

Sermon draft for August 17, 2025

Text: Jeremiah 23:16–29

Sermon: “Faithfully Proclaim”

One comes to church on a summer Sunday hoping for a message filled with warm, uplifting thoughts, but the theme of this day is set by the Collect: **“*Merciful Lord, cleanse and defend Your Church by the sacrifice of Christ.*”** Even in the dog days of summer we are faithfully engaged in the struggle to proclaim the full counsel of God.

Both the Old Testament Reading from Jeremiah and the Gospel from Luke 12 emphasize the faithful proclamation of the Word of God and the inherent conflict that comes when the message is faithfully proclaimed. Jeremiah confronted false prophets and Jesus tells us he comes not to bring peace, but division.

In faithful proclamation, the church is cleansed from error and defended from evil. Like preachers today, Jeremiah is tempted to preach sermons people want to hear, not the sermons they need to hear (Jeremiah 23:17). Falling to that temptation is akin to feeding people straw rather than wheat (23:28).

It is the steadfast love of the Lord and his testimonies that give life (Psalm 119:88), not the preaching of an imagined peace. The Word of God is not market driven; it does not bend to our desires, our wishes, or our whims. Instead, to borrow a somewhat overused slogan, “We do not change the message; the message changes us.”

The Word of the Lord can be a tough business, and few people knew that better than Jeremiah. He initially tried to disqualify himself from the call to be a prophet, citing his youth: ***“Ah, Lord God! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth,”*** he said (1:6). He knew he was doomed to ineffectiveness, having been told by the Lord that he would preach but that the people would not listen. It doesn’t get much more straightforward than Jeremiah 7:27, where the Lord declares, ***“You shall call to them, but they will not answer you.”*** Knowing this, he worried he would end up looking like a buffoon. ***“I have become a laughingstock all the day; everyone mocks me,”*** he complained (20:7).

To make matters worse, Jeremiah had competition. For every word he proclaimed, there were many others proclaiming a different message, one that was far more appealing than what the Lord had given Jeremiah to say. Jeremiah served as a prophet during the final days of the kingdom of Judah. The Babylonians were at the point of taking the people into captivity and exiling them from their land. Faithful King Josiah had been killed in battle, and his successors were all evil. Jeremiah became the target of persecution. Not surprisingly, the current king, Jehoiakim, preferred the message of the other so-called prophets who said Judah had nothing to fear, that peace and good times were right around the corner.

Call it “market-driven ministry.” Give the people what they want to hear rather than what they need to hear. The Lord sums up their message at the beginning of the text: ***“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*’” (vs 16–17).

No one likes to ponder the impending destruction of their homes and their cities. No one really likes to hear that the only way to avoid that outcome is to submit in repentance to the Lord, returning with broken and contrite hearts to the one who saved them and made them to be his people. It is much easier to hear that things will be well and that despite appearances to the contrary, everything is going to be fine, no disaster shall come upon you. People wanted to hear about peace, and the so-called prophets were only too happy to proclaim peace rather than judgment.

Sadly, the problem faced by Jeremiah was not confined to his time. The walls of Jerusalem were breached long ago, but the temptation to give people what they want, rather than what they need, has plagued God’s people and God’s prophets in all ages. The Word of the Lord is a tough business; we know we have to say something to the world in which we live, so why not give them what they want to hear?

Even better if we can personalize the message by proclaiming our own dreams, our own hopes, and our own experiences.

We live in a market-driven world and are tempted to market-driven preaching and teaching. If you've been on any form of social media for any length of time, you've noticed that the various advertisements appearing on your page will be based on your interests, other internet searches you've done, and products you may have bought at some point along the way.

This isn't some magic act conjured up by your cell phone or tablet but happens because of a deliberate partnership between advertisers and social media providers to give us what we appear to want. So, if you buy a shirt online, chances are you'll see many more ads from the seller offering you other products. Buy a book, same thing. Buy a hand tool, and you'll soon learn the entire product line offered by that manufacturer. The idea is simple: give the people what they want. And by and large, it's a good idea.

A person who's shopping for tools may not want to get weighed down by ads for blouses, and a person looking for a new dress probably has little interest in the latest offering in power drills.

The so-called prophets of Jeremiah's time gave the people what they wanted (Jeremiah 26:16–17). But God's call is not to be popular but to be faithful.

The problem when we succumb to the temptation to preach what is popular is that we reduce our Lord to a deity made in our image.

“Am I a God at hand, declares the Lord, and not a God far away?”

(v 23). We all like the idea of a god who is at hand, a god who is near us and serves us the way we want to be served. Indeed, the Lord is near to us and has promised to be with us always, but that message can be distorted to be preached in such a way that God's promise of closeness lines up very nicely with the contours of our lives, and every distinction between God and us collapses into self-congratulation.

Jeremiah counters this contentment with the message **of “a God far away,”** who knows what we hide in secret places (v 24) but whose own power is vast, inscrutable, and, finally, utterly beyond us.

This transcendent Lord promises judgment against those who preach their own imaginings: **“Behold, the storm of the Lord! Wrath has gone forth, a whirling tempest; it will burst upon the head of the wicked. The anger of the Lord will not turn back until he has executed and accomplished the intents of his heart. In the latter days you will understand it clearly”** (vs 19–20).

The storm would come; judgment would fall upon the false prophets and those who listened to them. In 587 BC, Jerusalem was overrun, the dreams of the so-called prophets became nightmares, and the wrath of the Lord came upon the people. Jerusalem would be destroyed and her people carried into captivity. But even in his wrath, God would not forsake them.

Just a bit earlier in Jeremiah 23, God made an important promise to his people: ***“Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: ‘The Lord is our righteousness’”*** (23:5–6).

This righteous Branch would be the ultimate prophet, the Word of God in human flesh. Like Jeremiah, he stood in the council of the Lord to see and hear his Word. He proclaimed that Word faithfully. And like Jeremiah, he was opposed. People looked to Jesus to proclaim a worldly peace, but he would not preach what they wanted to hear. Instead, he proclaimed what they needed to hear, even if it turned families upside down and brought turmoil into the hearts of those who heard him.

Like Jeremiah, he would contend with false prophets, oppression, and lies. And as with Jeremiah, there would be a storm. The clouds would rise and the winds would blow (Luke 12:54–55). On a particular Friday, the storm would reach fever pitch, and Jesus himself would be the lightning rod for God’s anger against all who pervert and misuse his Word, against all who proclaim their dreams rather than the Word of the Lord. Only as we see him hanging there in our place do we **“understand clearly”** (v 20) the Lord’s real message for us. Only there do we find what we really need to hear. On the cross we see God’s fire burn against sin and his hammer shatter the prideful rocks of our hardened hearts. But there, too, we find real and lasting peace. God’s wrath is poured out on Christ, and in him we are forgiven. In Word and Sacrament our Lord comes to us, giving us true and lasting peace.

The Word of the Lord can be a tough business. Temptations abound to water down, dumb down, and adjust the message to suit our desires. But we have stood in the council of the Lord. We have seen and heard his Word, and that is the message we faithfully proclaim. His Word is the testimony that gives life (Psalm 119:88).

It is a message not driven by the market but driven by the Holy Spirit. It is a message that feeds God's people as healthy grains feed our bodies. It is a message that truly proclaims, ***"It shall be well with you; . . . no disaster shall come upon you"*** (v 17), because it is based not on our dreams but on the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Real peace comes in the faithful preaching of God's Word because it gives us Christ.

Amen.