

Dear friends in Christ



St. Francis Episcopal Mission Outreach

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“Good Shepherds”

Jeremiah 23:1-6; Psalm 23;
Ephesians 2:11-22; Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

In my role as chair of the religious studies department at Alaska Pacific University, I would sometimes be asked by our president Glenn Olds to look over the transcript of a prospective student who had been to what was frequently called a “Bible College.” Could any of these courses be given credit towards our degree? Almost all were in service of the theology or church dogma of the issuing institution. They did not begin to meet the rigorous academic standards of an accredited school of higher learning in critical biblical scholarship.

Sadly, I would have to inform the prospective candidate for admissions that, for the purpose of obtaining a bachelor’s degree from a college like ours, he or she had wasted both time and money. No matter how I soft-pedaled it, I could see the disappointment, the discouragement. Sometimes we could accept an English course or something similar to our offerings, but that was it.

Those responsible for providing this student worthwhile academic guidance had failed the person miserably.

Jeremiah knew of such incompetence and corruption.

“Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! 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.”¹

Bad advice by religious authorities may seem a little thing, and in the full scope of what confronts us moderns, might not see that significant. Except to the downcast student in my office.

I would try to encourage them to enroll anyway. They were young with their entire life before them. Not too late to get on a sound academic track. If not our school, go for a community college. Tuition at Anchorage Community College was very reasonable, and scholarship aid was readily available.

Those who fleece the sheep in academia at for-profit institutions are legion. Look at Trump University and dozens of others that will gladly load their marks (that’s what they are) up with tons of student debt while issuing worthless degrees.

Don’t our high schools give any sound guidance to their students? Don’t they give any warnings concerning these bogus scams? Don’t they know the difference between a properly accredited institution and a rip-off college? A good mentor is worth the price of gold, much fine gold. And a few wasted years.

Mentor, that’s how we now designate “shepherds of meaning,” shepherds of encouragement. Or “life coach.”

Our oldest son said that one of the most valuable classes he took at his college in Ohio was farming. For an entire semester he worked at a nearby organic farm. One of the skills he learned was herding sheep. At the end of the semester, he thought he had become reasonably good at it, though he admitted that the sheep dog probably was the one who really knew what was going on with the sheep and did most of the work.

¹ Jeremiah 23:1-6, New Revised Standard Version of the Bible (New York: National Council of Churches, 1989).

A good and faithful shepherd is priceless. So is a good mentor and life coach.

Our other son working on his PhD dissertation, has a “dissertation coach” he pays. I told him that I would have been willing to kick his butt for free. I guess, that’s not quite the same.

One of the oldest depictions of Christ in the catacombs of Rome, where Christians were forced to worship in secret, is that of the Good Shepherd. As such, Jesus is most frequently portrayed as a comfort and companion in times of death. To carry us through to the other side.

Unfortunately, we have no lack of those in positions of responsibility who would lead us astray – for greed, for power, or just out of sheer orneriness. Never discount free-floating perversity when it comes to human motives. Those who leave us adrift, who would forsake their posts – they are legion.

“As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.”

Under the barrage of “alternate facts” and a dumbing down of truth as “fake news,” The American public is adrift in an internet wilderness. Is Rudy Giuliani right? “Truth is NOT Truth?”

I remember once checking a reference on one of my eighth-grade American student’s papers. “How do you know this is real, that it happened?” I asked him. “It’s on the internet,” was the answer. Lord, have mercy!

We have entire “news” channels that pour into American minds a constant stream of corrupt misinformation, lies and innuendo. Some of it straight from Moscow. It is the propaganda that fed the Big Lie -- that Trump is really the legitimate president, to be restored on office this coming August. The other guy is a faker and fraud, illegitimate. And it all culminated in the January 6th seditious insurrection at the temple of democracy, the Peoples’ House. Five killed, over one hundred police injured – many seriously.

One hundred forty-seven Republicans swallowed this Big Lie, hook line and sinker, refusing to accept the results of the Electoral College. “These were “good people,” the former president said of the rioters.

Where is that Good Shepherd? Faith leaders who continue to denounce the lies, teachers who continue to teach science, judges who demand proof and facts. Here are our faithful Good Shepherds.

Unfortunately, too many political hirelings have, through their neglect and duplicity, led students and parents astray in beggaring our public education. Most high schools have only one counselor or two for an entire campus of thousands. By diverting public funds to private schools, they have diminished public education to the point that much of the public has lost all confidence. It becomes a vicious downward spiral: as funding is decreased, schools perform even more poorly, and the public becomes fed up and cuts funding even further. The scandal of the past administration is that, Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, had never even been in a public school until she took her government post. She, who siphoned millions away from public education into private charter schools. Woe to you, shepherds of greed and grift. Incidentally, her brother, Eric Prince didn't do too badly either on the dole with his Blackwater renegades in Iraq. Certainly, didn't lose any money there!

Not that we have a lack of scoundrels in the religion business. I remember flipping through the channels one Sunday morning in Ghana. There on several channels the "Prosperity Gospel" was on full display. Hucksterism of the worst sort. No, sir, Jesus definitely does not want you to have a Mercedes. The prosperity gospel – another wonderful import from America. Where in the Bible does it say that? That you deserve a luxury car while your fellows sink further into poverty? What the gospel of Jesus Christ does command is an admonition to love mercy, do good, and to walk humbly with your God.

