

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod

Easter 5

May 10, 2020

Sermon by Pastor Jon D. Buchholz

The Word of the Lord stands forever

—Acts 17:1-12

If we were to go back to Christmas time last year or even the first months of this year—only 3-4 months ago—I don't think anyone would have predicted that we are where we are today. Just a few weeks ago the Dow Jones was knocking on the door of 30,000, unemployment was at an all-time historical low, commuters sat in traffic sipping their morning coffee, children were playing on school playgrounds at recess, and on Friday nights the wait was long at area restaurants. My, how things have changed! There seems to be almost no facet of our society, of our schedules, of our communities that has not been changed by the Covid pandemic. We've been scrambling to adapt to a new "normal." And we don't know what the future will look like. When will things get back to the way they were? Will they ever? What will our lives, our schedules, our social interactions look like a month from now? Nobody knows. But we do have a very strong sense that things will never be the same. Our society has been changed forever.

Stop and reflect, and it makes us realize how fragile are so many things we regularly count on. Our society, our economy, our jobs, our food supply chains, all the props and the pillars we rely on for our daily existence. Things that we once thought to be rock-solid have crumbled to pieces. But one thing has not changed in the slightest. God's Word has not changed! His promises to you have not changed. His covenant with you has not changed. His plans for you have not changed. God's Word is the one immovable rock that remains constant and unchanging in changing times. The Word of the Lord stands in the face of opposition. The Word of the stands firm in the face of change. The Word of the Lord stands forever.

The Apostle Paul was on his second missionary journey. He was called by God to take the gospel and share the good news of Jesus, so he went from city to city telling people about their Savior. Paul himself had been transformed by Jesus. He came to trust that Jesus was his Savior, his sins were forgiven by Jesus' death on the cross. He saw Jesus risen from the dead, and he knew Jesus loved him, had taken away his sins, and given him eternal life. Paul was compelled by Jesus' love to share the good news of free forgiveness everywhere he went. So when Paul entered a new city he often followed a consistent pattern. He often started by visiting the Jewish synagogue. These were people well versed in the Old Testament Scriptures. The people in the synagogues knew the law of Moses and the writings of the prophets. They were watching and waiting for the Messiah, the promised Savior. So in the synagogue Paul helped people connect the dots. He pointed them to the prophetic words written about the Messiah in the Old Testament, and he showed them how those prophecies were fulfilled by Jesus of Nazareth. Now Paul came to the city of Thessalonica in northern Greece. "As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. 'This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ,' he said."

God's Word is powerful. When it calls sinners to repentance it's like a hammer that breaks rocks into pieces. When it announces forgiveness and peace with God, it's like a healing ointment, a balm or salve that brings peace and comfort to an afflicted soul. But God's Word is powerful in another way. The Word of God can generate the most passionate rebellion against God. Our natural sinful self doesn't want to repent and turn away from our sins, so the call to repentance can make a human being very, very angry. Our natural sinful self doesn't want to be saved by Jesus' free redemption and grace. We naturally want to save ourselves, and when God's Word tells us that we cannot save ourselves, that Jesus is the *only* way to the Father, a human being can resist and push back very hard against God's love in Jesus.

The reaction to Paul's gospel preaching in Thessalonica was similar to what he met in other cities. Some people believed and trusted in Jesus the Christ. "Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women." But other people became angry. "But the Jews were jealous." Paul's message was met with opposition. The religious leaders enlisted the help of the civil authorities, accused the apostles of defying Caesar, and wanted to expel them from the city.

This is just one example of the kind of persecution Christians have faced through the years. Persecution from religious leaders, persecution from political leaders. Last week we saw how resistance to the Word of God resulted in the death of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. Throughout the centuries there have been tyrants, despots, governments, nations, empires that have opposed the gospel and made things difficult for Christians. But here's the ironic thing: Those enemies of the gospel are gone. Empires have crumbled. Governments have fallen. Mighty, arrogant leaders who shook their fists in proud rebellion against Jesus have returned to dust. But the church is still here, and the message we share of hope and peace, resurrection and eternal life, the message of Jesus our Savior, is still being preached, and it's still changing hearts and lives, in spite of all the human opposition people have ever been able to throw against it. The Word of the Lord stands forever!

