

“In the Face of Enemies”

Jeremiah 20:7-13, Matthew 10:21-33

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

This morning in our text, Jeremiah cries out, “O LORD, You have deceived me!” Didn’t see that coming, did you? Prophets call out to God all the time, but they normally don’t call God a liar, right? Yet here’s Jeremiah: “O LORD, You deceived me, and I fell for it hook, line and sinker.” Some backstory helps here. Jeremiah is a prophet—nicknamed “the weeping prophet”—who will be around to watch Jerusalem be destroyed, and is one of the last prophets whom God sends to the people there. He’s to tell them to repent of their sin, to return to the Lord, and be saved. He ought to get some respect for this work, shouldn’t he? Think of the cop who talks the jumper off the ledge, or the school resource officer who tackles the shooter before a massacre takes place. Such people are hailed as heroes, and rightly so, but it is not so for Jeremiah.

He is sent by God to save the city with his words, and what happens to him? It’s hardly a victory parade. It’s not that he’s just dismissed or ignored. He’s flat-out denounced, and called a liar and a troublemaker. More than that, he’s made an example. One of the priests in a powerful position even has Jeremiah beaten and then put in stocks for a day and night, so that folks can pass by and ridicule him. Not just to humiliate Jeremiah, but to discourage everybody from listening to his message of repentance. Jeremiah is newly released from the stocks and basically sick of being a prophet when he cries out, “O LORD, You have deceived me, and I was deceived; You are stronger than I, and You have prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all the day; everyone mocks me.” They don’t mock him for his appearance or personality, but for the Word of God which comes from his lips. No one likes to be ridiculed, and the solution for Jeremiah is easy. In the face of such enemies, He can just shut up. God can find another prophet if He wants. It’s not like anybody’s listening anyway, so Jeremiah might as well be silent.

But he can’t. He can’t be quiet. Listen to what he says next: “If I say, ‘I will not mention Him, or speak any more in His name,’ there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot.” Jeremiah has a “problem” with his plan to be quiet. He has faith. He believes the Word that God has given him, and faith just wants to keep on speaking it. He can’t hold it in, because the Word needs to be spoken. There’s terror on every side as even his close friends plot against him. But here’s the thing—the only thing that will turn such enemies of God into His people is repentance, and the only thing that will work repentance is the Word of God. Rather than let Jeremiah give into hatred and bitterness against his persecutors, the

Lord instead blesses him with faith and compassion. And so, the prophet cannot be silent, because the Word can turn these persecutors into forgiven people of God.

If they will not hear, then the Lord will come not as their Redeemer, but as a dread warrior. He will mark those who punished His prophet and rejected His Word, and He will condemn them forever. But if anyone hears, and repents, and believes, the Lord will deliver them from sin to everlasting life. It will not be the last time Jeremiah decries his role as a prophet, but the Lord faithfully cares for him nonetheless. So, Jeremiah has hope when there's no hope to be seen, and he declares, "Sing to the LORD; praise the LORD! For He has delivered the life of the needy from the hand of evildoers." Oh, Jeremiah will weep some more, but even when Jerusalem is destroyed, he will still know that the Lord is faithful. And that is always a wonderful thing to proclaim, because it is when the world is at its darkest that Christ shines most brightly.

It is important for you to remember that the world hates you. Don't take my word for it. It's Jesus who says in our Gospel lesson, "You will be hated by all for My name's sake." It has been proven throughout history that the world—meaning unbelievers—is not content to live and let live. Unbelief always opposes the Gospel, and so the world will always oppose those who believe and proclaim it. You can sense it in the cultural shifts in our own nation. It's been pointed out to me more than once that more and more people have stopped talking about "freedom of religion," replacing that term with "freedom of worship." It doesn't sound like much, but it's significant. The underlying message is that you should be free to worship how you want in church, but you can't let your religious beliefs influence your daily life.

The message is that you can believe what you want, but don't you dare practice it. If such trends continue, we face some challenging times in our nation, and there is no guarantee that even the reduced "freedom to worship" would ever be preserved. All the more reason to keep speaking the Gospel now while it remains unfettered by man's law. Even so, we're very blessed with the freedoms and safety we have in our nation now. Many Christians in the world are not so blessed, but face suffering and death for the sake of Christ. Beware of complacency and pray for those who are so persecuted, because they are your brothers and sisters in Christ.

Unbelief hates the Gospel. Because of that, many are under the impression that the Church simply needs to rework and reword the Gospel so that it sounds more attractive to the world. But that isn't true. Jesus never said, "You will be hated for My name's sake until someone learns to word the Gospel better than I do." If the world likes the message that a church is declaring, then you can be sure that that church is no longer

proclaiming the Gospel. They are one of the ones which Paul warns of in his letters that is bringing a different “gospel.” Let’s be clear, though. Just because Christians are hated doesn’t mean that they are speaking the Gospel. It’s quite possible to be obnoxious without the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The ongoing check for Christians is to be assured that they’re opposed only for speaking God’s Word and staying true to His Sacraments, and not because of their personal weaknesses and foibles.

