

I used to sing these nursery rhymes to my son. One that we would sing and dance to is, Ring Around the Rosie which is about the 1665 Great Plague in London.

Do you remember the nursery rhyme, Baa Baa Black Sheep? “Baa, baa, black sheep, Have you any wool? Yes sir, yes sir, Three bags full. One for the master, One for the dame, And one for the little boy Who lives down the lane. Baa, baa, black sheep, Have you any wool? Yes sir, yes sir, Three bags full.” This sermon series reminded me of that nursery rhyme. I knew that Baa Baa Black Sheep was about taxation on wool. I didn’t really understand the connection of how tax laws hurt the little shepherd boy who lives down the lane.

The British Broadcasting Corporation or BBC published an article June 2015 titled, “The dark side of nursery rhymes” by Clemency Burton-Hill explains, “Baa Baa Black Sheep is about the medieval wool tax, imposed in the 13th Century by King Edward I. Under the new rules, a third of the cost of a sack of wool went to him, another went to the church and the last to the farmer. (In the original version, nothing was therefore left for the little shepherd boy who lives down the lane).” The king’s tax law further oppressed the people of his kingdom and he has built his kingdom by enacting unjust laws.

It’s weird how catchy and cute we can make sinister stories by adding a happy melody. Burton-Hill’s article explains how parents unconsciously sing nursery rhymes about the plague, medieval taxes, religious persecution, injuries, and other sinister stories to their small children. Burton-Hill explains, “Indeed, in a time when to caricature royalty or politicians was punishable by death, nursery rhymes proved a potent way to smuggle in coded or thinly veiled messages in the guise of children’s entertainment. In largely illiterate societies, the catchy sing-song melodies helped people remember the stories and, crucially, pass them on to the next generation.”

Dr. Michelle Reyes preached about two years ago about how fairy tales and folklore are real world stories of real issues of hardship, loss, and darkness. These stories resemble what we read in Scripture.

We’ll see today how the figure of speech Jeremiah uses gives a powerful political statement against the powers that be. Jeremiah sticks it to the man by showing how God will act against the unjust political dynasty of the House of David.

Today, we still can relate to how laws can be unjust and further oppress people. We’ve all experienced leaders who hurt rather than heal. And we all need to hear Jeremiah’s reminder that Jesus not only shows us what a good leader looks like, Jesus *is* our faithful leader.

Message

Our Fall Series is called *Black Sheep*. A lot of us these days feel like Black Sheep - the one who doesn't fit in. Did you ever stop to think about *why* we use the term 'black sheep'? Black sheep are not common in herds. Black wool used to be worth less than white wool because black wool cannot be dyed and farmers would get rid of the black sheep because of this. That's changed in recent years - now black wool is seen as valuable and there is more of a demand for black wool for creating garments.

As we are continuing in this sermon series and you feel like a black sheep, know this: You're not worthless. God sees value in who you are. There is more of a demand for what you provide. The past sermons have shared how as black sheep, you are not drifting or backsliding, or wandering from your faith. It is your faithfulness as God's people that makes you feel like outsiders to the larger church body. We hope to learn how God is calling us to live as a Black Sheep church in our day.

Maybe there's been leadership at work, in the church you left, or a political system that you have been part of that has looked to their own interest and set policies that has had a negative effect on your emotional, physical, psychological, and spiritual health. Not only that, maybe these policies have a trickle effect and have hurt your finances and your community. Today, we are exploring the idea of leadership that hurts the people it was intended to protect.

Turn with us to Jeremiah 23:1-8

The passage we are reading today is about sheep and shepherds. Jeremiah identifies the sheep as God's people and the shepherd are the rulers who were to care for God's people. Sadly, the shepherds were ruthless and had no concern for their sheep.

Last week, we were in Lamentations and we saw how communal or corporate sin does not bear witness of a loving or gracious God. The sheep were held accountable for their idolatrous lifestyle and rebellion to God. This week, Jeremiah brings accountability to the corrupt rulers - the shepherds. Jeremiah writes using metaphors of how the earthly kings did not hear the cries for justice and deliverance. Instead, the rulers ignored the cries and did not bring about deliverance to the oppressed. Jeremiah uses the metaphor of sheep and shepherds.