Thankfully our government is not prohibiting us from preaching and teaching God's Word. Our Arizona governor has been very careful to protect our constitutional right to worship and gather to hear God's Word. Even though some people are confused and might think otherwise, the government has not forced any churches to close. The purpose of the government is to promote public peace, health, safety, and physical welfare, and by encouraging congregations to be careful or to refrain from gathering, it is not trying to persecute religion or squelch the preaching of the Word. It is encouraging practices that foster physical health and welfare. And as Christians we are happy to comply with guidelines that protect our neighbor's safety. We have a right to worship; we have a right to assemble. But for us as Christians our approach has never been about asserting our rights; it's never been about what we can do because we have a right to do it. There's an important lesson here, that we Christians often choose to set aside our rights and not make use of our rights for the sake of the gospel and out of love for our neighbor. In 1 Corinthians 9 Paul talks about all the rights he enjoys as an apostle, but then he goes on to say that he chose not to exercise his rights because it's not about him but about the greater good, about the spread of the gospel. That's a situation we find ourselves in today. We love our neighbor, we don't want people to get sick, so for a while we set aside our right to assemble and worship inside God's house, and we worship God in other ways. It has been pointed out that the church is not closed; the church is deployed!

Maybe back when all this virus business hit and churches chose to suspend on-site worship for a time, maybe the devil and his minions thought that this would slow down the preaching of the gospel. What has happened is exactly the opposite! When we had to learn how to stream worship and Bible classes, so they could be available on the internet, it was a sudden leap into the deep end of the pool. It was a quick learning curve, and we had to try to come up to speed very quickly. But the net result is that now *more* people are engaging in the worship services. *More* people are participating in Bible classes. The preaching, teaching and hearing of God's Word has not stopped, and now it's not limited just to those who are physically present in the sanctuary or the fellowship hall; it's going out around the world, and people around the globe are able to tune in and be encouraged by God's forgiveness and strength. Times of trouble, uncertainty, fear, disease, death, are times when people especially need God's Word, and so many people are turning to the Lord and finding just the hope and the comfort they need in Jesus!

We have a great example of some people who did just that in Acts 17. Paul and Silas left Thessalonica and went down the road to a town called Berea. The Bereans listened to Paul's preaching about Jesus. They searched the Scriptures to compare what Paul the Apostle said with what the Old Testament prophecies said. They received the message of salvation with joy. Instead of opposing Jesus, they embraced him!

No question, these are strange and extraordinary times. Maybe you're sheltering at home, and you're feeling kind of cooped up. You can't get out and do the things you normally do or would like to do. Maybe you find yourself with some extra time on your hands. There's never been a better time to be a Berean Christian, to use our extra time to get to know our Bibles better, to strengthen our devotional lives. Maybe you've never taken part in one of the Bible studies that we have here at Emmanuel on Sundays or during the week. Why not start now? You can participate at your convenience, whenever your schedule allows it, just be clicking on one of the Bible study links and joining in. When we have extra time on our hands, we all know there are lots of ways we can waste our time. We can binge-watch Netflix or spend hours surfing the internet or just lounge around and watch the hours drift by. Or we can let God's Word speak to us, inspire us, strengthen us, encourage us, comfort us, and this can be a time when God draws us closer to himself through the time we spend in his Word.

Since we celebrate Mother's Day today, I want to tie in a message to Christian mothers: Moms, the greatest tool you have in raising your children is the Word of God. Moms teach your children to pray. You teach them that Jesus loves them. You yourself find comfort in the Word, and you love to share it with your families. You sing, you share Bible history, you talk about the hope and comfort you have, and your children see your rock-solid trust in the Lord Jesus. Thank you, mothers, for all you do to show your children the love of our Savior Jesus! The Word of the Lord you share with your children stands forever.

This pandemic, too, shall pass. These strange days will soon be a fading memory, and the history books will record how this generation came through trying times. Long after the history of this time has been written, and all the people right now concerned about their lives and their livelihoods have long since left this life—God's Word will still endure. God's good news for sinners—forgiveness, life, and salvation—will still be bringing comfort to human souls long after today's political leaders, today's nations, today's empires, today's technologies, have returned to dust and ashes. God's Word will endure till the end of time. And when time ends and eternity begins, God's Word will still stand. It will stand for all eternity. The good news that God's Son Jesus became one of us, died for our sins, rose from the dead, and opened heaven for all believers—that good news will be what we will sing and celebrate for all eternity. The Word of the Lord stands forever! Amen.