**St. Paul’s Lutheran Church
Wildwood, Missouri**

**The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost**

**August 18, 2019**

**Jeremiah 23: 16-29**

In our Old Testament reading for today, our Lord, through the prophet Jeremiah, warns us about false prophets and the very real danger that they present to our faith. It is a warning worth heeding because just as in the days of Jeremiah, there is no want for false prophets for us today. Just as in the days of Jeremiah false prophets deceived God’s people, so too today false prophets deceive God’s people.

I wish I could say it was hard to find examples, but, unfortunately I can’t. Examples abound. For instance, about ten years ago or so, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, or, the ELCA, hosted their biannual convention in Chicago. Now, of course everyone thinks that the big news coming out of that convention was their tacit approval of ordaining gay and lesbian clergy. But, you know, that really wasn’t the big news. The big news actually came in an article in the Chicago Tribune entitled, *“Lutheran Church Out to Tackle Biblical Illiteracy.”*

Why is that really the big news? Well, here is what the article says, “*On Tuesday, the Evangelical Church in America waged war on illiteracy. But it didn’t tackle the challenge of how to read words. The group addressed the challenge of how to understand and interpret The Word, otherwise known as the Bible. The five year Book of Faith” initiative is intended to boost study of the Bible throughout the 4.8 million-member church.”*

Admittedly, this surprised me even more. The ELCA, a church body not known for its allegiance to Scripture, wanted to attack biblical illiteracy. At first I thought, “*Wow! This is great! Biblical illiteracy is a huge problem in the church today so good for them.”*  However, then I read on. You see, this initiative was started in *“response to church research that shows 32 percent of Evangelical Lutherans believe the bible is the inerrant word of God . . .which is not the position of the Evangelical Lutheran church.”* If you did not catch that, the ELCA is upset not because only 32 percent hold to the inerrancy of Scripture. They are upset because 32 percent *“still”* hold to the inerrancy of Scripture! The initiative is actually an effort to reduce the percentage of those who believe the bible is the true word of God! They don’t want anyone to believe the bible is the inerrant word of God

The then Presiding Bishop of the ELCA, Rev. Mark Hanson, even confirmed the position in the article. *“In our culture,”* he says*, “particularly around issues of immorality, the prevailing understanding tends to be a literal understanding of Scripture . . . which is not a Lutheran understanding.”* If you wonder why our Lutheran Church Missouri Synod does not have fellowship with the ELCA, you need look no further. This is the fundamental reason.

However, as I said earlier, there are plenty of false prophets out there in the world, but, how do you know who is and who isn’t? I have been to several gatherings in the past where Bishop Hanson has spoken. He has no horns on his head. There are no flames coming out of his ears. His eyes don’t glow orange and his voice does not sound like it comes from the deepest pits of hell. He is extremely cordial, articulate and comes across as someone who is eminently reasonable. He is actually a very nice man who I would imagine is a lot of fun on the golf course. From all outward appearances, you would count him to be a kind and compassionate man of God. After all, he looks the part.

But you know, I look the part too. I have the title *“pastor.”* I wear a collar. For church services I put on an Alb and a stole. In fact, if Bishop Hanson and I were to stand side by side, both wearing clerical collars how would you judge between us as to who is true and who is false? My dear friends in Christ, there is only one way to judge and it is not by outward appearances. You judge a prophet, a teacher or a pastor by what comes out of his mouth. Does he speak his own dreams or God’s Word? Does he speak the product of his own imagination or what God has revealed in Scripture? Well, our Old Testament lesson for today from Jeremiah gives us the answer, *“Let the prophet who has a dream tell the dream, but let him who has my word speak my word faithfully.”*

My dear friends in Christ, the problem of false prophets misleading the church is not new. If you look at the Old Testament, it seems that false prophets arose just as quickly as the church itself. And keep in mind that this is the real danger of false prophets: they arise from within the church. They look like friends. They seem to have our best interest at heart. In fact, most often, they tell us exactly what we want to hear.

You see, that is what the false prophets in Jeremiah’s day were doing. They told the people what they wanted to hear.Look again at the first paragraph on the back of th bulletin*. “Thus says the Lord of hosts: ‘do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy filling you with vain hopes. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord. They say continually to those who despise the word of the Lord, ‘It shall be well with you’ and to everyone who stubbornly follows his own heart, they say, ‘No disaster shall come upon you.’”*

To give you a little historical background, by this time in the Israel’s history, they had reached an all-time low in faithfulness to God and his word. The people and the religious leaders, the priest and the prophets, had all but abandoned the worship of the one true God. They participated in gross idolatry and made no attempts to hide it. Jeremiah 7 tells us that they even began to worship and devote themselves to the *“Queen of Heaven”* (whoever she was) and made for her offerings of fire and bread.

Now, keep in mind what we are talking about here. We’re talking about Israel. God’s chosen people. His Old Testament church. This was not some pagan nation. This was not Babylon, Egypt or Assyria. Quite literally they created for themselves a new god, rather, a goddess, who was nothing more than a figment of their imaginations. This would be like you and me here at St. Paul’s placing a golden calf on the altar, bowing down and saying, *“behold, this is your God!”*

With no regard for the word of God, Israel’s sins ran rampant. That is what happens when the church begins to ignore God’s word and creates its own standard for morality. Oppression of the poor was common. Businessmen acted dishonestly, cheating each other out of goods and money. Sexual immorality became the norm as chastity became a thing of the past and fidelity to one’s spouse became a distant memory (Jer. 5). Israel even adopted the practice of using temple prostitutes as part of their worship. Worst of all, though, the people of Israel even began to practice human sacrifice, offering their children to gods made of wood and stone.

