

"Faithful Proclamation"
Jeremiah 23:16-29

August 14, 2016

13th Sunday After Pentecost

Rumors began to circulate that disaster was at hand. Reports of impending doom appeared. People were afraid. The "experts" denied the reports and the rumors. They said there was nothing to worry about and everything would be okay. People could continue doing what they had been doing without fear of consequence. We now know the experts were lying.

During the 1930's, '40's, and '50's, the links between smoking and lung cancer were becoming more apparent. The public was worried. So tobacco companies began running advertisements in which doctors, authorities on health, not only said that cigarette smoking was harmless but that some brands were actually healthy for you. People could continue smoking without fear of consequences. Why did the doctors do it? Were they simply lying for pay? Maybe. Had they not studied the most current information regarding the link between smoking and cancer? Maybe. Did they just want to give people a positive message to make them feel better? After all, telling people, "These cigarettes are going to kill you," doesn't win you many friends. Maybe. What ever the reason, many people died because of their erroneous message.

A similar situation occurs in our text for today. Disaster is coming to the people of God. Judah had sinned against the Lord and rejected Him. God's wrath is going out against them like a powerful storm. Like a whirling tempest, it would burst upon the head of the wicked people. The people of Judah were going suffer the full consequences of their sin. The text says, "The anger of the LORD will not turn back until he has executed and accomplished the intents of his heart."

But were the people of Judah worried or afraid? No, they weren't. Why not? They had professional prophets who worked as skillfully for the king and his court as some doctors did for the tobacco companies in the 1950's. They delivered a positive and uplifting message to the people and told them exactly what they wanted to hear. Although they claimed to be from God, they never got their message from Him but from their own dreams, visions, and imaginations. They were simply empty and meaningless promises. The text says, "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.'" In other words, just keep on doing what you're doing and nothing will change. Everything will be just fine.

This was all a big lie. Did these prophets believe this lie? It's hard to say. They probably did it to keep their prestigious high paying positions in the palace. There was money in prophesying in those days. They also did it to keep the people happy. After all, a message of, "You are all a bunch of sinners with whom God is angry and will judge you, condemn you, and send you to Babylon in captivity," doesn't sell too well.

As a result, God was furious with the lying prophets. He says, "I did not send the prophets, yet they ran; I did not speak to them, yet they prophesied." In other words, I didn't call these guys or give them a message. Yet they made up a message and spoke without my authorization.

And people died because of that made up message that contradicted the will of God. God still judged and condemned the people for their sin and unbelief. The armies of Babylon came, destroyed Jerusalem, burned the Temple, and took the people off into exile in Babylon.

The same still happens today. Disaster is still coming for people because of their sin and unbelief; their rejection of God and His will. This includes not only obvious pagans and unbeliever but, like in the time of Jeremiah, it also includes the people of God. If things don't change, even we will be held accountable for our sins and suffer the consequences for them. And the consequences are bigger than Babylon back then or even ISIS now. The consequences are hell and damnation.

There are still false prophets around as in the time of Jeremiah. It's hard to identify a false prophet. None of them come with signs on their back saying, "False prophet." None of them say, "Hi! I'm here to deceive you and lead you to hell." They all look pious and sincere. They all claim to be from God.

Many speak the same positive and uplifting message that the prophets spoke during the time of Jeremiah. To those who despise the Word of God, the false prophets say, "Don't worry. It will be well for you. We will adapt and change our message so you will like it and it will fit your life style." So we get radically new interpretations of the Bible and the introduction of new holy books that now allow what was once forbidden and forbid what was once commanded. The proclamation of sin and judgment is muted because it is too negative. Speaking of a generic love and a non-discriminatory inclusiveness is considered to be much more positive.

To those who stubbornly follow their own hearts instead of God's will, they say, "Don't worry. You don't have to change your behavior. As long as you say you believe in God, no disaster will come upon you." Behavior (especially in the area of human sexuality) which was formerly condemned is now allowed and even

promoted in order to attract people to church. Anything to get people through the doors of the church seems to be the motto of many of today's "prophets".

It's easy to get caught up in the lies and deceit being told about God just as it was easy to get caught up in the falsehoods and myths about cigarettes in the 1950's and 60's. We are hearing these lies from those who are in authority so we feel we should believe them. Plus, there is much pressure to go along with and not disagree with the social, moral, and theological orthodoxy of today. To fight against the lies can bring rejection and much worse.

In the midst of these false prophets and their lies, we, as a church and as individuals have been called to proclaim the truth. But many, like Pontius Pilate, will ask, "What is truth?" We reply, "It's not WHAT is truth, but WHO is truth?" Jesus Christ, the Son of God, said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6) We proclaim truth by proclaiming Christ – all that He has said, all that He has done, and all that He has promised – regardless of whether it makes us rich, popular, or acceptable or not.

How do we do that? How do we proclaim truth? Certainly not with our own dreams, visions, and imaginations like the prophets in Jeremiah's time. Jesus Himself tells us how to proclaim truth. He says, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth (you will know me), and the truth will set you free." (John 8:31) By abiding in His Word (and His Word alone), we will know truth. We will know Him. And that is what – that is who - we proclaim.

We start by proclaiming sin – the failure to do all that God has commanded and the continual doing of all that God has forbidden. We do not alter, cover up, or abandon the message about sin, no matter what reaction we get. We call people to repentance – to turn from their evil way and from their evil deeds. We tell of God's anger over sin and His coming judgment of sinners. We speak this message outside the Church and even within the Church. For each one of us needs to hear this every day.

Some will complain that this is too negative of a message, one that will drive people away. But the diagnosis of a fatal disease is a negative message. Yet, you need to hear it if you have the disease. Unless you hear the diagnosis, you won't seek out the cure for your disease. And without the cure, you will die in your disease. No happy message will save you.

In the same way, we proclaim the unchanging Law of God, as unpopular as it might be in this day and age, and the diagnosis of sin. We do that so that they – and we – may know that what we have – sin – is more than a character flaw, inappropriate choices, or moral weakness, but a fatal disease and that we will die in hell forever if we are not cured.

Then we proclaim the cure: Christ. He has come between us and the wrath of God. He has taken all of our sins upon Himself on the cross and endured the punishment they deserved. He has taken our death upon Himself and defeated it by rising from death and the grave to life and immortality. To all who believe, He gives His forgiveness, His righteousness, His life, and His immortality. Sin is gone. Death is gone. Hell is gone. The cure is perfect and complete.

The truth – Jesus – has set you free. You are free from sin, death, and hell. You are free from false prophets, fear, and failure. Do not pay attention to the false prophets who may have much money, many followers, and the support of the culture but have strayed from the Word of God and substituted their own dreams, visions, and imaginations. They may be popular now but God will judge them one day.

Continue to proclaim the truth without fear. Also, always pray for those specifically called to proclaim the Word of God that they might be faithful and without fear. The Word of God overcomes fear and will endure forever – long after the prophets of this culture are gone.

Think not of the failure of your testimony to the Word of God but, instead, focus on the power of the Word of God spoken by you to convict people of their sin, call people to repentance, and create faith in people to receive the gifts of forgiveness, life and salvation. For God has promised, "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it." (Isaiah 55:11)

We have a faithful God! He has given to us a faithful message! May we, by the power of the Holy Spirit, always give a faithful proclamation! Amen.