory!" Advent is a time of anticipation. These few verses from Isaiah should fuel our spiritual anticipation. For beyond the presents and the lights and the festivities of the holidays, there is a deeper truth. We have a bright future that God will provide. All we have to do is look and walk in faith. See what the Lord will do! –Larry Broding

Like almost all the images we will see during this Advent season, Isaiah's picture of swords turned to plowshares seems absurd...We need to remind people that Isaiah was a realist...Isaiah isn't naïve. He is not a Pollyanna prophet. This vision of weapons of war turned into agricultural tools, images of death-dealing turned into food-producing is a promise for "the days to come." But biblical visions in both testaments come to us from the future, longing to shape the days in which we are living. –Barbara Lundblad, Prof. Emeritus of Preaching, Union Theol. Seminary

The anticipatory aspects of the Isaiah tradition are not unlike Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I have a dream" speech. This tradition has an anticipation for the future rooted in the deeper resolve of Yahweh, a future not yet seeded in historical circumstances. The poet imagines a smaller, burnt, purified Jerusalem with a wholly new future. –Walter Brueggemann, Columbia Theol. Seminary

Nations known for war will come now to this house and household of Jacob not to conquer or plunder, but to learn God's ways. God's teaching, torah, is new for them, and will soon replace the knowledge of war.

To make this possible, God will judge between the nations, deciding cases for the many and the mighty. Nations will bring to Jerusalem their desire and hunger, need and hurt, greed and grievance, and submit them to the authority of the One who is able to make peace, bridge division, and resolve conflict.

An important detail emerges here: the house of God is traditionally a place of mediation. But typically it is a place of mediation through worship, bridging the divide between people and God. In Isaiah's vision it is still a site of mediation. But the mediator is not priest, prophet, judge, king, or worship; nor is it Israel, the chosen people. The mediator is God. The divide God bridges is between nations.

When God judges between them, they can no longer justify war. When Zion is lifted, the sword will be lifted no more (2:4). Nations will hammer their weapons into pieces. The vision might stop there. It might stop with weapons shattered to bits, robbed of the power to destroy. But it doesn't. The vision does not affirm destruction of any kind, nor does it reject power. It is a vision of transformed and transforming capacity. Like swords and spears, plowshares and pruning hooks are tools made with human craft from the minerals of the earth and the growth of trees. The ingenuity and skill that devised weapons of war also devised tools and technologies to cultivate rocky soil, to build terraces, and coax forth from the land the nourishment of olive, fig, grain, and grape. Isaiah sees in this same creativity the capacity to transform the machinery of warfare into a technology whose sole purpose is to sustain the life of families in God's good land. –Anathea Portier-Young, Duke Divinity

### Questions for Discussion:

- What do you see at the heart of these poetic words? What stands out for you?
- Compare this passage with the similar poem in Micah 4:2-3 and then with Joel 3:10. What do you make of the similarities and contrasts?
- What do you hear here from a justice perspective? And how might that preach?
- What are some other angles from which this text might preach?
- In what ways might God's people in Lexington be seen to walk in the light of the Lord?

## BUILD Text Study – November 17, 2016

Micah 6:1-8 (first lesson in revised common lectionary for Epiphany 4 - 1/29/17)

Hear what the LORD says:

Rise, plead your case before the mountains,  
and let the hills hear your voice.

Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the LORD,  
and you enduring foundations of the earth;  
for the LORD has a controversy with his people,  
and he will contend with Israel.

‘O my people, what have I done to you?

In what have I wearied you? Answer me!

For I brought you up from the land of Egypt,  
and redeemed you from the house of slavery;  
and I sent before you Moses,  
Aaron, and Miriam.

O my people, remember now what King Balak of Moab devised,  
what Balaam son of Beor answered him,  
and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal,  
that you may know the saving acts of the LORD.’

‘With what shall I come before the LORD,  
and bow myself before God on high?

Shall I come before him with burnt-offerings,  
with calves a year old?

Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,  
with tens of thousands of rivers of oil?

Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,  
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?’

He has told you, O mortal, what is good;  
and what does the LORD require of you

but to do justice, and to love kindness,  
and to walk humbly with your God? (NRSV)

A Commentary from Amy G. Oden, Professor of Early Church History and Spirituality at Saint Paul School of Theology at Oklahoma City University. January, 2011.

Micah prophesies during the second half of the 8th century BCE in Judah.

### **The Back Story (or Historical Context)**

He speaks in a context with no shortage of religious people. In fact, Micah describes widespread religiosity where people, especially religious leaders, are making a public show of how religious they are with loud lip service to God (Micah 3). It appears that

business-as-usual religion has kept religious leaders self-satisfied and the powerful in power. For a messenger of God to enter this scene and proclaim judgment against the faithful must have been quite a shock.

