

*The Shepherds* (Jer. 23:1-6; Mk. 6:30-34)

\* Dear Friends, sometimes I urge you to think figuratively because it may help you to learn the spiritual insights from your life experiences. For instance, knowing that traveling is the American way of life, I've started using the pilgrims – travelers' imageries in order to help you catch a meaning. As I can judge, all of you are the good drivers. No doubt, you are familiar with the essential and ordinary tricks of the trade while you are steering the wheel. The knowledge of those things provides secure and comfortable driving. But beyond your experiences, there are still many things you don't know when you travel to a new location. That is why we need a map for direction and traffic signs for having our driving secure. Among the well-known map providers you look for the most reliable and informative such as MapQuest and Google. The same idea can be applied for the needs of our spiritual driving until we'll have reached the final point of our redemption.

\* The OT and NT readings for today will continue to speak on behalf of our growth in faith as soon as we turn to the Builder of this faith for help and guidance. We pray, Dear Blessed Trinity, have mercy on us, the people of your pasture. Please, make us faithful to the end so that the devil and all destructive powers of this world, including sinful flesh, would not be able to destroy our fellowship with Jesus Christ; who alone is the most reliable and faithful King of all ages; who alone didn't spare his life, but preferred to suffer and die on the cross for our salvation. O Lord, we also pray for our Synod, provide it with faithful shepherds and teachers who have been called to teach your holy Word and to lead others in the way of faith and love. Graciously hear our prayer in this our necessity that we may praise and glorify your name forever and ever. Amen.

\* We noticed that the Sunday readings from (Jer. 23:1-6) and (Mk. 6:30-34) don't communicate any teachings, rather these passages are the results of God's teachings. In the first place we've heard God's decree pronounced against the bad shepherds; they will be removed from their positions and the new will be installed. Jeremiah says, God Himself will care for sheep. From the second reading we've heard what happened in Palestine during Jesus' ministry. For a short time people learned how Jesus was gracious and merciful to them, how he was slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love to them. After experiencing Jesus' caring and sharing, the people ran on foot after him from all the towns. He was believed to be a Good Shepherd; the Good Shepherd will have made them lie down in green pastures, he will have led them beside still waters, (Psa 23:2).

As Jeremiah says, *In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety*, ( Jer. 23:6). The end of the passage from Mark says, *So he (Jesus) began teaching them many things*. Please notice that God teaches his people not only by words but by acts as well. After teaching by words Jesus taught them by deeds feeding 5000 with bread and fish. Significantly, Jesus continues to teach his people by words and deeds even today, even by these two texts that themselves are out of teachings.

\* The (Jer 23:1-4) pronounces judgment against the unfaithful kings of Judah and Israel, who went after the king Ahab as an ideal standard for them. As usual all bad kings look nice from the beginning. Accordingly, a king's inauguration included a solemn promise to care with love and share with benefaction. It seems everybody believed that the new king was a man after God's own heart, as holding his dignity and power by the covenant made with David. Little by little the new kings forgot their promises, being swallowed by luxury and idolatry, they no more cared and shared. Moreover they treated their poor people unjustly and stimulated slavery.

\* Certainly by speaking against bad shepherds the prophet Jeremiah included the king of Judah, Zedekiah, to whom he served as a counselor. The Scripture says, *he did evil in the sight of the Lord* (Jer. 52:2, 3). Zedekiah didn't listen to God's prophet; he broke the covenant with his patron, king of Babylon and entered into an alliance with the king of Egypt. In response, the king of Babylon sieged Jerusalem with all his brutal hosts, (2 King 25:1). Eighteen months of the siege came to the end with total destruction of the city. Zedekiah and his royal court were made captive. He saw his children put to death and after that he wasn't able to see anything because the king's eyes were removed. Then he was carried to Babylon in chains where he remained to the day of his death, (2 Kings 25:1-7). Now you know how much the mighty king of Babylon paid back the king of Judah for breaking a covenant with him!!!

\* In addition to that Jeremiah's prophecy also can be applied to the shepherds of the NT era. Now let's say a little about God's concern towards the bad shepherds of his Church. As it can be seen from (Luk 12:45-48), (1Pe 5:1-6) and other texts, God executes judgment upon the bad shepherds: - If they don't care for giving bread of life and protect not God's flock from false teachers, Woe to them! - If they treat God's people unjustly and oversees with unclean profit, Woe to them! Or, if they appear to be arrogant, dictatorial, and overbearing persons, Woe to these shepherds, says the Lord of Host!!!

