

No vacation from ministry: Jeremiah 23:1-6; Mark 6:30-34, 53-56; Ephesians 2:11-22

by [Daniel Harrell](#) in the [July 14, 2009](#) issue

July is vacation time for many of us. Anticipating grilled burgers, potato salad, sunshine and seashore can get us through months of occupational drudgery. We all need time away to kick back, relax and recharge—even Jesus did. We read in Mark 6 that he invited his disciples to join him for a beach getaway. It had been a busy chapter for them all. Already Jesus had offended the folks in his hometown synagogue with one of his sermons. You’d think news of his popularity and power would have preceded his arrival in Nazareth. You’d think he would have been welcomed home with open arms. Instead all he got was folded arms. Mark writes that Jesus “could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them.” Theologians are quick to insist that Jesus’ hands weren’t tied, that he could have done more if he wanted to. But why bother if no one believes? Mark writes that “he was amazed at their unbelief.” It’s the only time Jesus is described as being surprised.

As for the disciples, Jesus had sent them out by twos to spread the word. Presumably they’d enjoyed a better reception—they drove out a lot of demons and healed a lot of sick people. But they encountered folded arms too. (Jesus told them to shake it off.) Then there was government trouble. King Herod beheaded John the Baptist and put all kinds of state pressure on the new movement. This heaped worry and sadness onto the disciples’ fatigue. They needed some down time at a deserted beach.

But apparently their getaway boat was a slow one. We read that the crowds that hounded Jesus wherever he went were able to beat him and his disciples to their seaside destination on foot. When Jesus and the disciples pulled up, needy people were piled on the shore waiting. It was like arriving at a vacation site only to find your Blackberry packed with messages, all demanding immediate attention. Yet rather than being annoyed at the rude interruption, Jesus felt compassion for these people. They were, like the Israelites of old, “sheep without a shepherd.”

This is not a throwaway line, but like so much in the Gospels, it’s a throwback to Old Testament prayers and promises. We read in Numbers 27 that God gave Moses a

parting glimpse of the Promised Land. Knowing he would not be the one to lead God's people there, he prayed for the Lord to send another so that God's people would "not be like sheep without a shepherd." Moses' prayer was not only for the immediate future but also for the ultimate future. God provided Joshua (Jesus' namesake) to serve as shepherd, of course, as well as other leaders throughout Israel's history. The problem was that few of them did a good job—and most of them did such a bad job that by the time of Jeremiah, God had decided he was just going to do it himself: "I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold" (Jer. 23:3). This ingathering would eventually include gentiles. Paul writes to the Ephesians, "You [gentiles] who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ."

The shepherd metaphor derives from the vocation itself—one that required strength, commitment and self-sacrifice. Unlike the vocation pictured in bucolic watercolor Bible paintings, shepherding was rigorous labor. The only actual shepherds I've encountered were in the West African deserts of Benin. These tireless men roamed the arid countryside in search of grazing fields while at the same time guarding their flocks and keeping the unruly in line. It's common knowledge that sheep aren't the smartest of animals—which is one reason God's people are often referred to as sheep. Nevertheless, good shepherds persist because they love their sheep. It's why Jesus couldn't help but have compassion here. "I am the good shepherd," Jesus said, "and a good shepherd gives up his life for the sheep" (John 10:11). He gives up his vacation too.

The lectionary skips the material between verses 34 and 53 of Mark 6—the familiar accounts of Jesus feeding 5,000 and walking on water, perhaps because that material will be covered in John 6 next Sunday. Jesus' acts of pulling bread out of thin air and defying the properties of water are also throwbacks to Moses, where manna in the wilderness and the Red Sea crossing were undeniable manifestations of God's presence. What we have here is the makings of a Mark sandwich. Throughout his Gospel, Mark sandwiches one story (or stories) of Jesus inside another in order to amplify the meaning of each. Verses 30-34 provide the first slice of bread: Jesus arrives on shore, sees lost sheep and raises afresh Moses' prayer for a shepherd. Verses 53-55 provide the second slice of bread: Jesus arrives on the other shore, and the sheep recognize him as their shepherd. The meat is the middle—the stories of a miraculous feeding and a miraculous walk, both hallmarks of divine power. The sandwich as a whole is answered prayer. God in Christ is the long-awaited Shepherd of his people. And if there remains any question concerning Jesus'

identity, Mark adds the garnish: “All who touched even the fringe of his cloak were healed,” and fed, and loved.