Here was this TV preacher, this carny barker, in a fine sharkskin suit that would have cost three or four months of my salary, prancing about the stage yelling and shouting, jumping up and down, imploring us out in TV land, to send in our money right now for a special blessing. And promising that God would reward us threefold, tenfold. Why, there's no telling what the return on such a donation might be! Folks, you don't need to go to Ghana to see this side show. It's home-grown right here.

I didn't send anything in. I didn't need a special prayer cloth that morning.

It's easy to characterize such theatrics as malfeasance, as religion gone bad, to lay such charlatans open to ridicule. But we staid Christians, we "frozen chosen" are not without fault.

When we fail to lay open the full implications of the gospel in our daily life, in our political life we do the gospel a disservice. We commit malpractice. Jesus was fearless in confronting the powers and authorities of his time. Pulled no punch.

When we preachers fail to draw out the implications for our common life together, we fail our people just as badly as those rapacious shepherds of whom Jeremiah speaks – the hucksters on TV.

Those preaching a brand of Christian Dominionism are a "real and present danger" to our democracy. This perverted theology maintains that the "right-believing" Christians are destined to take over and rule the world by taking "dominion" over the political process and reinstituting biblical law. Levitical law, heaven forbid? Enter Pat Robertson stage right: "We don't want everyone voting."

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is not meant as entertainment. It is not meant as a warm blanket to snuggle in and doze off to sleep. It's meant as a goad to clean up our act, as a plumb line by which to evaluate our lives. It is meant for encouragement to the distressed and mournful. It's meant as an affliction to the comfortable. A call to "necessary trouble."

Blessed is the nation whose leader is grounded in a faith tradition of generous spirit, whose leader is guided by a strong moral compass, guided by a heart for the left out and locked out. Not that such presidents are perfect, but that they have often been leaders who by word and deed brought forth our "better angels." Leaders who gave direction. Leaders who served the common interest.

Through such faithful elected officials, God has led us besides still waters, comforted us in the presence of the shadow of death, anointed our heads with the oil of goodness. God has set a table in the presence of enemies. Our cup has run to brim-full and overflowing.

Look around for these leaders? WE are the leaders we have been waiting for.

Through those of us who weekly sit in these pews, Sunday in and Sunday out, through those who have been faithful to this same Gospel,

God has been a true and trustworthy shepherd. Mercy daily follows our steps, and we dwell in the House of Abundance and Everlasting Life. This outpouring of God's goodness that takes place in village and hamlet, big city and suburb -- each week all across America. Every week, the church of Monday is the action of that community which gathered on Sunday. It's about humility, not dominion.

This week, God has provided us all with Good Shepherds aplenty. As dozens of raging infernos race through these western states in California, Oregon, Washington, Idaho: fire crews, faithful to their duty, have been on the lines for unimaginable hours.

The pay is mediocre, the hours are beyond human endurance. Fire season is now year-round. Add in drought conditions and some of these massive fires are doubling in just a matter of hours as wind whips them from one hilltop to the next. The crews that fight these fires to the point of exhaustion each day -- are our present-day Good Shepherds.

Faithful pastors and lay leaders, who have through Zoom, kept their congregations together, who have comforted families that have lost loved ones to COVID-19 -- these are God's Good Shepherds in our midst. Those faithful who have checked on friends to see that they are okay. "Do you need anything?" often being the first question. These common, every-day parishioners who make sure there are funds to pay the light bill and the skeleton staff who are the weekly face of Christ.

Our bishops --John and Diane, and Mike in West Virginia -- they have faithfully preserved the unity of the Body of Christ through these fraught days of deepest distress. Bishop John's parting word each week to our deanery clergy Zoom meeting, is always, "Call me if you need me" -- and he means it. These are our faithful and Good Shepherds who lead us beside cool waters, providing reassurance that we, together, will get through these dark days -- that we, together, will raise an Alleluia on the other side.

They are our Light. Good Shepherds, all.

This past week, some of our House of Hope team spoke with Senator Manchin's staff concerning potential state and federal funding for addiction recovery. If you read the news, you know this senator is plumb in the center many critical political issues these days. Regardless of your opinion of Senator Manchin, his staff is doing an incredible job balancing

federal priorities with the local state issues of West Virginia. Every day they faithfully show up at the office by Zoom or otherwise. They remain cheerful and keep on top of innumerable demands. They, we – all of us know someone lost to addiction. They get it. These, too, are the Holy Spirit incarnate, Good Shepherds through an epidemic of addiction and political dysfunction.

Within the hearts of all Shepherds of meaning and duty, the Life-giving Spirit of God's Abundance fortifies courage and commitment. The one and same Spirit, moving through our weak and frail humanity, gives to each of us "those things which for our unworthiness we dare not, and for our blindness we cannot ask."

And for those who will again rouse themselves from sleep to do it all over again this day, Good Shepherds every one, we say THANKS BE TO GOD. Amen.