

# Jeremiah 23:1-6

Reformation 500, November 5, 2017

Theme: Sola Scriptura: Only the Bible

I. God seeks our repentance

II. God shows our Savior

INJ The visible Christian church is in trouble. Membership has been declining for the last 30 years in our country across all denominations. As St. Luke's, people don't seem involved. It is hard to continue the work we desire to undertake because there are few volunteers, dwindling resources, lagging energy. How can we be more relevant? How can we be more interesting? How can we be more popular and vibrant and alive?

Those are interesting questions. Ones worth thinking about and working into our own faith life and that of our congregation. Let's talk today about the fears we have and the solid confidence our God gives us. It is the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the beginning of the Lutheran Reformation, and God has not changed, nor has the tool he has given us. We have the inspired Word of God and it is relevant and powerful and alive. We express our determination to use that Word exclusively with a Latin phrase: Sola Scriptura. It means Only the Bible. There God seeks our repentance and there he shows our Savior. "Scripture alone" is our Reformation theme.

The visible church has always faced difficulty in this sinful world. The world hates God's saving message. Satan prowls around looking to devour. The temptations that come from our flesh derail our intentions and destroy our relationships. At the time of our lesson, Jeremiah was the LORD's prophet. The church was a shambles both outwardly and inwardly. The teachers and leaders and priests and pastors were interested in superficial things. They led their people to false security with empty words.

The LORD had his prophet accuse the religious leaders of dereliction of duty: "You have scattered my flock. You have driven them away. You have not taken care of them, but I will certainly take care of you, because of the evil things you have done, declares the LORD." What a mess the visible church was in! The sheep, those dear but vulnerable people who trusted God's promise of a Savior, the sheep were scattered! They were in danger, separated from God's Word, with no protection, no defense, no help. Where were the shepherds? Busy, I am sure. Busy with important things, probably. But neglecting the care of souls.

What had God charged those shepherds to do? Care for his people using only the Bible. Lead them to repentance. Point them to the Savior.

Comfort them with the promises God made and bring them those promises again and again. The shepherds weren't doing that. Instead, the smart ideas and the popular methods and the things that made a splash weren't feeding the people with the Good News of God. The Bible was being pushed right out of the lives of God's people!

Times weren't much different in the 1500's. When Martin Luther was growing up, the religious leaders were not particularly interested in caring for the souls under their care. Personal empowerment was important. The exercise of authority was important. Riches could be gained. God's powerful Word was nearly lost! The sheep were scattered.

I guess it isn't any different today, either. Look across the landscape of the visible Christian church in our land, and leaders have driven people away from God's Word. They have undermined its authority and clouded its message. Don't look too far away, though. If the Bible is so important to us, then when do we actually take time to read it? If we treasure the Word of God, then when do we make time to review it and to talk about it? If we are sheep of God's flock and we need to be fed with his gospel message, then when and where do we come and eat? I am not thinking just about once in a while at church, but also at home with our family each day, maybe more than once a day! Isn't God's Word that important?

It is. And to show it, listen to the next thing God says to his people, those sheep scattered and forsaken by miserable shepherds. "I will gather what is left of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their pastures. They will be fruitful and multiply. I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them. They will no longer be afraid or terrified, nor will any be missing, declares the LORD." Did you hear God's promise? He will gather his sheep. He will intervene to save them. He will do it by bringing them back to his Word. He will care for them and strengthen them and save them. The Words he inspired to be written down lead people to repentance. They point to the Savior. The sheep are fed by God himself! They are secure. They will be fruitful – because the Words of God are the strength of both shepherds and sheep. God's promises make us safe.

Faithful shepherds and a remnant of God's people remained, even in those terrible times. The Savior came, born of the Virgin. Jesus died and rose again to pay for all sin. Just as the LORD had promised! The Bible, Old and New Testaments, are the source of life for all God's people.

Faithful shepherds emerged 500 years ago to bring people back to God's Word. Martin Luther was one of them. His goal was to bring the Word to the people. He translated the Bible from its original languages into

German, what the common person spoke. He wrote music so that the Word of God would be sung and memorized and used in church and at home. He was a pastor who cared for souls by pointing them the Jesus at every turn. God's tool for his Church is Sola Scriptura: Only the Bible.