We also add that this is not about making it make sense. Sometimes, Christians get the idea that they just have to make the Word make more sense to the world, and then things will be better. This also is not true. For one thing, the Gospel doesn’t make sense. Remember what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 1. The Greeks demanded wisdom—they wanted a sensible argument from Paul—but “all” Paul had to give them was the “foolishness” of God that Jesus had died for their sins. You simply can’t make the Gospel sensible. It isn’t sensible. But it is the power of salvation to all who believe.

Now, the Law of God is a different thing. The Law of God makes sense. “Thou shalt not kill” is a sensible law, because it makes sense for society to preserve life. “Thou shalt not commit adultery” is a sensible law, because the consequences of adultery and other promiscuity are obviously harmful to society. But this is not about making sense. Unbelief will always oppose God. If God demanded child sacrifices, no one would be more pro-life than the world. If God commanded adultery, no one would trumpet the sanctity of marriage like the world would. You cannot convince unbelievers to think God’s Word is a good thing. That’s not what the Church does.

The Church just keeps speaking God’s Word, and by that Word of God, the Spirit works to turn unbelievers into believers—to turn enemies of God into His beloved children, just like the Spirit has already done for you. I’ve already sort of hinted at this, but this isn’t just about speaking the Gospel specifically. The world will try to oppose, degrade and defile every good gift from God, and the more precious the gift of God, the more it will be under attack. If you rejoice in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, you’re going to hear about evolution every time you turn around. If you rejoice in how marriage illustrates Christ’s love for His bride the Church, the world is going to redefine marriage into any sort of relationship you want to have. The Church will always face ridicule for speaking the Word of God.

It’s wearisome to be faithful and keep resisting the mob mentality of the world. It’s tiring to be accused of intolerance and discrimination. It’s really tough when it comes into your home and family, when agreeing with God means disagreeing with loved ones. This shouldn’t come as a surprise either. Jesus warns of this very thing in our Gospel

lesson. So, chances are that, sooner or later, you're going to be tired and discouraged enough to join Jeremiah in saying, "O LORD, You have deceived me! I was expecting far better than this as a Christian, but all I've got for my efforts is a bunch of ridicule and trouble. If that's what I get for trying to be faithful to your Word, I'm just going to shut up for a while."

This is a bad idea for two reasons. First, it's not that the Lord deceived you with His Word, but that you weren't listening to it in the first place. The idea that life will be easy and the world will love you for being a Christian isn't found in Scripture. That's something that you're tempted to add into the mix. Second, if you shut up and stop speaking the faith, you're stifling the faith that you have, and Jesus warns that if you deny Him before men, He will deny you before His Father in heaven. There's a better reason not to be silent though. The Lord re-creates unbelievers into believers and draws His children out of the world by His Word, and He gives you, His Church, the honor of speaking it.

The fact that man, who has forsaken God, opposes you doesn't mean that you're forsaken, because God incarnate values you so highly that He has gone to the cross and shed His blood to redeem you from sin. There is no deception there. The Son of God became flesh and chose to be ridiculed by man and rejected by God so that you might be delivered from sin. He has redeemed you in both body and soul from sin so that He need not destroy both your body and soul in hell. If He has so proven His love and faithfulness to you, why would you fear the world more than love Him? It wasn't just for you, but for all. Jesus died for all those unbelievers who still ridicule Him and His Word and His people, for He would have all be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth.

That's why He sent Jeremiah to Jerusalem. That's why He sent His disciples out in the Gospel lesson. That's why He puts His Word in your mouth, so that you might tell others (even hostile others) that they are worth far more than sparrows, for Jesus has died for them too. This will often be in your own family. Where a loved one has departed the faith, resist the temptation to rewrite the Gospel to accommodate sin, and defy the temptation to be silent. Speak to pray and commend your loved ones to the Lord, and speak the truth in love even to those who don't want to hear, that they might know that Christ has died to redeem them from their sin too.

What does the future hold for the Church? In the long run, eternal life! In the short-term, we do not know, although it does not look like an easy time ahead. Do not be afraid, because the Lord is faithful, and this is never more evident than in the midst of trial. I read a report that quotes Nigerian church leaders who have faced imprisonment,

persecution and terror for decades. Far from weary, they know the faithfulness of God and maintain, “Persecution is always good for the Church. Always.” Among other things, persecution exposes the world for the enemy of the Gospel that it remains, and it is then that the faithfulness and grace of God comes most clearly into focus. It shows that the Lord does not deceive, but speaks life and grace to all who believe for the sake of Christ. That is never more clear than in the reception of His Means of Grace. And in that life and grace for the sake of Christ, you and I are given to join Jeremiah and say, “Sing to the LORD; praise the LORD! For He delivers the life of the needy from the hand of evildoers.” This is a certain comfort in the face of enemies, because the Lord does not deceive—a comfort that He provides you in His very body and blood at His Holy Supper, which He speaks to you in the truth that you are forgiven for all of your sins, and assured in His promise of eternal life in His Holy presence forevermore. Amen.