\* In fact, the problem of the bad shepherds exists as long as God's community exists; it started by one priestly person, named Cain. He didn't want to share a privilege to make an offering to God with anyone else. Cain's ambition to being the exclusive head of the priestly dynasty led him to kill the good shepherd, his brother Abel. (Gen 4:8). After awhile Cain became the father and the king of his evil clan. Cain's community didn't call upon God but grew up fast in all kind of idolatry and wildness, (Gen 4:23; 6:11). The consequence of his kingship affected the ancient community dramatically; it resulted in God's wrath against people through sending upon them a flood, (Gen 6:17).

\* Let's see what is going in the world today. The church, including our Synod, continues to suffer from the bad shepherds, like Cain, Ahab and those who came after them. Being a participant of the 15<sup>th</sup> District Convention I was introduced to the new synodical proposition concerning the ordination of the new pastors. The Synod wants to promote an additional year of training for the graduated persons before their ordination. During that year the candidates for a public ministry have to show a good shepherding, and if it is so, the Committee will give them permission for ordination. The new policy is designed with a purpose to reduce the number of the bad shepherds before they will receive an official rank and after that cannot be removed easily. So the problem of the bad shepherds is still in the air and its consequences may be dramatically harmful like it once took place when God destroyed the ancient world by water. (Gen.6).

\* In contrast to the bad shepherds, the Scripture portrays the Good Shepherd, the King and the God of Israel. Our gospel reading points to Jesus who is easily recognized as a King, *a righteous branch*, whom Peter, the apostle, calls *the chief Shepherd*. He came from David's line to reign over the remnant, the Spiritual Israel. He started gathering the remnant from the twelve, (Mar 3:13); after a time he gathered seventy-two, (Luk 10:1); the number of gathered continued to grow, 120, (Act 1:15); 3000, (Act 2:41); 5000, (Act 4:4); afterwards, millions were gathered from Medieval ages; and after all, two billion Christians all over the world put their hope in him, who is Christ, our God. With Jesus' coming to the world the OT prophecies were fulfilled, we received the Good Shepherd, (Isa 9:6).

\* Friends, when we think over the challenges of the missionary work in the US and specifically in our congregation, please understand that the Lord himself is the Missionary. Listen what the Lord says emphatically on this account through the prophet Ezekiel. For thus says the Lord GOD: *Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep*

and will seek them out, (Eze 34:11). And through the prophet Jeremiah He says, ... *I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply*, (Jer.23:3). The Scripture doesn't teach that the disciples, bishops, pastors, deacons and missionaries make people believers as I thought in the beginning of my Christian life. Faith is a supernatural phenomenon; it is God's work in the human heart, (Joh 6:29). Saying metaphorically, though the disciples are *harvesters* they don't start and they don't grow the garden, (Isa.5:1; Joh 4:38). Or though the disciples are *fishermen*, they would catch not one fish without Jesus, (Luk 5:5). But the disciples are workers of that garden; they are the fishermen under authority of their Master whom the Master assigned to care and share, (Joh 21:17). The servants of the Lord were called shepherds as it can be proved from (Joh 21:15-17; 1Pe 5:3). They've been asked to provide spiritual needs of God's people in place of the chief Shepherd. The passage from (Mark 6:12,13) says that the disciples preached repentance, made the sick well and cast out demons!!! It is a shepherding. It is what the faithful shepherd must do in addition to other work such as the preparations for Sunday's Services, writing articles, participating in different programs, meetings and so forth. The preaching of repentance, healing the sick and casting out demons are the real business for the good shepherds. Take for example the Peter's and Paul's shepherding, it is a perfect model for all shepherds after all, (1Co 4:16).

\* So, with God's help we've drawn the bad and good shepherd's imageries. We've contrasted them with purpose to make your knowledge more solid and competent on the matter of shepherding. It was also made with purpose of protecting you from bewitching by the false teachers, read (Gal 3:1). Beloved, to be successful in spiritual driving you need a reliable shepherd. For instance, if the shepherd meets your thirst for truth and hunger for righteousness, it signals that the shepherd is good. Or if you see positive changes in your life, it signals that you have the good shepherd. Or if the evil spirits unleash war, but cannot harm you, it signals that you have the good shepherd. On the other hand, if you don't experience these things, then, there are two options, and one of them is that you have the bad shepherd. But your perceptions might not be deceived because the Father lets you know His Son, and a person through whom the Son cares and shares. Beloved in the Lord, Jesus himself gathered you from all nations and gave you the shepherd so that you may be fruitful and multiply to the glory of God the Father.

Amen.