

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Festival of the Reformation
October 29, 2023
Sermon by Pastor Jon D. Buchholz
It's rough out there

—Matthew 10:16-23

At the end of Matthew chapter 9 Jesus is hard at work preaching and healing. He looks at the crowds, and he has compassion on them, because they're harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he says to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field." We can only imagine that the disciples did just what Jesus instructed them to do: They *asked* the Lord of the harvest to send out workers. Then in Matthew chapter 10 Jesus tells them that they themselves are the answer to the prayer. "He called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness." And then, once he has conferred the apostolic office on them, he tells them what they're getting into. *I am sending you out like sheep among wolves.* Maybe sometimes you want to be careful what you pray for, because you just might get what you ask! It was a huge privilege to be named an apostle and a follower of Christ, but it came with a very high cost.

Ever since the universe was created by God, there are two defining moments in the history of God's creation. The first one is described in the Gospel of John chapter 1: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the Only-begotten, who came from the Father full of grace and truth." God became a man and walked among us in the person of Jesus Christ to live, die, and rise again for our salvation. The second event is described at the end of the Bible, where Jesus says, "I am coming soon" (Revelation 22). The time in between those two events is sometimes called "the Last Days," or the "End times," or the time of the "New Testament." It's those days we're living in now, the time in between Jesus' first coming and his second coming at the end of the world. This age has been in place for almost 2,000 years. In this brief sermon series for the next few weeks we're looking at what life is like during this "Time in between."

Today we hear Jesus telling his apostles then and his followers now what it will be like during the "Time in between": *It's rough out there! I'm sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be shrewd as snakes and innocent as doves.* This mission for Jesus' disciples to preach and teach out in society was just practice for what would come later. At this point in their training, Jesus is just getting the apostles ready for what they would face after he was gone. As they went out to preach in Galilee, the apostles had to be ready for some terrible persecution. Jesus warned them, "*Be on your guard against men; they will hand you over to the local councils and flog you in their synagogues. On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles. Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved.*" After Jesus completed his work on earth and ascended into heaven, the disciples continued to carry the good news, and the persecution only intensified. Do you know that of all the twelve disciples, only one died a natural death? Judas tragically committed suicide in despair after betraying Jesus. James, the brother of John, was the first of the twelve to die when Herod commanded, he be put to death by the sword. All the disciples except John—who lived to be a very old man—died a gruesome death at the hands of the enemies of Christ. Matthew chapter 10 was just a warm-up for what would come later. The apostles learned firsthand that it's rough out there.

Fast-forward 1,500 years, and at the time of the Reformation of the church Martin Luther learned that it's rough out there. In the 1500s the Roman Catholic Church had become outwardly corrupt, and there were lots of people clamoring for things to get cleaned up. The office of bishop might be sold to the highest bidder. The church was raking in big bucks selling forgiveness through indulgences. Immorality was rampant among the clergy and church hierarchy. But worst of all, the church's teaching wasn't based on the Bible. People thought they had to earn their way into heaven by their good deeds. They were told that they would spend years—maybe thousands of years—in purgatory suffering in intense pain to pay for their sins before they could ever get to heaven.

So along comes Martin Luther, a priest and university professor who knew what the Bible really says, and he found out that when you take on the establishment it's rough out there. All Martin Luther did was to rediscover in Scripture that we are forgiven, justified, made right in the eyes of God only because of what Jesus has done, not because of what we can do. The Bible tells it straight that we are sinful and deserve God's eternal punishment, but God has loved us and sent his Son Jesus to die for us. We have the gift of heaven and eternal life as a gift, purchased for us by the holy, innocent blood of Jesus. It's all in the Bible. It's all plain as day in Holy Scripture! But Martin Luther threatened the institutional church's power to control the people. The gospel he preached set people free from fear and the spiritual tyranny the Roman Catholic Church had over them. Now people could enjoy comfort and peace and a joyful relationship with God in Jesus, and they didn't have to pay for it or doubt it. So the Roman Church called Martin Luther a heretic. They excommunicated him for preaching that we're saved by God's grace alone, through simple faith in

Jesus alone, and that this truth is found in Scripture alone, not in church traditions or in the decrees of the pope; the Bible trumps everything! Luther was threatened and declared an outlaw. He could have been killed on sight just because he preached the truth that flew in the face of the establishment. In the end, Martin Luther died in peace in bed because his enemies were never able to take his life, but there were many others who suffered persecution, even torture and death just because they insisted on trusting only in Jesus. Think of the Inquisition and the like. Christians who wanted to be faithful learned that it's rough out there during this time in between Jesus' first and second coming.

