

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod

Pentecost 5

July 5, 2020

Sermon by Pastor Jon D. Buchholz

***Turn to the LORD***

—Jeremiah 20:7-13

Jeremiah didn't want to be a prophet. When the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah son of Hilkiah in the thirteenth year of the reign of King Josiah of Judah, Jeremiah protested the call of the LORD. "Ah, Sovereign LORD," Jeremiah replied, "I do not know how to speak; I am only a child." A hundred years earlier, when the Prophet Isaiah saw a vision of the LORD seated on his throne, Isaiah responded by saying, "Here am I! Send me!" Not Jeremiah. Jeremiah wanted the LORD to send someone else.

But the LORD called Jeremiah to be a prophet anyway, despite his reluctance, despite his protests. God put his words on Jeremiah's heart and on his lips, and Jeremiah spoke the words the LORD gave him to speak. And it was precisely those words from the LORD that Jeremiah spoke that made his ministry so difficult. The LORD had a difficult message for the people of Judah, and Jeremiah was the prophet he chose to be his messenger. As is so often the case, rather than listen to the messenger, people who don't like the message would often rather shoot the messenger, and Jeremiah's message was a message that made him a target for getting shot. Jeremiah preached a message of repentance. He told people to turn from their sins. He told people to return to the LORD.

King Josiah was the last good king of Judah. After Josiah came about 25 years of wicked rulers who led the nation down a path of evil that finally culminated in the siege and destruction of Jerusalem and the people carried off into exile. But even during the reign of Josiah, even with a good ruler on Judah's throne, Jeremiah began to preach from the LORD a message of destruction. Judah's wickedness was woven into society. It was cultural. The people's hearts had been drawn away from worshiping the LORD, and they worshiped the false gods of the nations around them, gods that aren't real, gods of wood and stone, the product of human hands and the invention of human minds. On top of this idolatry there was immorality. Divorce was prevalent. Sexual sin was rampant. Perversion was accepted. There was racism and social injustice. People didn't show kindness to immigrants. They let widows and orphans suffer without food. The court system was biased and corrupt. People didn't go to church anymore; they didn't keep the Sabbath and worship God. Love for God and love for neighbor were nowhere to be found. And the few people who still worshiped the LORD had become silent. They didn't want to speak up or speak out. As their society went down the sewer they just went with the flow.

So Jeremiah had the unenviable task of speaking a message of judgment. He warned the people that God's patience was nearing its end and destruction was at hand. He warned people that Jerusalem with its lively markets and buzzing economy was about to be completely destroyed. He warned the priests who served at the temple that their message of "Peace, peace," was fake news, false prophesy, a delusion of their own minds, not the word of the LORD. He told the people that God was preparing to use the Babylonians to bring judgment upon Judah, her cities would be toppled, their wealth carried off, and their inhabitants put to death by the sword. This was not what people wanted to hear. For his efforts Jeremiah was ridiculed, he was beaten up, he was put in chains, he was left to languish in a well, at every turn he was treated with contempt. Until finally his words came true, and Jerusalem was destroyed, and then Jeremiah wrote his Lamentations as he grieved the destruction of the city.

Does the culture Jeremiah confronted sound familiar? Of course it does! There is nothing new under the sun. Jeremiah lived and moved in an environment that we might find very familiar. So how did he deal with it? He preached the word the Lord gave him. He spoke what was on his heart. He had to! Even though every time he warned the people he was met with opposition and persecution, he couldn't keep it in. The word of the Lord burned inside him. "Turn to the LORD! Turn to the LORD and be saved!"

You and I didn't want to be Christians. In our natural condition we were hostile toward God; in our hearts we made God our enemy and rejected his truth. But God wanted you and me to be Christians, so when you and I were ignorant, hostile, and dead in transgressions in sin, God who is rich in mercy made us alive with Christ. He caused us to be born again of water and the Holy Spirit. He gave us the gift of faith to trust him, and he brought us into his family. He chose you. Jesus said, "You did not choose me; I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last." Jesus did not choose you to be a prophet. He chose you to be a disciple, to follow him and learn from him, and he called you to be a witness. He called you to testify to the great things God has done for you and for the world in his Son Jesus. He tells us always to be ready to give an answer to anyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope you have in you. Be sure to do this with gentleness and respect.

