

St Paul's Lutheran Church (Latimer, IA)

Lent 5 – March 17, 2024

John 8:46-59 – The War Is On

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In the name of Jesus. Amen.

This Sunday in the church year is like storm clouds gathering for war. Like when two enemy nations slowly build up their forces. Battle seems inevitable. The tension has been building for months. It's almost a relief when it finally spills over. When the first shots are fired, the wait is over. Now there's no going back. The soldiers know what must be done; they can finally get to work. There's a feeling of exhilaration, when the corner is turned. The war is on.

Today, Lent is finally drawing to a close. This is the turning point. Palm Sunday, Good Friday, Easter, it's all next. After all the waiting and preparation, we've rounded the corner. The cat-and-mouse game is over. Now the hour has come to stand up straight and set our faces, with Jesus, toward the cross. Because the Jews are openly trying to kill Jesus. The war is on.

And what a war. Jesus and the Pharisees, gloves off, fists bare, going at it for real. Our reading from John 8 is perhaps the most bitter of all their confrontations. They've been arguing for most of the chapter, the tension building, till now it erupts.

Because the Jews feel the need to defend themselves. Jesus has said that his truth will set them free, but they don't think they need to be freed from sin or anything. Aren't they sons of Abraham? Why should they need rescuing? Isn't God their father through circumcision? So who is this Jesus and why should they need anything from him?

But Jesus replies, "If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me. Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies. But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me."

What a tragedy that they reject him. None of them can convict Jesus of sin, none can accuse him of saying anything but the truth. So why do they hate him? Jesus points it out. "The reason why you do not hear [my words] is that you are not of God."

All this fills the Jews with self-righteous rage. Not of God? They strike back, "Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?"

But Jesus is not looking for a fight. He replies patiently. "I do not have a demon, but I honor my Father, and you dishonor me." He even adds a gospel promise, "Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death."

If you keep his word, you will never die. If only you believe his word, if only you set aside your blind hatred. Even now it's not too late. Stop your rebellion, turn and believe. Has Jesus ever spoken a word contrary to Scripture? Has he ever said anything false? Then why do you reject his lovely promises of life and light and everything good?

But these men don't believe he has anything to offer. And they certainly don't believe he has any power over death. So they dig their hole deeper, sneering out blasphemies, "Now we know that you have a demon! Abraham died, as did the prophets, yet you say, 'If anyone keeps my word, he will never taste death.' Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? And the prophets died! Who do you make yourself out to be?"

Jesus could destroy them for this, but still he holds his peace. He refuses to defend himself, to assert his own glory. "If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, of whom you say, 'He is our God.' But you have not known him. I know him."

Even now, Jesus seeks their salvation. He wants them to know God. "If I were to say that I do not know him, I would be a liar like you, but I do know him and I keep his word. Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad."

Abraham rejoiced to see me. I am his promised offspring, in whom all the nations are blessed. To me all the prophets bear witness. Listen to their word, and to mine. Turn and believe.

But these unbelievers are too far gone. They sneer again, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?”

Now at last, Jesus must respond. Every medicine, kindness, and patience has been wasted on these stubborn mockers. All preaching is in vain. So he erupts and freely confesses his eternal Godhead. “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.”

I am. I am Yahweh, the one who was, and is, and is to come. I am the Beginning and the End. Before heaven and earth were created, I am, and I abide for eternity. I am the Lord and God of the Old Testament. Not only have I seen Abraham, I made him. I called him out of Ur, I promised him this land. I gave him a son, Isaac, and I credited his faith to him as righteousness. Then I spoke to him and sent him to mount Moriah, to sacrifice his beloved, only-begotten Son. And when he raised his hand to slaughter the boy, I stopped him and provided the ram in the thicket. Now I will die in Isaac’s place. So Abraham rejoiced to see my day, and he was glad. Moses also, and all the prophets, everyone who believed in me from the foundation of the world. I am who I am, and there is no other. I am God of gods and Lord of lords. And even now, at this late hour, if only you will believe in me, I am here to set you free.

But the blasphemers are utterly convinced of their own holiness. And utterly convinced of the Holy One’s blasphemy. For they understand exactly what his words mean. “Before Abraham was, I am,” means, “I am God.” So they picked up stones to throw at him.

From this moment, the cross is inevitable. The corner is turned, the war is on. Now Jesus must die. They will not rest until they bring him down.

What about you? For you, there are only two possibilities. Either this man is telling the truth, he really is God the Son from heaven. Or he is a liar, and his father is the devil. Either you believe him, or you reject him. There can be no middle ground.

Before the cross, there is no room for soft Christianity. No moderation. Before the cross, you must take a stand. The man hanging there claims to be God, God dying in your place. So will you believe his word? Will you put your hope in the life he offers?

Ultimately, there is only radical faith, or radical unbelief. The gloves must come off. No human being can stand back as an onlooker. Do you love him, or hate him? Choose your army, take your stand and fight. Will you stand with the armies of the living God, or the demons of hell?

By his very nature, Christ divides. He has not come to bring peace, but a sword. To divide father against son, mother-in-law against daughter in law. So you must forsake everything and follow him. “And blessed is he who is not offended because of me.”

As he said, “Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death, and you will be hated by all for my name’s sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.”

Taking up your cross and following him to the fight, it will not be easy. You will be slandered and attacked for confessing the word. Just as the slandered our Lord. Calling him the son of Satan was only the beginning. Then came lashing and whips, spitting and blows, a crown of thorns, piercing nails. Even his Father’s face was turned away. Yet he endured it all. He conquered by suffering. And he rose on the third day.

This is the glorious battle. The great victim, the offspring of Abraham, the hope of all the nations, the mighty God, the victory is his. “Sing, my tongue, the glorious battle; Sing the ending of the fray. Now above the cross, the trophy, Sound the loud triumphant lay: Tell how Christ, the world’s redeemer, As a victim won the day.”

See him now, the great I Am, dying in Isaac’s place, and in yours. Abraham’s knife never made the deadly plunge, but God the Father carried it through upon Jesus. Look, Abraham! Your son, your only son, whom you love – his life is spared, so that my own beloved Son might truly die.

Go with him now, saints of God. Follow the only-begotten Son as he sets his face toward Jerusalem, to stand trial, to bear and fight and die, for you. Believe in him, your God, and be strong in his word forever. “Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death.” “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live.” Amen.

Now may the peace of God which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, unto life everlasting. Amen.