What is it you want from your church and your pastor? It is tempting to seek superficial things. What are other churches doing? How can we be more like them? Watch out! So many paths lead away from the Scriptures. So many efforts end up inflating a person's influence and authority at the expense of the Savior's. So many times what is lost is a realization of sin and a humble repentance. What can be forsaken is the very foundation: the Bible itself! At the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation, the threat remains. We confess Sola Scriptura: Only the Bible. It has everything we need and want. God delivers it all in the book!

So read the book. Study it and learn it and use it daily. (I will, Pastor. I do, Pastor!) And then I have to ask you a follow up question. What do you look for when you read the book? I ask that question because many churches that are not Lutheran claim to use Scripture alone. But when you listen to what they say, they tend to twist Scripture into weird shapes and come up with strange teachings. How can people who use the same book we do go so far off track? It isn't the fault of Scripture. The inspired Words are clear and consistent and easily understood. This is what we always look for: God seeks our repentance and God shows our Savior. When people miss the point, they make a mess of God's clear Word.

Take the situation in our lesson from Jeremiah. The church was falling apart! What God didn't do is instructive. God didn't give ten ways for shepherds to be more productive. He didn't list four keys to the proper care of sheep. There is no hint of re-imagining the job or thinking outside the box. God didn't lead them to try a different approach or method.

What God did is important: He called them to repentance! "You didn't care for my people!" God convicted them for their sin: "I will certainly take care of you because of the evil things you have done." God didn't worry about their fragile ego or emotions. He did cut to the heart and expose rebellion against the Holy God! The problem was their unbelief. God's Words are targeted to seek repentance!

In Germany a half millennium ago, Martin Luther and those around him approached their problems in the same way. God, in his Word, seeks repentance. He isn't interested in schemes to get out of trouble by paying for it, or by working for it, or by ignoring it. God isn't a taskmaster who works you hard and seeks to drain you of the last ounce of your energy and your money. God doesn't help those who help themselves. He seeks the

repentance of sinners. He drives us to despair over our inability to do anything right. When you read the Bible, God wants you to see your sin and be horrified by it! God works in us the sorrow. God works in us the repentance. God does the activity Sola Scriptura: Only the Bible.

When we are hopelessly crushed by God's Law, then we listen to the sweet promises of our God. Look! In the Bible he shows us our Savior. He picks us up and pulls us out of despair. He rescues us from the death we deserve and he makes us his own dear children, the sheep of his pasture.

Hear the promise of God to his people: "Listen, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, who will reign wisely as king and establish justice and righteousness on earth. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will dwell securely. This is his name by which he will be called: The LORD Our Righteousness."

What the LORD reveals in his Word is that he rescues us. He raised up the righteous Branch by sending his Son. Jesus is the King who defeated every enemy: guilt is gone because he carried our sin in his body and shed his blood to pay its debt. Death is defeated because Jesus rose from death to give life to all who trust in him. Satan cannot accuse or harm us because the LORD is our Righteousness. He gives us his perfection. He clothes us in robes of righteousness for his name's sake. This is what we look for when we read the Book. God uses Sola Scriptura: only the Bible to show us our Savior. By the Words, God comforts us and encourages us and leads us. He saves us. Sola Scriptura. Listen! The LORD is our Savior.

When you are discouraged and tired and at your wits end, then come to God's Word and listen to him shepherd you. "They will no longer be afraid or terrified, nor will any be missing, declares the LORD." I don't know if you noticed as I have read from this section of Jeremiah the phrase: "declares the LORD." Five times in these verses God reminds you of the power of his Word. Where do you turn for your needs? To what the LORD declares! When you are helpless and hard pressed, run to the Word. God shows your Savior there. In him, you are safe, never lost because of sin. Never lost in unbelief. Not scattered. Sola Scriptura.

When the visible church is under pressure, that means you, the sheep of God, are under pressure. So many temptations to scatter, to leave God's Word alone, rather than to stand on it alone. So many distractions. Let us remember a lesson learned from 500 years of Lutheran history. We don't make ourselves relevant and vibrant. God does. He does it using one tool: only the Bible. He seeks our repentance. He shows our Savior. Let's use it together, standing in God's strength. Sola Scriptura. SDG Amen.