

Who do you listen to?

Text: Jeremiah 23:1-6 for 11/05/2017 by Pastor Bolwerk

Who do you turn to if you want the best information on a particular subject? You turn to the experts! You turn to people who have the greatest amount of knowledge and experience with that topic. Experts are people who know something so well that they can answer any of the questions you have about a topic.

The difficulty is in knowing who is really an expert. Many people claim to be experts, touting multiple schooling degrees, or a certain number of years working in a particular field. Yet with all of their degrees and experience does that mean they really know what they are talking about? More and more it seems even experts cannot agree on things. It seems that you can ask five experts the same question and get five different answers. How true that is, also, when it comes to experts on religion. Religious leaders and “experts” of today will often give completely different answers to the same spiritual question. So, who do you listen to?

When it came to learning spiritual truths, the Israelites at the time of Jeremiah, and also the people who lived during the Reformation, struggled with that same problem: The problem of who to listen to. In this portion of God’s word from the book of Jeremiah, our Lord sets before us that same question:

Theme: Who do you listen to?

1. Shepherds who drive you away from God,
2. Or the Branch who takes away your fear?

The problem Israel faced in Jeremiah’s day was that the people were being led by spiritual shepherds who were leading them away from the true God. The religious leaders were teaching the people to worship things other than the LORD. Earlier in the book of Jeremiah, God said to the people, **“You have as many gods as you have towns, O Judah; and the altars you have set up to burn incense to that shameful god Baal are as many as the streets of Jerusalem”** (Jeremiah 11:13). What is astonishing is that it was the religious leaders of Judah who were teaching the people to worship these false gods! While Jeremiah was proclaiming the true word of God, the religious “experts” were teaching the people something completely different. The spiritual shepherds of Israel were supposed to be leading the people to the one, true God. Instead, they were doing the opposite, they were leading the people away from God and into eternal destruction.

Sadly, Martin Luther was facing the same problem in his day. The religious leaders of the church were turning people away from the truth of God’s word, and telling them trust in the pope and in human traditions. Even worse, those spiritual shepherds were leading people to believe they could buy their way into heaven by purchasing indulgences from the church. They told the people that indulgences would pay for people’s sins, and get them out of hell. These religious shepherds were driving people away from God and his saving truth.

Things really are not all that different today. There are plenty of false teachers who claim to be “experts” in the Bible or religion, yet these “experts” teach people things that lead them away from God. There are those who preach a prosperity gospel saying that if you follow what God says in the Bible then you will always be healthy, prosperous, and have few problems in your life. Then there are other shepherds who take liberties with God’s word, teaching only the parts they think people will want to hear – like God’s love – while ignoring the rest, especially God’s law. There are many shepherds proclaiming a message of peace and

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tolerance. They tell us to make peace with a world that hates God. They encourage people to tolerate evil behaviors which destroy God's good gifts of life, marriage, family, possessions, and reputation.

What is even worse is that some of these "shepherds" are not even connected to God's church. They claim to be "spiritual," or claim to have some great knowledge that we should listen to, but when it comes to the saving of our souls their words only point away from God. They tell us that science and the advancement of human knowledge can find the solution to all our problems. Medicine can cure all our diseases. Technology can make our lives easier, simpler, and more fulfilling.

Are we listening to any of these shepherds? It's easy to think that because we go to church and read our Bibles that, somehow, we are immune to the voice of these false shepherds. Well, beware. Your sinful nature loves the things these false shepherds teach and preach. The words of these shepherds make our sinful-self feel good. Their message appeals to our human reason, and our lusts. The things they say appeal to our greed, and they can even appeal to our sense of fairness as long as that fairness is skewed in our direction. These shepherds speak a message that makes us feel good about sin. Yet their message can never bring us any comfort before a holy and just God. When we turn our itching ears toward the words of these false messengers, listening to their words so we can feel good about ourselves, their empty words leave us empty. Their message only leads us to fear: The terror of facing the judgment of the all-powerful God all on our own. Their words leave us without comfort or hope because their words leave us stripped of everything good. They leave us standing in our sin before God.

False shepherds lead us away from God. Don't listen to them. To be separated from God means to be without faith. It means to be without the hope of eternal life. To be without God means looking forward to eternal torment in the heat of hell. So, if we don't want to listen to the false shepherd, then who do we listen to? Listen to the Branch who takes away your fear.

Who is this Branch? This Branch is the true God who says, "**I myself will gather the remnant of my flock**" (v. 3). He gathers his flock, rescuing them from this world of sin. This Branch is descended from the line of King David. He is "**a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The Lord Our Righteousness**" (vs. 5, 6). This Branch is God's Son, Jesus Christ. The Son of God descended from his heavenly throne, and came into this world to lead his believers as their Shepherd King. Our King came to serve us by leading us with his words. Jeremiah tells us that he is our Righteousness. To make us righteous Jesus made an exchange with us. He took our sins upon himself. He took our selfish sins, our greedy sins, our sinful desire to listen to false shepherds. He took all of our sins, and then he willingly gave up his life to pay for our sins. In exchange for our sins gave us his own perfect life. Scripture says of that exchange that "**God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God**" (2 Corinthians 5:21). Jesus is the Lord who is our righteousness.

This Branch also removes our fears with his words of promise. Because of Jesus, who is our righteous Branch, we no longer have to be afraid. Trusting in Jesus as our righteous Savior, his perfect life covers us and makes us perfect before God. We do not need to fear our sins any longer since Jesus has paid for them all. We also no longer need to fear anything in

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this life, because Jesus promises us that whoever believes in him will not perish but will have eternal life (John 3:16). Our righteous Branch said that he will never leave us or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5). Our Good Shepherd daily cares for us, providing for our bodies and nourishing our souls with his life-giving word.

Our Lord cares and provides for us so we can grow in our faith, and take part in the growth of his flock. Jeremiah said of those whom God cares for that, **“They will be fruitful and multiply”** (v. 3). As we grow in our faith we produce the fruit of good works. Those fruits of faith attract others to the righteous Branch who saved us. When we serve and care for others, loving them unconditionally just as Christ loves us, that service gives us the opportunity to share Jesus.

Our Lord’s promise to care for us encourages us to reach out to others and show them that same care and concern. When we share the good news of Jesus saving work with the people in our lives, that good news will multiply God’s believers. The gospel changes people’s hearts, and every time it does God’s kingdom to grows.

Martin Luther came to understand all of these things. For years Luther had struggled, looking for peace with God. Luther found that peace in the gospel of Jesus Christ, and when he did it radically changed his life. That message moved Luther from fear to peace. Energized by the peace he now had in Christ, Martin wanted to share that life-saving message with the world. That is why he worked as hard as he did to translate the Bible into the language of the people, and to teach people the word of God. Luther wanted everyone to have the same comfort and certainty that he had in the gospel.

It’s that same gospel that has changed our hearts. The good news of Christ’s saving work has filled us with peace, and given us the comfort and certainty of knowing that we are right with the Almighty God. Like Luther we know that eternal life in heaven is waiting for us, not because of our own goodness or righteousness, but only because of Jesus perfect saving sacrifice. That good news is the word of God that saves.

So, don’t listen to shepherds who lead you away from God. Instead, listen to the Branch who takes away your sins and makes you right with God. Listen to the Lord who is our righteousness. He is the Branch who takes away our fears and gives us an eternal peace. Amen.