To this God said, “*Should I not punish them for this? Should I not avenge myself on such a nation?”*  Israel had kindled the anger of God with their unfaithfulness. God warned them of the impending disaster coming their way. His did not mince words. In fact, his words were clear. But, what did the false prophets tell the people, *“No disaster shall come on you.”* They told the people, *“Don’t worry. God does not mind. Live any way you want. Everything will be just fine.”* Jeremiah tried to warn them by speaking God’s word. He told the truth and how do you think the people reacted to him? They hated him. In fact, they even tried to kill him. The false prophets told the people exactly what they wanted to hear and how do you think they reacted to them? Hearing what they wanted to hear from these false prophets, they loved them.

And boy doesn’t that just feed our old sinful nature. We love to be affirmed in our life choices, don’t we? We love to hear that there is nothing sinful about what we do and what better affirmation than to have a *“man of God,”* a prophet, a priest or a pastor tell you that what you are doing is *“OK.”* After all, they speak for God, right? If a pastor says it’s alright, regardless of whether or not it goes against God’s word, people are apt to accept it. We love to be told, *“Go about your business. There is nothing to worry about.”* I have even had people come to me, tell me about their plans to sin, and then ask me to tell them it’s OK with God. One woman (different town, different place) who had been in some financial difficulties sought my approval of her (and I kid you not) buying into a pornography distributorship. She asked, *“God won’t mind if I am doing this to help my family, will he?”* If you’re wondering what my answer was, it was, *“Yes! God will mind.”* His word is clear on matters of sexual immorality.

But, what if I had said, *“Don’t worry. Go ahead. God doesn’t care. After all, you need the money.”?* What do you think she would have done with my approval? She would have probably done it and lived in the *“vain hope,”* as Jeremiah puts it, that God is pleased with her. I would have been causing and permitting her to sin out right and that my dear friends in Christ is the most damnable thing about false prophets: they confirm people in their sin. They tell sinners, whether they are liars or cheats, adulterers or gossips, murderers or thieves, gay or lesbian that God doesn’t mind, when his word is clear that he does.

In truth, there is no more unloving thing to do then to tell a sinner that God is fine with his sin. It’s like a physician knowing you have lung cancer, telling you that you are fine and then handing you a pack of cigarettes on the way out the door. So too, false prophets and false pastors gleefully take people by the hand, tell them what they want to hear, and lead them down the inevitable path to destruction. And we, because of our sinful nature, easily succumb, because as I said in the beginning of this sermon, most false prophets, most false pastors look the part and we like it when they tell us what we want to hear.

So how then are you to protect yourself? How then are you to judge even me? As I said earlier, you judge by what they preach and teach. You judge by what comes out of their mouth. My dear friends in Christ, God is so clear on this: let him who has my word speak it faithfully. You judge a pastor and you protect yourself by whether or not they speak God’s word. And when I say, God’s word, I mean all of it, both Law and Gospel. We don’t pick the parts we like and discard the parts we don’t. We are not to make things up about God and ignore what God has already revealed about himself in his word. When God condemns something as sin, it is sin regardless of what I think about it. My personal thoughts and opinions, even though I am pastor, don’t count. My feelings about it don’t matter and my dreams certainly don’t matter. Only what God says counts.

Is his word of Law harsh? Your bet! Jeremiah tells us it is like fire and a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces. His word of Law exposes our sinful hearts and lays waste to our pride and stubborn rebellions against him.

Yet, as powerful as his word of Law is there is a more powerful word a Gospel word, a word which builds and restores, a word which forgives and saves. That word is “Jesus” and that is the word, the Word made flesh, which our Lord wants in the hearts and on the lips of every sinner. You know, it is amazing, with all that Israel had done, with all of their brazen sin and rebellion, throughout the book of Jeremiah, do you know what God does? He continually invites his people to return to him. He wanted those who had sinned so much with all their horrible and egregious offenses to return to him and know that he is our Lord who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth and that in these he delights.

God wants sinners, he wants you and me to see that his greatest desire is not to punish, but to forgive. And so great is that desire that he bore our flesh himself that he might die in our place to accept the punishment that we deserve. So great is his love for you that, as St. Paul tells us in Romans, that, *“while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”* Christ died for us, for you for me and for all people. He stood between us and God, taking all of God’s wrath against sin upon his shoulders so that you and I might have life and salvation. For those who believe, for those who trust in Jesus our Savior, he graciously gives them eternity.

These are God words, not mine, and these are the words that save. For only God’s words save and it is only by God’s words that you must judge every pastor you hear preach. And this is true no matter what he looks like. This means, of course, that you must be diligent in your use of God’s words. You must be as knowledgeable in his word, if not more so, than I am. My dear friends in Christ, God’s word is his gift to you and it will protect you. Use it. Judge what you hear by it and not what you see. And rejoice in Jesus your Savior who alone has the words of eternal life. Alleluia. In Jesus name. Amen.