

# Church of the Palms

November 24, 2013

## *Our Merciful King*

by Rev. Dr. Lal Hmingliani Browne

Jeremiah 23:3-6, Luke 1:68-79

Not long ago I went to the hospital to be with Andrew McFall while his son, Calvin, was having hand operation. Finally, the doctor came out to report on Calvin. He looked at me and said, "Hello Pastor Browne, I am Peter Graper, one of your members." I was embarrassed. What kind of shepherd am I? I am ONLY the Congregational Care Pastor and here was a member I did not even know I had. He knew who I was, but I did not know him. I introduced him to Andrew and Andrew to him as fellow church members. I thought, "Here God has called one member to be the healing surgeon for another member in a time of need. God is good!"

I went to Health South Rehab to visit a church member. I went to the Nurse's Station to ask a question. The nurse said "Hello, Pastor Hmingi, I am one of your church members." I didn't recognize her even looking at her name tag. She had to tell me she was Gert Brown's daughter, Leanne Swain. I pointed at her and then said, "Hah! You are Rachel's mom!" How was it that I knew Gert and I knew Rachel as Gert's granddaughter but did not even think about the daughter that had to be the connection between them? What kind of shepherd am I?!

Our scripture passages put my failings in perspective. They are lectionary passages assigned for today. Today is both Thanksgiving Sunday and Christ the King Sunday. And, it is the last Sunday of this liturgical year.

This makes it a three-in-one Sunday and it is sort of our Church's New Year's Eve party. So let us be happy – God has been good to us this year!

The new liturgical year will begin next Sunday with the First Sunday of Advent.

The passages I am using today come from the Common Lectionary. I am amazed again and again as these passages chosen by a committee (see I really am a Presbyterian) speak to me with power and meaning. They lead me straight to the message I hear God has for us all. That message today is about God's love and merciful caring of his own people.

I hear the prophet, Jeremiah, explaining to us God's desire that God's people be lovingly shepherded. Speaking God's words, Jeremiah tells us that God's desire starts with God's own action as the first shepherd. God says, "I will gather the scattered people... I will bring them back." The Prophet Jeremiah goes on to tell us that God says, "...I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them...(so that) they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing."

We are God's gathered people, the community of faith – God's flock. We see God raising up shepherds among us to shepherd us. In fact, we have 190+ Shepherding Deacons and 28 Stephen Ministers and Leaders. Each of our Shepherding Deacons knows their flock by name and prays for each every day.

God wants to make sure no one is lost out of the gathered people – no one is forgotten or missing - so we have this Shepherding system. We have Stephen Ministers so that when need is more urgent individualized Christian Caring can be given. There is room for any of you to join these caring ministries. And, I am just the person to invite you!

Why do we take on God's call to shepherd? Because, we share God's vision that God's scattered, hurting people will be gathered back home. We stand as shepherds with people who fear change and loss in their lives. We accompany those who are struggling with dismay. We are committed to

making sure that every child of God that is a part of this congregation, does not go missing and is not forgotten or neglected.

We are not quite where God calls us to be. We do not yet have enough shepherds to cover all of our number. We still lack shepherds for 85 families. We have discovered that some of our number are missing and we do not yet know where they are. We have learned that we have people, especially television worshippers, who consider themselves part of us - but we do not know who they are so we cannot care or pray for them by name.

While patience is not my gift, this passage from Jeremiah is good for me because I need to be patient and persevere. Together we are building this shepherding system. At Church of the Palms, we are striving faithfully to answer God's call to shepherd all his people.

Jeremiah's passage moves from the appointment of shepherds to God's promise to give a new and righteous king, a new and righteous David, whose name shall be, "The LORD is our righteousness." We rejoice on this Christ-the-King-Sunday for we know "the new and righteous David" is Jesus of Nazareth. We know he is our KING and savior. He is the One who makes us right with God again. Jesus our King is the One who calls us to obedient service and joyful worship within the company of God's gathered people.

The Gospel According to Luke has an equally powerful passage. It records the words of Zachariah, father of the John the Baptist. You might remember that when Zachariah had his vision in the temple...God told him that he and Elizabeth in their old age would have a son. Zachariah expressed doubt. God silenced him.

He remained mute until John was born and the gathered community wanted to name his son "Zachariah" after his father. At that moment Zachariah's voice returns, saying, "His son name shall be 'John.'" He then goes on to give this wonderful poetic speech we have come to call the "Benedictus" (Latin). It means 'blessing' in English.

Zachariah revisits the promises made by God through the mouth of the Prophet Jeremiah. He gives praise for how God has acted to redeem and gather and restore and claim and love his chosen people.

Most importantly Zachariah blesses God because of the coming birth of Jesus, saying

*"He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we would be saved!" (Luke 1:69-71)*

Zachariah rejoices that his son, John, would be the prophet to announce and name the One who would be the Messiah,

*"You, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins." (Luke 1:76-77)*

These are wonderful passages for the last Sunday of this liturgical year. They are wonderful in getting us pointed toward Advent and the beginning of the story of Jesus and of our own story in Jesus.

These scripture passages remind us in this Thanksgiving Season, that we are not just to give thanks for the bounty of resources that mark our lives. We are to give thanks to God for the mercy of our salvation in Christ our King.

As Zachariah says,

*"By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and, in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace." (Luke 1:78-79)*

The promises of God to the people of Israel still stand. They are still God's chosen people. But now we too stand within "the tender mercy of our God." We stand there because the One whom God has made King is the merciful, loving, sacrificing, redeeming Christ. Christ our King loves us and heals us and calls us toward a life that is rich and full and joyous.

The promises, from today's scriptures, remind us that it is God, in Christ our King, who is the ultimate shepherd. And it is God who first acts in mercy to reach out and save all of us. And, it is God who calls us all to shepherd one another with love, mercy and prayer.

We are a people God has redeemed in Christ our merciful King. ...

We are not forgotten. ...

We are not left vulnerable. ...

We are not abandoned. ...

We are remembered. ...

We are claimed. ...

We are protected. ...

We are restored. ...

We are loved and held in mercy. ...

We are not strays, for we too are God's chosen people! ...

Blessed are we - for we are loved and shepherded all our lives by Christ, our merciful King!

Amen.