

Sermon Draft

Text: Jeremiah 20:7–13

Sermon: “From Persecution to Joy”

In our Gospel, the Lord warns that persecution is the lot of all who follow him: *“If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household”* (Matthew 10:25). This parallels the message of Jeremiah. It is the same in every age. However, even amid this dire warning, the Lord still calls the persecuted *“his household.”*

We are his family, his bride, children of the same Father. While Jeremiah writes about his confession as a physical necessity, the Lord speaks of it in terms of its everlasting significance.

Jeremiah’s life was not working out as he expected. Life started well for the prophet. He was born during the reign of one of Judah’s good kings, Josiah. He came from a priestly family and probably began his work as a prophet at about eighteen years old. That was unusually young. Most men in Judah were not even allowed to comment on the Scriptures until they were thirty.

And the Lord had given him incredible gifts. God made Jeremiah tough. The Lord described him as a wall of bronze (1:18; 15:20). God spoke directly to him. He made Jeremiah wise and insightful and passionate. And all of that made him very unpopular.

Jeremiah's family and friends abandoned him, and he was alone in the world. His wisdom made it impossible for him even to enjoy simple amusements because he saw the encroaching doom. He lived in evil times and the last years of the Kingdom of Judah. What may have been worst of all is that all the impending pain and sorrow was utterly avoidable. But no one would listen. False prophets assured the people that God was a supporter of their sin and Jeremiah was just a bitter conservative.

The people had abandoned the Lord and turned power and money and pleasure into their gods. They had claimed to know the true God, but they worshiped false gods and demanded that the church and prophet change God's Word and declare them righteous.

You “*deceived me, you overpowered me.*” The Hebrew word the ESV translates “deceived” might be better rendered “enticed.” It was as if Jeremiah was led into a trap. For godly people, it is easy to feel this way. The world does not love Jesus, and respect for the Word of God has dropped abruptly in recent decades. It would be far easier just to be quiet and keep from the scorn and anger that often comes our way.

In 2004, 60 percent of Americans polled by the Pew Research Center said they opposed homosexual marriage. In 2019, the same research company found 61 percent of Americans now say they support homosexual marriage. The change has been stunning. Internet trolls, interest groups, and TV talking heads demonize the churches that uphold the Word of God saying God created the world, there is universal truth, there is only one Savior, and, in these days, that gay marriage is not God’s design.

Christians have been sued, and biased tribunals have awarded six-figure damages to those whose Christian bakers, florists, and pizza shops refused to deny their religion by servicing these marriages.

There are real costs for standing up for your faith, even in the land of the free. Politicians criticize Vice President Pence's wife, Karen, for teaching at a Christian school. In Canada, hate speech legislation passed in April 2019 has criminalized even the Bible's condemnation of anyone's "sexual behavior." It would be far easier to keep quiet and keep your head down in these times.

Jeremiah had the same experience. How does someone hold to God's Word in times like this? The first step is to take Jeremiah's experience seriously. Even though he felt like it, he did not stop proclaiming God's truth. Today's reading quotes him: *"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"* (v 9).

It gets to the heart of our lives and purpose. God did not leave his people, his Church, here on earth to fit in with the multitudes. He speaks a different word than they do, a higher, ancient, eternal word that will always prove right.

It is right not only because it is true but because its purpose is to save the world from its folly. If we love our children, spouse, friends, parents, and even our enemies, we should want them to hear and know this truth.

The Lord loves his children, and that is why this word has been proclaimed in every generation. He will not let it die. He will not let it go unheard. He will not allow it to return to him empty without accomplishing the purpose for which it is sent.

That doesn't mean that we'll escape the wrath of the deceived or evil people, but, like Jeremiah, we bear their scorn knowing that our vindication is at hand: ***“But the Lord is with me as a dread warrior; therefore my persecutors will stumble; they will not overcome me. They will be greatly shamed, for they will not succeed. Their eternal dishonor will never be forgotten”*** (v 11).

We err if we believe we are on earth to be comfortable and enjoy life. (That is part of the promise of heaven, not earth.) Those who speak the Lord's word are in a battle for the life of the world. It's not really an option to keep our heads down and our eyes averted.

As we can tell from the long speeches about abortion, assisted suicide, euthanasia, and infanticide, we oppose an enemy obsessed with death and destruction.

It is only when we understand what is at stake that the course of action becomes clear, and the way we are to live becomes a creed. We pray that our heavenly Father would deliver us from every evil of body and soul, property and honor, and finally when our last hour has come, that he would graciously deliver us from this vale of tears and take us to himself in heaven. We proclaim the blood of God, which overcomes sin and death and the power of the devil. And these we do first among ourselves because we have been a part of the evil.

The deliverance we proclaim is not only for the world out there that doesn't get it. It is for us who do. We need a Savior, not just from the world but from ourselves and the wrath we have rightly earned. Before we're overwhelmed by the fear and anger, we have toward the world, we need to understand our deep need as well. The church is the home of rebellious sinners who seek comfort and pleasure.

We have sinned in every way the world has. We share the world's obsessions.

But the church is also the home of forgiveness and peace wrought by Christ's death and resurrection. Wrought by our Father's unquenchable love and poured out on us by the Holy Spirit through Word and Sacrament. We reach out with the world's only hope because we have already drunk deep drafts of the cure of souls. Our sins are forgiven, and we get to share that undeserved gift.

In the end, it becomes clear that the world hates the church for all the wrong reasons. They hear our words as rightful condemnation that steals their hope of earthly power, integrity, and purpose. They are so quick to defend the evil; they too often do not hear the salvation the prophets proclaim amid their futile strife.

But know today that this prophetic word is made more sure for us.

“Sing to the Lord; praise the Lord! For he has delivered the life of the needy [who cannot save themselves] from the hand of evildoers” (v 13)
and from our own sins!

Persecution will come, but the prophetic voice will be heard.

Amen