You have probably heard a sermon about sheep and shepherds if you have been to a church a few times. I grew up around sheep on the Navajo Reservation and I'm kind of critical of shepherd and sheep sermons. I think the experience of watching first hand my grandmother interacting with her herd made a great impact on me. Sheep has become an important part of our culture for food and using the wool for weaving rugs, just to name a few. My grandmother would tell us kids of how we must care, respect, and protect the sheep. The sheep provides for us and we must

mutually care for them as well. So, I get annoyed when I hear sermons that say sheep are stupid and really have no individuality. Only because we are sheep according to Scripture.

There was a group of us cousins who would herd sheep together when we went back to visit our grandparents. We weren't good shepherders when we all went together. We probably cared more for ourselves having fun than making sure the sheep were all together. Needless to say, we'd come back with a much smaller flock of sheep than we left with in the morning. We'd lose at least half of our flock out of a couple of hundred sheep. My grandmother would ask us what we did and where did we go with the sheep? Us shepherds cared about us having fun and didn't take our task as shepherds as seriously as we should.

In Jeremiah 23, Jeremiah tells the rulers that there is no excuse for them being bad shepherds. The shepherds have been inattentive to the sheep, God's people. The shepherds cared only about themselves and that is the reason the sheep are now scattered in exile. Most commentaries explained that the rulers misuse their position and abuse their political power for their own personal gain and for benefiting their own royal dynasty.

Let's listen to Jeremiah's warning

“What sorrow awaits the leaders of my people—the shepherds of my sheep—for they have destroyed and scattered the very ones they were expected to care for,’ says the Lord.

Therefore, this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says to these shepherds: ‘Instead of caring for my flock and leading them to safety, you have deserted them and driven them to destruction. Now I will pour out judgment on you for the evil you have done to them. But I will gather together the remnant of my flock from the countries where I have driven them. I will bring them back to their own sheepfold, and they will be fruitful and increase in number. Then I will appoint responsible shepherds who will care for them, and they will never be afraid again. Not a single one will be lost or missing. I, the Lord, have spoken!

‘For the time is coming,’ says the Lord, ‘when I will raise up a righteous descendant from King David’s line. He will be a King who rules with wisdom. He will do what is just and right throughout the land. And this will be his name: ‘The Lord Is Our Righteousness.’ In that day Judah will be saved, and Israel will live in safety.

‘In that day,’ says the Lord, ‘when people are taking an oath, they will no longer say, ‘As surely as the Lord lives, who rescued the people of Israel from the land of Egypt.’ Instead, they will say, ‘As surely as the Lord lives, who brought the people of Israel back to their own land from the land of the north and from all the countries to which he had exiled them.’ Then they will live in their own land.”’ Jeremiah 23:1-8 (NLT)

It's not that people shouldn't care about themselves. Caring for ourselves should not bring harm and oppression to another person. God's people had the Torah which shaped their life to follow God's law and commandments. One law was, **“Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against a fellow Israelite, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.”** (Leviticus 19:18 NLT)

Rulers were not exempt from this. The rulers loved themselves enough to bring prosperity to their house. This came at the cost of hurting the people they represented.

Can you hear God's anger at these unjust shepherds? Can you hear that God is angry when those who are charged with caring for the people don't do so? God doesn't ignore the oppressed and trampled on. God hears the cries everyone else ignores.

Can we pause here and sing to our God who hears our cries?

Song

Jeremiah conveyed God's anger at unjust shepherds. The nursery rhyme, Baa Baa Black Sheep, told of King Edward I's tax law that oppressed the people of his kingdom and he has built his kingdom by enacting unjust laws. There are plenty of unconstitutional and unethical laws that have been past within the United States that benefited lawmakers and their interest. There were the Southern Black Codes passed during 1865-1866 which limited the freedom of Black Southerners and benefited white landowners and the Southern economy.

