

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Mary Newberg Gale
Sunday, November 23, 2025

Friends, as we turn to scripture, I invite you to join me in the spirit of prayer. Let us pray.

Gracious and merciful God, thank you for the way you have moved in and among us together to this place to this moment. Send your spirit once again amongst us that our eyes might be open, that our ears may hear, that our hearts may receive your word, that it may strengthen us and challenge us and send us out as people prepared to serve. Amen.

Our scripture this morning comes from the prophet Jeremiah, the 23rd chapter and the first six verses. I invite us to hear these words from our Hebrew ancestors.

Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture, says the Lord. 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 driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So, I will attend to you for all your evil doings, says the Lord. Then I myself will gather a remnant of the flock out of all of the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will raise up shepherds over them, who will shepherd them, and they shall no longer fear or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the Lord. 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. In his days, Judah will be saved, and Israel will live in safety, and this is the name by which he shall be called, the Lord is our righteousness.

Friends, these are the words of our Lord. Thanks be to God.

We find ourselves today gathered at the end of our church liturgical year. Today is Reign of Christ Sunday or called Christ the King Sunday. Today we get a chance to reflect back on all the mighty acts of God we have proclaimed every Sunday of this year. I have colleagues and friends who on Reign of Christ Sunday, they do a modified Lessons and Carols where they start with the Advent season, and they begin with Advent scripture and an Advent song and then Christmas scripture and a Christmas song, Lent and a Lenten song all the way through the seasons of the year as a way to connect this day looking backward and looking forward. And there are some really powerful and wonderful images inside that whole year's worth of experience of God. Images of a King of Kings and Lord of Lords. And yet we gathered here know that oftentimes the imagery of kingship has proven problematic. How many times has that imagery of kingship been used to promote power or division amongst people? And I would argue that it's out of touch with our modern, particularly American, context. We rest on our laurels that we have had no kings since 1776. We are a king-free people. And yet that belies the truth that while we do not

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have a king like King George, we have made kings in America that we worship and serve, kings of our own making. Oftentimes this image of kingship has been not used to describe an image of reality of love and equality but rather the reality of domination and patriarchy. So this Sunday every year we get a chance to revisit and reimagine the idea of what it means to claim Christ as king. Now, we do this every year because we need to be reminded every year that God's kingship looks different. And every year, our text reminds us that God undermines and, in fact, redefines our very understanding of power and authority. And this year, I feel maybe more than any year that I have been ordained, we need, desperately need, to spend some time with this reframing of what it means to be the leader of people. Now, we have in our Old Testament, as witnessed to from our passage from Jeremiah, there is another image, a really powerful image, not as king, but one that perhaps will serve us better as a modern church. Now, throughout the history of the Hebrew people, the kings and leaders of the people are described as shepherds. The idea being they are distinct from the kings of other lands who lord over their people. The kings that God has raised up for the Hebrew people are called to shepherd, to nurture and support, to care particularly for the lost, the lonely, the frightened. to be concerned with how the community is doing rather than concerned with their own authority, wealth, privilege, and might. Now, here in Jeremiah, the first thing that happens in this passage is that God proclaims a word of woe to the bad shepherds. It's helpful for us to keep in the back of our minds the context of Jeremiah. Now, scholars disagree about this a little bit, but the big picture is that the book of the prophet Jeremiah was written and these words were proclaimed either right as the people were going into Babylon...they were being conquered and taken away...or right after it happened. Either way, Jeremiah is speaking to a people who are scared, who are lost, who are fearful, who have no idea what is coming next, and they are mourning, and they are confused, and they don't know where to turn. And so in this passage, the very first thing Jeremiah does is say, "Woe to the shepherds or the leaders who have done this to you." Because the shepherds, God's shepherds, had failed to do their job for the people of Israel. They had not cared for the weak. They had not sought the lost. They had not healed the sick. They had not done what God called them to do. And they are the reason the flock, the people are scattered. So God steps in. In verse three, God says, "I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them. I will bring them back into their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. They will no longer be fearful or dismayed, nor shall any be missing." In the midst of this scattered people, God's promise is that God takes off to find them. It's here that we see God becoming the subject of the verbs. God is the one who gathers, who brings back, who raises up. And this is an incredibly powerful image, and it resonates with us even now, particularly as it relates to us as individuals. We cherish the idea that when we are wandering, God will seek us. We rest in the idea that when we are lost and we are suffering, our God seeks us out to bring us back into the fold. But the truth also is that as much as we cherish that, we often let the image stop there rather than broadening it

