

Numbers 27:15-17, Matthew 9:36-38

Dear Friends in Christ,

Moses was an amazing person. You know a lot about him. You know that he was supposed to have been killed at birth as he was born at the time when Pharaoh had decreed that every male child born to the Jews was to be killed. You know how his mother hid him, and then floated him in a basket in the Nile where she knew Pharaoh's daughter would find him. You know how he was raised in the palace, how he killed an Egyptian who was mistreating a Jew, how he fled to the desert and tended sheep for 40 years until God called him to go back to Egypt and tell Pharaoh to let his people go. You know about all the miracles God performed through him, dividing the Red Sea, providing Manna and quail and water from a rock. You remember how he went up Mt. Sinai and met with God and received the commandments. He was in charge of a nation of over a million people. He was in charge of leading them through the desert to the Promised Land. He was their king and their prophet, but he did not seek those positions. We are told that he was the most humble man on earth. When the people rebelled against God he often offered to be punished in their place. He pleaded for mercy on their behalf. He was truly a leader, a shepherd who put God's sheep first.

Moses' servant leadership, his loving concern for the sheep God had placed under his care, is evident in these words from Numbers, especially if you know the context. God had just told Moses that his time on earth was up. Because he had not given God all the glory when he struck the rock to give the people water God was not going to permit him to cross the Jordan and lead the people into the Promise Land. He was to climb a mountain from which he could see the land and after he had seen it from a distance, he would die.

How did Moses respond to this news? Did he beg for more time? Did he list all the terrible things Israel had done in the desert, grumbling and complaining constantly, committing adultery with foreign women, worshiping a golden calf, and then point out that he had not done those things? Just one little mistake, just hitting a rock and making it sound like he was giving them water instead of reminding the people that it was God who was performing the miracle—should that keep him out of the Promised Land?

No, Moses didn't say any of those things. As a Shepherd of God's sheep his concern was not for himself, but for the sheep. His response was to pray, **May the LORD, the God of the spirits of all mankind, appoint a man over this community to go out and come in before them, one who will lead them out and bring them in, so the LORD's people will not be like sheep without a shepherd.**

God answered his prayer and told him to appoint Joshua as his successor and have him publically designated, we might say ordained and installed by the High Priest. Moses didn't want God's people to be like sheep without a shepherd and neither did God.

This prompts a question. Why? What would be so bad about God's people not having a leader, a shepherd? Weren't they adults? Couldn't they serve and worship God on their own?

Fast forward to our gospel lesson for today. **When Jesus saw the crowds he had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd.** God had arranged for a descendant of David to be their shepherd-king but many of David's descendants had ignored the command to have their own personal copy of God's word and to read it daily. They had become power hungry and greedy and, worst of all, they had not only allowed but often even led the people in worshiping idols. As a result, God did away with their kings and allowed his

people to be subject to the Egyptians, then the Babylonians, then the Greeks, and finally the Romans.

In addition, their spiritual shepherds, their priests and religious leaders were not shepherding them. Instead of leading them to the green pastures of God's word, they gave them all kinds of man-made rules. They were more concerned about their position and power in the church than they were about God's sheep. We see how they treated hurting sheep when Judas came to them distraught over what he had done and all they could say is, basically, "tough luck guy, we got what we wanted, you'll have to deal with your guilty conscience yourself."

Jesus saw people who were **harassed and helpless**. He saw people who knew what God demanded in his commandments and who heard all the additional things their religious leaders were telling them they had to do and who realized that they couldn't do them. They were failures. They felt that there was no hope for them, that they deserved God's punishment and there was nothing they could do about it. The word translated "helpless" can also be translated "hopeless."

That's the situation for many people today. More and more people are Biblically illiterate. Their parents have not shepherded them into the green pastures of God's word. Some have never been in a church in their lives; others have only been in a church a few times a year, but they have never actually picked up a Bible and read it. They are sheep without a shepherd. They are harassed by their conscience which tells them that something isn't right. They feel helpless and hopeless because, no matter how hard they try, no matter what they try, they just can't get over the feeling that something bad is going to happen to them, that they are going to die some day and they don't know where they will end up.

Then there are those who are in a church, who listen to Christian radio, who keep hearing the false message that if only they would serve God better, if only they would be better Christians, then all their problems would disappear. But they still have problems; maybe they are sick; maybe they lost a job; maybe their marriage isn't what they want it to be; so they are harassed and helpless. They think, "I'm trying hard. I'm doing my best to serve God and follow his laws, so why am I not happy, healthy and rich?"

Moses knew what would happen if people didn't have someone to lead them to God and his word. Jesus saw what had happened because those who were supposed to shepherd God's people were not servant-leaders like Moses, but were more interested in themselves, their power and their rules than they were the people. Jesus wanted his disciples, and he wants us, to have compassion on such people; not to judge them or look down on them like the chief priests did on Judas, but to have compassion on them. Jesus says that such people are like a ripe harvest. They are ready to hear the comfort and the hope that comes from the Gospel. They are at the point of despairing; thinking that they can't be saved. They need to hear the good news that Jesus came to save them, that in him there is hope because he did it all in our place.

Jesus tells his disciples to pray that the Lord would send out workers into his harvest field; that he would send people out to be true shepherds, people who would preach the good news of the kingdom and point them to Jesus alone for salvation.

Just as the Lord answered Moses' prayer and provided Joshua, Jesus shows the disciples that they are the answer to the prayer for workers in the harvest. He sends them out to preach to the lost sheep of Israel, to tell them that the kingdom of God is near. He gives them the ability

to perform miracles to let the people know that what they are saying is true. He encourages them to be good shepherds; shepherds who are not greedy for power or fame or fortune.

**Freely they had received, freely they are to give.**

As you look around you at work, in school, at the grocery store, as you talk with your friends and neighbors, you see what Jesus saw. You see people who are harassed and helpless; people who are worn out by a guilty conscience; people who are without hope because they either do not know God or because they only know a God who is angry because they have not met his expectations. You see sheep without a shepherd. As you do, don't be like the chief priests, so focused on yourself that you don't care what happens to others, so proud that you think you are above them or thankful that you are not like them, so callous that you tell them to solve their own problems. See that they are ripe for harvest. Pray that the Lord would send harvesters, shepherds who will care for these lost sheep and tell them what they need to hear, that yes, they are sinners who deserve God's eternal punishment just like everyone else, and yes, it is hopeless if you think you can save yourself, but Jesus is the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for the sheep. He paid for the sins of the world and that means their sins are paid for as well. Pray for more workers in the fields that are ripe for harvest and then realize that the answer to your prayer might be you. Don't be like Moses was at first when he kept telling God, "Send someone else." Having seen how God always gives us what we need to do what he asks of us, say with Isaiah, "Here am I, send me."

God doesn't want his sheep to be without a shepherd. There are many sheep who are harassed and helpless, who need to be brought into his fold, who need to know that Jesus is their Good Shepherd, their Savior. Keep praying that God will provide shepherds; that he will give us men like Moses and Joshua and the twelve apostles. Realize that there are hurting sheep around you every day, that the harvest is ripe, and putting away all selfishness and greed, say, "here am I, send me, help me to use the good news of Jesus to guide more sheep into your fold."