How long does our beloved nation have before the Lord God casts America onto the ash heap of history? I don't know; none of us knows. But the history of the human race tells us that when the family disintegrates, when immorality is rampant, when injustice is endemic, when the prosperous revel in their prosperity and the poor are left in misery, when disrespect for authority and the rule of law prevail, and when God's people wring their hands

and watch in silence as their culture rots from the inside out—history tells us that under those conditions civilization crumbles. Every single time! In our day the Babylonians are not knocking at the gates of Tempe threatening us with the sword. These days we're not trembling under the threat of nuclear holocaust or fighting off foreign armies at the borders of our land. Most of the time we don't even have to deal with angry mobs that loot and burn. But whether we encounter those things or not, the greater threat to every human being is very real. The clock is running out on every human life, and for those who end their earthly days without Jesus by their side the sentence of outer darkness and eternal fire looms just a heartbeat away.

Christians, you and I are countercultural. God has put us here in this world, in this country, in this place and at this time. It is a strange time, and these are strange places we find ourselves. The world is an uncertain place. There is virus. There is violence. But this is where God has placed us, and this is the time he has given us. What do you suppose God's goal is in permitting all our society to go through the ordeals we're dealing with? I don't presume to know the mind of God, but what he has told us is that his primary objective is to lead souls to repentance, to lead sinners to turn away from their sins, to turn to him and to find forgiveness and eternal life in Jesus, this world's Savior. That's where our allegiance is, to Jesus, God's Son our Savior, who came to redeem us from slavery to sin, Satan, eternal suffering and the most horrible eternal death by taking all our sins on himself, dying on the cross, suffering everything that we deserve, and washing our sins away with his blood.

So into the world we go, cleansed and forgiven by Jesus' blood, dressed in Jesus' righteousness, to live as children of light and to engage the darkness with the light of God's truth. We walk as disciples of Jesus, with Jesus at our side. But walking with Jesus on the road of discipleship can be a difficult road, a narrow and difficult path. It means carrying a cross. It means bearing reproach like Jeremiah did. It means being laughed at and ridiculed for our "outdated morality" and our "narrow-minded focus on Jesus." We are called intolerant and bigoted and judgmental when we say that Jesus Christ is the world's only Savior, every sinner's only hope for forgiveness, and the only way to eternal life with the Father. We are considered dangerous, because we stand opposed to the immoral and godless agenda that the world around us pushes. But with Jeremiah we say, "The LORD is with me like a mighty warrior; so my persecutors will stumble and not prevail. They will fail and be thoroughly disgraced."

The tool we carry with us as we engage the world is the word of God; the Bible calls it the "Sword of the Spirit." It's a simple message: Repent and believe the good news! Apply it first to yourself. Repent of your sins, your sins of injustice and unkindness, of greed and selfishness, of pride and ego, of apathy and silence. Repent and turn to the Lord. He forgives you your sins, for Jesus' sake. He died for you to take your sins away. God's immense love for you and his good news of forgiveness in Jesus not only motivates you, it empowers you. His word burns within you, good news of life and salvation just burning to get out, something you eagerly want to share, because you have the mind of Christ.

This world will never be a place of perfect justice. There will always be inequality. There will always be suspicion, mistrust and hatred of other races. There will always be illness, violence and death. The best way for us to deal with those sinful realities is simply for you and me to be salt and light in the world. Turn to the Lord in repentance! Revel in the power of his forgiveness. Go out into the world and just be Christians. Love God! Love your neighbor! Go out in the name of Christ, so that where you are there is Christ. Go in the name of Christ, so that where you are there are the love and the forgiveness and the kindness and the compassion of Christ. Go out in the name of Christ, so that where you are there is the invitation to others to repent and turn to the Lord, so that they can know the joy of forgiveness and the promise of eternal life that are only in Christ.

In spite of God's mercy and Christian kindness, there will always be sin in this sinful world. There is no heaven on earth. And that's why we look forward to heaven in heaven. We are waiting for our Savior Jesus to deliver us from this world of tears and tragedies and take us to his side in the kingdom of God. While we wait we work. While we wait we witness. While we wait we share the good news of God's love and the gift of eternal life in Jesus. Repent. Turn to the Lord, and live. Amen.