You have probably found the same thing to be true: It's rough out there for you when you want to be faithful to the truth. Granted, you are not an apostle vested with the apostolic office, but simply because you bear the name "Christian" you walk around with a target on your back. And you are out on the front lines of the battle, where the pressure is the fiercest. A few years ago a young lady in our congregation told me how at her workplace they wanted everyone to put a sign on their desk that said, "Ally," meaning that they were an ally of the sinful behavior associated with the LGBTQ movement. She said that they didn't *have* to put the sign on their desk, but it was very strongly looked down upon. I thought, "Wow! The pressures some of our congregation members have to deal with are intense!" I don't have to deal with that sort of thing in my ivory-towered cocoon here at church, where everyone I work with is a Christian. Yes, I get out on the streets; yes, I interact with non-Christians; yes, I catch flak for following Jesus. But you are out in the trenches day in and day out. You are under pressure at work, at the gym, in the community. You may be challenged and confronted every day with the pressure to lay aside your moral values, get on board with a sinful agenda, and turn a blind eye toward wickedness. And you get pressured and persecuted for your connection to Jesus Christ in subtle and not-so-subtle ways.

Why is that? Why does your Christian faith elicit such a vehement response from some people? Sometimes it's your Christian moral values. John the Baptist got his head served up on a platter because he dared to tell the king that what he was doing was immoral and wrong. Partly it's because you're different. You don't fit in. You don't go along with the crowd. The Apostle Peter pointed out that people thought Christians were strange because they wouldn't participate in the filthy, debauched practices of their day. But mostly you catch flak because you follow someone who says he is the only way to heaven. There is only Jesus. Repent of your sins and trust in Jesus as your Savior—that's the only way to God. "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me," Jesus says. There are no multiple paths. There is no "all roads lead to God." There is no "be a good person, and you'll make it." There's no "everyone goes to a better place." There is only repent of your sins and trust in Jesus for forgiveness and righteousness. That's it. There is no other. You are on the right path with Jesus, and sadly, many, many others are not. So it gets rough out there.

And when the heat is on, it's tempting to give up. We might get so weary of being in the heat of the battle that we just want to chuck it. "It's not worth being a Christian and a follower of Jesus! It's too much. I don't want this, I can't take this, it's too hard." But here's what's at stake: If we turn away from Jesus, we are disqualified from the prize. If we turn our back on our Savior, we forfeit heaven. Without Jesus there is no hope for our immortal soul. A sobering thought when we reflect on what's at stake in this battle in this life.

So when it gets rough out there during this time in-between, keep a few things in mind: First, you're in good company. You stand in Christ in the company of believers and martyrs going back thousands of years. This life is short, and soon comes the victory. Fight the good fight, run the straight race, keep the faith, and it will not be very long before you will receive the crown of life. Second, understand that when you are insulted and persecuted for Christ, you are blessed. Jesus said so. The people who oppose you because of Jesus are not first and foremost your enemy. They're victims of the enemy. The enemy is Satan, the prince of darkness, and he has such a grip on their hearts that they may be filled with indifference toward Jesus or with vitriol toward Jesus. The only thing that can overcome that animosity toward Jesus is Jesus. When you stand up for Jesus you are an ambassador of Christ's love, a love that stooped from eternity into time to rescue every vile sinner from everlasting condemnation. Why in the world would you want to be subjected to such abuse from the world? Because you are the face of Jesus, and Jesus lives in you, and you live in him. When people make life difficult for you because you're a Christian, it's not really you they have a problem with; it's Jesus who lives in you that they're fighting against. So just as they mocked him, they will mock you. And just as they tormented him, they might just torment you. And just as Jesus loved and loved some more and kept on loving, it's your privilege to show that love in Jesus' name—love for the one who does not love you but mocks, threatens, and inflicts pain. The love of the tortured for the torturer. This is God's love, and that's the love that overcomes evil and conquers the world.

And finally remember that when you represent Jesus and share Jesus, you're not out there on your own. You stand with Christ. His blood has washed you clean. His righteous holiness is the dazzling garment you wear. When you go out like sheep knowing that all around you the wolves are waiting to pounce, it won't be your cleverness or cuteness that will keep you from being devoured but the Lord, who is your refuge and strength. *Do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.*

Remember the words of the great Reformation hymn: And take they our life, goods, fame, child, and wife, though all may be gone, our victory is won; the kingdom's ours forever! Amen.