

Proper 11B (Pentecost 7), 2009

Text: Jeremiah 23:1-6 & Mark 6:30-44

Title: Zedekiah

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Scene 1 (Jerusalem around 590 BC):

The last king of Judah is sitting on his throne.

He is the last of the line of David.

His kingdom is all but destroyed.

This king does not even rule by his own authority. He must swear allegiance to the king of Babylon. The Babylonians conquered Judah nine years ago. The palace was plundered; the temple of the Lord was ransacked. The structures remain, but they are mere shells of their former glory. All the soldiers, all the craftsmen, all the leading citizens of Jerusalem, including most of the royal family have been taken into exile. The only ones left are the poor and the weak and the sick.

The man on the throne is Zedekiah. His name means, “The Lord is my righteousness.”

Yet Zedekiah is not a righteous man. He should be tending the needs of the people. He should be shepherding the flock under his care. Instead, he is planning rebellion.

Zedekiah is not completely defeated. There is still fight left in him. He is thirty years old, in the prime of his life. He is planning a rebellion against Babylonians to win back the wealth and honor of his people. He wants to be their savior.

There is another man in the throne room. He is an old man and he has lived a hard life. His body bears the bruises and scars of many beatings. And yet he stands boldly before the king and he speaks as no one else dares to speak to the king. He speaks with authority. He is not a yes-man. He is the Lord’s man. He is a prophet. His name is Jeremiah.

The king is looking for good news, for promises of deliverance from this man of God. Surely God would not allow his people to remain defeated. Surely the Lord who promised this land to Abraham, the Lord who brought his people out of slavery in Egypt would support his rebellion.

But the words of Jeremiah bring no comfort to the king. He speaks of war, of destruction, and of exile, and not of peace and prosperity. Jeremiah tells the king to repent and return to the Lord. He accuses the king of being the last in a long line of bad shepherds.

David, Zedekiah’s forefather, had been a good shepherd. First he had shepherded the flocks of his father on the hills of Bethlehem, and then he had shepherded people of Israel in Jerusalem. That is what the people need. The poor, the weak, and the sick need a king who will care for them and gather them together like a shepherd.

Jeremiah's words end on a note of hope. The Lord will restore the line of David. He will send a new king. Zedekiah will not be the last king. There will be a new king who will reign with wisdom and with justice. He will save Judah, not just from Babylon, but from all their enemies. He will bring peace to his people. He will be the true Zedekiah, the Lord our righteousness.

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Scene 2 (about 640 years later and 70 miles to the north):

A lonely man stands by the shore of a lake. He has just received terrible news, news that grieves the man deeply. His cousin and friend from infancy has been brutally executed.

The most recent man to call himself king of that land is Herod Antipas. He does not rule by his own authority, but must swear allegiance to the Emperor in Rome.

He is no son of David. He is the son of Herod the Great, the notorious tyrant. Like his father, Antipas is not a righteous man. He has taken his brother's wife. Antipas has his own prophet to deal with, an eccentric man named John, the last of the prophets to tell of the coming Messiah.

John spoke with authority. He was not a yes-man. He was the Lord's man. John spoke to the king as no one else had dared. He called the king to repent and return to the Lord. And for that the king killed him.

As the news of this death reaches Jesus, the man by the lakeshore, he feels the need to be alone. The crowds are coming and he knows that if he stays, he will get no peace. So Jesus and his disciples get into the boat and look for a place to be alone.

And yet when they arrive on the other side of the lake, the crowd is there waiting for them. They are the poor, and the weak, and the sick. They are like sheep without a shepherd.

As much as Jesus is grieved by the death of John, he is also grieved to see the people shepherdless. And so he has compassion on them. He becomes their shepherd.

He has compassion on the people by teaching them the righteous ways of the Lord. He speaks with wisdom. And then he feeds them. He takes a few small loaves of bread, gives thanks, and then gives it to them to eat. And they are all fed by their Good Shepherd.

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Scene 3 (Jerusalem, three years later):

A dying man hangs on a cross. His body bears the bruises and scars of many beatings. He is about thirty years old, in the prime of his life. Above his head is a sign that reads, "The King of the Jews."

He is the king. David's Son yet David's Lord. The one true King of the Jews. He is their shepherd, the good shepherd, who knows his sheep, who cares for his sheep, who feeds his sheep, who lays down his life for his sheep.

He heals the sick, gives strength to the weak, and gives the poor the riches of his kingdom. His throne is the cross. His crown is made of thorns. He is the true savior of his people. He saves them not from the Babylonians and the Romans, but from sin, death, and the devil. His death brings peace, reconciling his people with God himself.

Jesus had entered the city five days earlier to the shouts of the crowd, "Hosanna, save us, Son of David!" He had spoken in the temple courts with authority. He told the leaders of the people to repent, and predicted the destruction of Jerusalem. He is not a yes-man. He is the Lord Himself, the righteous one, the true Zedekiah of whom Jeremiah had spoken.

The night before he had hosted a royal banquet. He prepared a table for his disciples. He took bread, gave thanks, and gave it to them with the words, "This is my body." They all ate and were satisfied.

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Scene 4 (two thousand year later and several thousand miles away):

A crowd gathers inside a building of brick and stone and wood. They are the poor, the sick and the weak, but they are not shepherdless. They are cared for by one called "pastor."

He is not a yes-man. He is the Lord's man. He speaks with authority. He stands in the line of the prophets. He calls the people to repent and return to the ways of the Lord.

The crowd has been gathered to meet their king. The scattered flock has been gathered by the good shepherd. You are gathered here to meet your king- Jesus Christ, the righteous one, your good shepherd. You have been granted a royal audience. You are clothed in the royal garments of your baptism. You have come to beg from your king. Lord have mercy! You cry.

And your king comes to meet you. He is here now with his royal servants, the holy angels. He makes this place his palace, his royal throne room. He welcomes you into his presence. He grants you pardon for your offenses and transgressions of his law. He has compassion on you as he teaches you. He graciously hears your requests and petitions. He receives the gifts that you bring to him.

"Hosanna! Save us, son of David," you sing. And he does. He saves you from the enemies of sin, death, and the devil. He brings you to his royal banquet. He prepares a table for you. He feeds you with the very bread of life, his own body and blood. He gives you his own righteousness. He gives you the name "Zedekiah" for the Lord is now your righteousness. He blesses you and sends you on your way in peace.

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The final scene (The heavenly Jerusalem as described by St. John):

I looked and behold, a great crowd, which no one could number, from every nation and tribe and people and tongue standing before the throne and before the lamb, clothed in white robes with palm branches in their hands. And they were crying out in a loud voice saying, "Salvation

belongs to our God who sits upon the throne and to the lamb.” And all the angels standing around the throne and the elders and the four living creatures fell before the throne upon their faces and worshipped God saying, “Amen. Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and strength belong to our God for ever and ever, amen.”

And one of the elders addressed me saying, “These clothed in white robes: who are they, and from where have they come?” And I said to him, “Sir, you know.” And he said to me, “These are those coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb. Therefore they are before the throne of God and worship him day and night in his temple. And the one seated upon the throne will make his dwelling with them. They will not hunger, nor will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them nor any scorching heat. For the lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd. And he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe every tear from their eyes.”