According to the nonpartisan policy institute, Center for American Progress, “[The United States] founding principles embrace the ideals of freedom and equality, but it is a nation built on the systematic exclusion and suppression of communities of color. From the start, so many of this country’s laws and public policies, which should serve as the scaffolding that guides progress, were instead designed explicitly to prevent people of color from fully participating.” (Report, Systemic Inequality and American Democracy; August 7, 2019)

These structural inequalities have caused harm to people of color. Dividing lines have also been created using railways, highways, and roads to set boundaries between communities of color that have affected access to schools, hospitals, parks, adequate housing, employment, and much more.

My cousins and I were not responsible sheepherders together. Sidenote, we were better when we were not distracted and were focused at caring for the sheep. Leadership is a huge responsibility.

God condemns and does not forget how leadership has misled and hurt the people. God promised to bring the people back together and appoint a new shepherd to care for them. “I will gather together the remnant of my flock from the countries where I have driven them. I will bring them back to their own sheepfold, and they will be fruitful and increase in number. Then I will appoint responsible shepherds who will care for them, and they will never be afraid again. Not a single one will be lost or missing. I, the Lord, have spoken!” Jeremiah 23:3-4 (NLT)

After the sheep came back from grazing, the shepherd would put all the sheep in the corral for the night. My family had a couple hundred sheep and each would have to be accounted for. A

shepherd who didn't spend as much time with the sheep couldn't tell the difference between all the sheep and would end up with a much different count than the true shepherd. I didn't know the sheep well like my grandmother. She was a good shepherd, she knew her sheep and could tell which sheep was which.

Is that how you think of Jesus? As the good shepherd who knows you, who loves you, who notices when you're not doing okay? The one who knows you well enough to know what you need?

It's good to have leadership that'll care for you. Jeremiah tells of God's vision to bring a trustworthy shepherd who would change the political structure to bring hope back to the people. **“For the time is coming,” says the Lord, ‘when I will raise up a righteous descendant from King David’s line. He will be a King who rules with wisdom. He will do what is just and right throughout the land. And this will be his name: ‘The Lord Is Our Righteousness.’ In that day Judah will be saved, and Israel will live in safety.” Jeremiah 23:5-6**

This is our hope as well. Jeremiah tells God's people of a righteous king who will be the new shepherd and restore the old promise that God's people will dwell securely, be fruitful and increase in number. Black sheep, Christ Jesus embodies this promise for us. He is our king and brings hope to a broken world.

Jesus, our shepherd, was a Jewish, brown man, born on the wrong side of the tracks in Nazareth. Jesus changed social structures. Jesus wasn't afraid to flip tables. He chose to hang out with the weak, marginalized, outcast, least of these. Jesus broke political, social and religious rules to heal and bring hope to others. Jesus was a teacher. He became our Savior. Christ Jesus has fulfilled God's promise of a just and righteous shepherd.

Don't you want leaders like that?

Sheep has a negative connotation where society does not want to be labeled as “sheep.” In that context, sheep would mean you are like everyone else and you are not unique. Unless you have actually spent time with sheep as much as a shepherd does, then you too would think all sheep look the same. A true shepherd can tell the difference between each sheep.

Black sheep, know that God is gathering you and is liberating you to something new. I am reminded of the song, Man in Black by Johnny Cash. Maybe you are black sheep and have a somber tone for reasons listed in the song:

“I wear the black for the poor and the beaten down, Livin' in the hopeless, hungry side of town, I wear it for the prisoner who has long paid for his crime, But is there because he's a victim of the times. I wear the black for those who never read, Or listened to the words that Jesus said, About the road to happiness through love and charity, Why, you'd think He's talking straight to you and

me. Well, we're doin' mighty fine, I do suppose, In our streak of lightnin' cars and fancy clothes,
But just so we're reminded of the ones who are held back, Up front there ought 'a be a [sheep] In
Black...But 'til we start to make a move to make a few things right, You'll never see me wear a
suit of white. Ah, I'd love to wear a rainbow every day, And tell the world that everything's OK,
But I'll try to carry off a little darkness on my back, 'Till things are brighter, I'm the [Sheep] In
Black."

Black sheep, go forward in the hope that the new governance in Christ is loving and righteous.