### **Called on the Cosmic Carpet**

In the opening verses, God lodges a legal case against Israel, calling upon all of creation to act as the jury. The mountains and foundations of the earth will hear God's charges and Israel's pleas. This is no petty squabble but set within a cosmic framework.

We are told that "the Lord has a controversy with his people." We don't get a list of transgressions in these verses, but earlier, chapter 3 lays out a host of sins and later verses in chapter 6 supply specifics: "your wealthy are full of violence, your inhabitants speak lies" (verse 12).

We hear God's plaintive repetition, "O my people," in verses 3 and 5, as God tries to understand what has gone wrong. As God reviews the divine-human relationship so far, there is implied judgment of the people as contrasted to God's faithfulness. We get a salvation history of sorts, where God enumerates "the saving acts of the Lord" (verses 4-5):

- God delivered them from slavery in Egypt
- gave them leaders (Moses, Aaron, Miriam)
- blessed them through the foreign priest Balaam even against his own king's wishes
- and brought them into the promised land (from Shittim to Gilgal).

Each of these acts is a full story in its own right, and each story reveals the chronic unfaithfulness of the people. These brief two verses serve to remind the people who this God is. This is the God who hears the cries of the people and brings them out of slavery. This is the God who will use even the outsider to bring blessings. This is the God who shows compassion and mercy when the people fall. Even the people's idolatry and injustice cannot prevent this God from acting. This is the God who is faithful no matter what. The entire creation stands witness to *this* God made manifest in *these* acts.

### **The People Reply**

Now the people reply (verses 6-7). The question "with what shall I come before the Lord?" is tantamount to an admission of guilt. There is no attempt to counter God's claims, and no evidence is brought forth to defend themselves from God's accusations. The people quickly revert to familiar formulae: sacrificial offerings to make

up for their transgressions. This response only reinforces the pattern of showy religiosity that Micah has already condemned, especially from leaders who look to their own interests (3: 11). Micah would expect such false leaders to turn first to conspicuous acts of sacrifice, as though the problem is appeasing God rather than changing their own behavior. Micah makes it clear that there will be no more business-as-usual in the religion department without a change of heart and life.

The go-to response here is to appease God through a form of score-keeping that tries to put a price tag on God's mercy. What payment will it take to get God off our backs? Burnt offerings? Thousands of rams? My firstborn? How can we even the scoreboard? But Micah isn't buying it. We can't just write a check.

### **No More Business-as-Usual**

Micah contrasts this knee-jerk score-keeping to the path God has already given, "He has told you, O mortal, what is good" (verse 8). The entire Torah has already given God's people the path of life. Moreover, Micah stands in a line of prophets who have reminded the people, over and over, of this path. Micah offers a summation of what God requires, at once more simple and more difficult than keeping ritual practices: "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God."

To enact justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God, are not single acts that can be checked off the list and left behind. On an individual and social scale, in ways large and small, this is a way of life. Periodic nods to equity do not constitute a faithful life, Micah tells us. We cannot only observe racial membership quotas on committees in place of seeking racial justice. We cannot send checks for disaster relief and avoid examining the lifestyles that contribute, at least in part, to some natural disasters. We cannot do hunger walks and refuse to change our consumerist lifestyles. We cannot confess with our lips on Sunday morning and hold grudges at work on Monday.

Rather than offer God thousands of rams, Micah calls us to offer a thousand daily acts of love for each other and the world God loves. "Walking humbly with God" means knowing our bent to self-righteousness. We cannot "play church" or frame our religious life as a game where we keep God in check by performing prescribed duties. The life of faith is indeed a *walk* that reorients heart and life.

### **A Caution**

It is easy from these familiar verses in Micah to set up the false dichotomy between ritual practice and genuine faith, between piety and social justice, or between "being religious" and "being spiritual" to use a common refrain. Nowhere does Micah tell people to stop observing ritual practices or to stop being religious. The problem is not

religion in itself. The problem is using ritual practice to excuse ourselves from the divine demands of justice and mercy. Equally troublesome is the opposite, excusing ourselves from communal practices of prayer and worship on the grounds of social justice work. Either extreme fails to be whole.

We should also be wary of another common misuse of this verse, namely, to excuse one from any corporate faith at all. The emphasis on "walking humbly with *my* God," in verse 8 can become the manifesto of privatized religion, a church of one.

Possible Questions for Discussion:

- In what ways are God and God's people in controversy today?
- What do you hear here from a justice perspective? And how might that preach?
- What are some other angles from which this text might preach?
- Do you hear any good news here?
- How does the text speak to the relationship between worship and justice work?