

Luke 1:68-79
Jeremiah 23:1-4

“I myself will gather the remnant.” This is the promise we are given through the words of Jeremiah, that even when, or especially when, our human systems fail—God steps in and makes a way out of no way, guiding us home to reconciliation and space for new growth. I have often struggled with some of the imagery of Reign of Christ Sunday. If we aren’t careful, celebrating Christ as King can teeter dangerously on the line of elevating and venerating earthly patterns of empire, colonization, and hierarchy even when the whole *point* is that Christ calls us toward a subversive, totally different view of power. The kingdom of God looks nothing like the kingdoms of this world, and yet we have to work to keep those images distinct in our minds. Christians don’t have the best track record of keeping those things straight, and prophets like Jeremiah call us to remember the difference between earthly power and heavenly love.

But religious leaders have known for a long time that speaking directly about problematic rulers and systems is a quick way to get people to stop listening to you. Jeremiah contends with this in his own context, living through a series of great and powerful kings who one by one fall to some combination of ego, error, and unchecked power. So though he is not exactly subtle about the kingdoms he’s critiquing, Jeremiah tells a story about sheep. First, the shepherds who have scattered the flock: they have sown division and distrust, driven those away who might be difficult or hard to understand, and not attended to those on the margins. Then he describes God’s intervention, to gather the remnant, calm their fears, and install a new shepherd who will lead them in a different way.

When I was reflecting on this passage with colleagues a few weeks ago, Pastor Jay asked me if I had ever seen a sheepdog do its work. I hadn’t, I’ll admit that my singular knowledge of sheepdogs comes from the children’s movie *Babe*. If you aren’t familiar, it’s a whimsical story of a young pig trying to find his place in the world who learns to serve the farm as a shepherding-pig, relying heavily on the power of kindness. I’m sure *Babe* is a very factually accurate view of shepherding, but Jay told me a little more and I learned some on my own about how sheepdogs really do their work. Sheepdogs work as partners with the shepherd, going out into the herd to make a million small corrections, turning

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the group in new directions they might not want to go, and keeping up momentum to help a large number of sheep keep moving in the right way. They circle around the flock, giving shape to the whole group's movements, but also might nudge along an individual sheep straying from the path. They're known to fight off predators—coyotes and wolves who threaten the flock are often attacked or scared away by a protective sheep dog. There, under the watchful eye of a careful shepherd and a responsive dog, the kingdom of sheep is safe. The flock can lower its guard, trust in the protection of the shepherd, and continue the work they have set out to do.

As children of God, we thrive when we can let our guard down. When there is space for vulnerability in community because we trust that the shepherd is in control. That safety gives us the space to take faithful risks, to bring our whole selves to one another without fear of failure. We can ask questions and share doubts securely, trusting that the shepherd and the flock will not leave us forgotten on the way.

But there's another aspect of shepherding that we might keep in mind as well. Sheepdogs know how to perform their job because of their hunting instinct. They put pressure on sheep in a way that is likely uncomfortable for the sheep at times. In this relationship, it is the shepherd's role to keep the dog in check so that the sheep stay motivated without being sent into a panic. I read a reflection from one shepherd talking about how he imagines a bubble of protection around the sheep. If the herding dog gets too close, frightening the sheep, he calls it back. Fear is not helpful, and the good shepherd, like our God, does not deal in fear and coercion. But gently, like the prophet motivates the people to reckon with hard things, the sheep are led in the right direction.

In recent years, as more of us have become more acutely aware of the sins of racial violence and white supremacy in our country, we've felt some of that prophetic pressure on difficult questions in our lives. Many of us have looked at things we took for granted as social norms and become more aware of their harmful underbelly. More of our neighbors are telling their stories, and pieces of American history that we might be inclined to plaster over are coming to light. It's a *good* thing. But often the truth doesn't feel so good to look at. We feel shame and discomfort, wanting to distance ourselves from the things that we'd rather not be connected to. The shepherd of the kingdom of God might push us further.

This week many of us will celebrate Thanksgiving with family, friends, and loved ones. We'll reflect on gratitude in ways that are life-giving and good. I'm so glad we can step into those places and mindsets, and I pray that you will find rest, joy, and goodness in these days to come. And at the same time, many of us have become increasingly aware in recent years of how the way we traditionally tell the story of Thanksgiving leaves out some of the harder parts. Native Americans and the original caretakers of this land remind us of the harm of American empire, a human-made kingdom that we too often idolize. The history of Thanksgiving involves violence and deceit, and it reminds us of the still-

ongoing history of this country treating indigenous communities poorly. Even while looking forward to gratitude and spending time with loved ones, and we can't disentangle this holiday from the ongoing American story of cultural erasure and violence against Native Americans. This week, enjoy the goodness of celebrating gratitude. But hold it in tension with our country's history, too, and the reality of the kingdom of God, which calls us above all to radical and disruptive love. In the guiding grace of our self-emptying God, we can hold both of those realities together.

Here at First Pres, we are trying to consider these things more thoughtfully, recognizing we're probably going to get lots of it wrong. Currently there is a group forming to learn more about the indigenous communities of our region and to work on some concrete ways that we can be more mindful of their history and presence in our community. If you want to join the team, there's some info in your bulletin. We'll share more broadly as the work comes together.

But why does this matter for us as Christians? I think Reign of Christ Sunday sets it up well. Christ calls us home into the reign of the kingdom of God, where justice, peace, reconciliation, and grace rule the day. What a gift and what a joy that is. But for the well-being of the whole flock, part of that process might mean being pushed in a new direction, feeling the pressure of a sheepdog at our heels, pressing us to tell hard truths about ourselves and our history.

In her book, *Native: Identity, Belonging, and Rediscovering God*, Kaitlin Curtice who is a member of the Potawatomi Nation writes: "Decolonization is not just for the oppressed. It is a gift for everyone. Just as growing pains hurt before the actual growth takes place, so it hurts to decolonize." In the shepherd's bubble of protection, sometimes we're pushed in a direction we need to go, but might prefer not to. Curtice goes on to offer hope as well. A vision of how our communities, land, and relationships can be revitalized and healed when we do the hard work of reconciliation and truth-telling. As Christians, we flex that muscle regularly. We know how to be honest about who we are, who God is, and how God's grace meets us in-between. In Canada, South Africa, and other places that have done deep work around the sins of racism, Christian communities have (at times) been at the forefront of that truth-telling. There are many ways that we can do the same.

I began by cautioning the kingly imagery that this Sunday invokes. But what a hope we have in the humble, grace-filled reign of Christ. We worship the kind of king who kissed lepers, chose women as partners in ministry, treated people with disabilities with dignity, and made friends with all the “wrong” kind of people. We worship a king who died on a cross at the hands of the Roman empire, a threat to earthly kingdoms. There is hope in that counter-cultural reality.

This morning news broke of another mass shooting, this time at an LGBTQ nightclub in Colorado Springs, and in the wake of pain, fear, and violence, I need a God who is both powerful and tender. Who guides us to reconciliation and also makes space for the frightened sheep need a little more gentleness. We worship a God who joins us in the fight against the systemic sins of homophobia and white supremacy, but who also weeps with us when it all is too much. We worship a king who understands the least and the lost, who gathers in the remnant of scattered sheep and calls us to draw a little closer together. Christ lets us be brave, to tell our truths that might not be so pretty, but also to know that there is hope and reconciliation and growth, both here in our messy world and in the kingdom of heaven.

Thanks be to God. Let us go forth with boldness.