

November 24, Reign of Christ C (Jeremiah 23:1-6; Luke 23:33-43)

The unfaithful shepherd sniffs out and stirs up fear, fragmenting communities.

by [Yvette Schock](#) in the [November 6, 2019](#) issue

A field of green felt, a few blobs of black felt and one of blue, and a handful of flat pressboard figures: some sheep, a shepherd, and a wolf. Years ago, I sat on the floor of a church basement, watching as a fellow participant in our Godly Play training told Jesus' parable of the good shepherd using these simple materials. She slowly moved the sheep out of their felt sheepfold, following the shepherd through the field of green and past the pool of blue. As she moved the shepherd and sheep between the dark "places of danger" in the scene, the storyteller tucked the last sheep under one of the black felt shapes, while the rest of the flock continued on. The pressboard shepherd, of course, went looking for the missing sheep and found him tucked under his cover of darkness. Later, the storyteller moved the shepherd to lie between the flock and the wolf.

Somehow those flat felt shapes and pressboard figures conveyed what Paul Tillich calls "the deep things of ourselves, of our world, and of God." As we watched the storyteller move the oval of black felt over the sheep, those of us sitting in the circle on that cold basement floor recalled our own moments of deep loneliness and fear. And we felt the lift of hope as she moved the shepherd out of the sheepfold to find and rescue the lost sheep, to guide it home again.

In Jeremiah 23, we hear of shepherds who do not guide, protect, rescue, or restore. We hear of God's anger toward unfaithful shepherds of God's people and of God's promise to raise up faithful ones. We are told how to discern between the two: look at the sheep given into their care. Under the care of a faithful leader, the people are not afraid (*yare*) or dismayed (*chathath*), nor are any of them missing (*paquad*).

There are countless instances of people being afraid, *yare*, throughout the Hebrew scriptures—in the stories of Adam, Sarah, Hagar, Isaac, Jacob, and many others. *Yare* is also the word used when God so often speaks to people in their time of trouble,

telling them, “Do not be afraid, for I am with you.”

Chathath, “dismayed,” also appears in many stories when people are afraid or urged not to be. But *chathath* has a particular edge to it: it means to be afraid or broken down, according to Strong’s Concordance “either (literally) by violence, or (figuratively) by confusion and fear.”

Paquad is harder to pin down. It is translated as “missing” in our passage in Jeremiah, but it has various connotations both negative and positive. The positive ones seem related to the commitment or expectation of attention and care, while the negative ones point to what happens when a leader is inattentive or careless.

Yare, chathath, paquad. The unfaithful shepherd leads by sniffing out and stirring up fear; by fragmenting communities through confusion, violence, or threat; and by treating some in their care as expendable. This is not what God wants for God’s people.

To the unfaithful shepherds, God declares through the prophet, “I will attend to you for your evil doings.” And to the sheep who have suffered under them, God promises, “I myself will gather the remnant of my flock . . . I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply.” Under new, faithful leadership, the restored community will be characterized by wisdom, justice, redemption, and safety.

Does the thief who is crucified with Jesus know these promises—that the lost will be found, the scattered gathered, the broken put back together and made whole?

In the synoptic Gospels, before Jesus begins his public ministry he is baptized and then tempted in the wilderness. At his baptism a voice from heaven speaks: “You are my son” (Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22). In the wilderness the tempter casts doubt on this witness: “If you are the Son of God” (Luke 4:3, 9). Mark Davis points out that later, at the crucifixion, the leaders and the soldiers and the first thief who is crucified with Jesus all echo the tempter’s conditional language: “Let him save himself if he is the Messiah . . . If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself . . . Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!”

When the second thief speaks to Jesus, there is none of the fear, scorn, or doubt we hear in the others’ voices. Instead what we hear in his voice is confession—in the sense of sorrow, the admission of guilt, and repentance, as well as in the sense of

faith. The way he speaks to Jesus, and what he says, suggests that this thief does know the promises of God.

He knows he is as a sheep lost in the wilderness, and somehow he sees in Jesus the good shepherd, who lays down his life so the sheep can come back safely to the sheepfold. The thief sees the fear, violence, and degradation around him, and somehow he sees in Jesus the faithful shepherd, the king who rules with justice and righteousness.

“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” At Jesus’ baptism, the voice we hear is from heaven. At Jesus’ crucifixion, the voice from above comes from the thief on the cross, declaring his trust in Jesus as God’s chosen One, in whom God’s promises are fulfilled.

And this time, Jesus answers: “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”