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beyond our own selves into the larger community, or the larger “flock” for Jeremiah's language. Frankly, we as church people are probably more comfortable staying in the presence of God, whether that is, you know, in beautiful sanctuary spaces or in prayer groups or in individual studies. We like being in places where change and challenge seem to be few and very far between. Often those spaces are filled with people who look like us and think like us and see the world like we do.

Those are places where we and the way we see and experience the world are not as threatened. I mean, Presbyterians like things decently and in order. We want to sing and pray and go home in an hour, and we want our faith to be neat and tidy.

But the truth is if we are living into this image of the reign of God, then there is a call upon our lives. It goes beyond us as individuals or even us as a congregation. We are called to join God in the search in that great shepherding work. Our text in Jeremiah tells us that our God is a wandering God that engages in the challenging and the messy and the dangerous work of caring for the people. Our text in Jeremiah also tells us that God is even now raising up shepherds to care for the flock. Raising up shepherds in you and in me. Because God wants us to join in the search to wander every part of every community looking for those who are dismayed and scattered. Our God is not a God that is distant and removed from the reality of the world. And because of that, we are not allowed to be distant and removed from the reality of what's going on around us. God calls us out of our comfort, not just in acts of mercy for the sheep, but also to speak out against the shepherds who destroy and scatter, against the leaders who ravage and take advantage. God calls us to follow where God leads. And that often calls us to speak out against power misused. Now, we live in a world that when we look outside, it's very clear, as our Confessions state, that we live in a broken and fearful world. And we live in a world where we place the blame for that, for societal ills, on leaders and institutions, and we tell ourselves that there's nothing we can really do to change the world. But God tells us over and over and over again through the story of our faith that we journey each year that our choices, our ideological, economic, political choices matter. They make a difference. Our voices count, as does our engagement or lack of engagement, with the world around us. So while we hope that our leaders execute justice and righteousness as Isaiah talked about right now, we also make choices and we act, and those choices impact whether justice and righteousness can be found in the broken world around us. Peter Story is a minister in South Africa, and he fought hard for many years to keep the South African confessing church from becoming a mouthpiece for apartheid and for the government. He issues this warning for all Christian churches. Peter says the church, that means you and me, not just here in Idlewild, but the church of believers everywhere, the body of Christ, the church must be different from and in contradiction to the ways of all nations. That alternative

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identity must be cherished and guarded as the most important characteristic of the church. The richest gift the church can give this world is to be different from it. It must be a constant irritant that the world does not want but cannot do without.

This Sunday, this Reign of Christ Sunday, we are called again and again each year to remember that our allegiance, our loyalty, our love, our faith is in the God made manifest in Jesus Christ, not in any particular ideology or institution or political party or group or nation.

As we stand here at the precipice of a season, both liturgically and ecologically in creation, as we stand here on the precipice, it feels like in our world and we look and we see the brokenness around us. It is easy to fall back into that mindset of that there is nothing that we can do to change anything.

But our scriptures tell us and our experience of God in Christ tells us that God's mighty acts and promises speak about what God can do in the future and what God is doing right here and right now. It is the possibility of what God is doing in our present and the hope of a future. The way the hymn *Oh God, our help in ages past* says just that. God is our help in ages past and God is our hope for years to come even when we are struggling to see it. That's why the prophet Jeremiah ends this pericope with the language, "Surely the days are coming." It's a repeated phrase that Jeremiah uses throughout his books as a way to point the people he is speaking to to the hope in God. Surely the day is coming when the world will be redeemed, when we will be made whole, when the shepherds will gather the scattered and the lonely and the dismayed and the missing. Jeremiah pins this hope on what God was doing in that moment and what God would be doing in the future. And so friends, for us even here in 2025, surely the days are coming when God's kingdom will be made whole, when we lead with righteousness and love, when we understand the power of community, surely those days are coming because God is raising up shepherds in this room to care for the flock this day and every day. Amen.