**Text: Jeremiah 23:1-6, Mark 6:30-44**

Like Sheep Without a Shepherd

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. How many of you like hosting parties or large family dinners or any sort of large gathering? I always dreaded hosting things like the family Christmas dinner or Thanksgiving because it meant that a serious amount of cleaning had to be done. Rooms needed to be cleaned, toilets scrubbed, vacuums run, shelves dusted, windows cleaned, floors mopped, etc. etc. I’m sure you get the picture of the gulagesque nature we had to endure. But cleaning was only the beginning, for after the countertops had been wiped and all available card table chairs had been dug out of the garage, it was time to prepare the food. Now I’ll use Thanksgiving as my example, as it is my one of my favorite days of the year and like founding father Benjamin Franklin, I believe that the Turkey should’ve been our national bird. My mother always said that while Turkey is the advertisement for Thanksgiving, the real star is butter. The shopping trip to the supermarket had to be done at least a week in advance. This of course means that you have to do math in order to attempt to calculate how much everyone scheduled to come over is going to eat. Which usually meant buying one more package of whatever it was we needed to buy, you know, just to be sure. After all Thanksgiving is a feast! Feasts are supposed to have excess right? We all know the tales of the fantastic state dinners that the ancients used to have, some that lasted days and even weeks. Thanksgiving is the great American feast, the day in which we give thanks for the bountiful harvests and the plentiful blessings that God bestows upon us. I know it’s July, but I really like Thanksgiving. Like any ancient feast, we eat our fill of turkey, I like dark meat, casserole, cranberry sauce, mashed potatoes, and gravy, we have seconds and thirds. And then it’s time for desert, after all, what’s Thanksgiving without pumpkin pie, apple pie, vanilla ice cream and Redi Whip? After all the eating is done, like the ancient days it is time for our entertainment. Of course, what else are you going to watch on Thanksgiving other than the Lions? Hosting such a dinner requires a lot of preparation as you already know. After all, you want to do a good job. You want people to enjoy themselves.

Now how many of you would be able to prepare a feast for 5,000 people at a moment’s notice? I’m not talking about having any time to prepare, I’m talking about right now after church, 5,000 people are going to storm through those doors and demand to be fed. Who is up for the challenge!? Right. That’s what I thought. In fact, I don’t blame you. For it would certainly be impossible for us to prepare enough food for 5,000 people, even with all of us working at full capacity. But that is basically what happens to Jesus. For the disciples had just returned from an episode of teaching and healing and certainly were in need of rest. Yet these crowds simply will not leave them alone. That seems to be a common theme throughout Jesus’ ministry. No matter where he goes to get a little bit of rest, even when he attempts to go to a “desolate place”, he and his disciples cannot get away. To us this would be, no doubt, frustrating. After all, how do you put a do not disturb sign on yourself? But Jesus is not like any of us, not even his disciples. “**When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.**” We’ve certainly heard that phrase before, “like sheep without a shepherd”, as it is usually meant to describe people in disarray, people in need of a leader.

But this was the nation of God, this was Israel, appearing as sheep without a shepherd. Did they appear this way because they were a great crowd? No, actually I think our Old Testament reading from Jeremiah gives us a pretty good insight. The prophet writes, “**’Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!’ declares the Lord. Therefore thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who care for my people: ‘You have scattered my flock and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. Behold, I will attend to you for your evil deeds, declares the Lord.’**” Now these couple verses give me chills, partially because of the position that I hold, but also because the tone of that statement. “Behold, I will attend to you for your evil deeds” sounds intimidating, and it should, because we know, that given the context and the language of this passage, that when God deals with them, it will not be good. For he will not be dealing with them in order to thank and congratulate them for doing a good job, rather he will be dealing with them aggressively, in order to punish them for leading his people astray. Imagine what God’s people look like to him now? We have how many different denominations? How many different books of doctrine? What about just here in our community? How many different styles, philosophies, and beliefs do we have just here in this county? God’s people, today especially, certainly seem to be playing the role of sheep without a shepherd, especially when you incorporate the secular world into the conversation. But God says, “**Then I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will set shepherds over them who will care for them, and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall any be missing declares the Lord.**” Just as God was planning to deal with the shepherds who drove his people away, so he too will gather them back and appoint shepherds over them himself. He will send shepherds to care for them, so that they are no longer in fear and dismay. What are the tools that he gives to these shepherds, in order that they may serve God and their sheep? He gives us the Gospel.

The story of the feeding of the 5,000 is one that I’m sure you had heard of before. This is a story that appears in all four Gospels and for good reason, as it is this feast that gives us an insight into God’s actions for his sheep. For where is it that this miracle happens? We don’t know for sure, but Mark says it is a “desolate place”. Desolate, meaning “deserted of people and in a state of bleak and dismal emptiness.” What more desolate place is there, than that of the human heart? A place that is bleak and dismal, covered in sinful desire. This is the place that Jesus has been sent to, the great shepherd. And much like he did for the people in our story, he prepares a fest for us. He prepares a feast for our desolate hearts, here, at this table. Much like the people in the story, Jesus has compassion upon us and feeds us. Like the lamb in psalm 23, He leads us to the waters of our baptism. He restores our souls. What is it that caused Jesus to feed these 5,000 people? Compassion, sympathetic pity and concern for the sufferings or misfortunes of others. This is what our God has for us, compassion. He has pity upon us, not because we deserve it, but because he loves us. He loves us so much, that he continuously sustains our bodies and souls and all things. He sends his angels to be with us, to guard and protect us. But most of all, God has kept his promises. God promised to send us a shepherd, and in Jesus Christ we have that great shepherd who goes into the thicket to pull out the sheep in distress, who tracks down the ones who are lost, who put is life on the line for us. Yes, our great shepherd sacrificed himself for us. He died upon a cross for our sins in order that we might one day be in His care. When Jesus feeds these people in a desolate place, we should not be surprised, for we see him do it here in this church all the time. For that is what a shepherd does. He cares for his sheep, he protects them, he sustains them. That is what our God does for us this, and every day. Our great shepherd cares for us by listening to our prayer, protects us from sin and our great enemy Satan, and sustains us through the Holy Spirit and His body and blood. That is what the compassion of God brings to us, it brings us life and the knowledge of his love. Thanks be to God indeed. Amen. Now may the peace of God which surpasses our understanding keep and guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus now and forever. Amen.