

St Paul's Lutheran Church (Latimer, IA)
Trinity 8 – July 30, 2023
Matthew 7:15-23 – Beware of False Prophets
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In the name of Jesus. Amen. Martin Luther once said, “Wherever God builds a church, the devil will build a saloon or tavern at the side of it.” He meant that wherever Christ is preached, rival voices will be competing for your ear. And only one voice is true, all the rest are liars. But how can you know which one speaks the truth? How can you recognize true prophets by their fruit?

What sets the true prophets apart is faithfulness to the word of God. Do not listen to the words of lying prophets, filling you with vain hopes, speaking visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord. They stubbornly follow their own heart, despising the word of the Lord.

In the days of Jeremiah, Judah thought she was secure. Though her kings led the people into idolatry, though she was treacherous and unfaithful to God, though she practiced bribery, immorality, and greed, yet she thought she was secure. So the Lord determined to destroy Jerusalem by the armies of Babylon. And he sent Jeremiah to foretell it. Disaster from the north. Famine and sword. Jeremiah was sent to call a remnant to repentance, and to speak the truth so that the unrepentant would be without excuse.

The sin of Judah was hypocrisy. They pretended to be pious, but they were false. By day they offered sacrifices in the temple, paying lip service to God. Yet in secret they stole, murdered, and committed adultery. And they presumed on God's mercy, unconcerned about their evil deeds.

So the Lord sent Jeremiah to testify against these hypocrites, “Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, ‘We are delivered!’ – only to go on doing all these abominations? Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, I myself have seen it, declares the Lord.”

Yet the men of Judah chose to listen to the lies of the false prophets, prophets who said, “No disaster is coming.” They thought they had nothing to fear, because the temple still stood in Jerusalem. As long as the temple was there, they thought no harm could come.

So the Lord said to Jeremiah: “Do not pray for the welfare of this people. Though they fast, I will not hear their cry, and though they offer burnt offering and grain offering, I will not accept them. But I will consume them by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence.”

And Jeremiah warned king Zedekiah of Judah: Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Behold, I will turn back the weapons of war that are in your hands and with which you are fighting against the king of Babylon and against the Chaldeans who are besieging you outside the walls. And I will bring them together into the midst of this city. I myself will fight against you with outstretched hand and strong arm, in anger and in fury and in great wrath. And I will strike down the inhabitants of this city, both man and beast. They shall die of a great pestilence. Afterward, declares the Lord, I will give Zedekiah king of Judah and his servants and the people in this city who survive the pestilence, sword, and famine into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon and into the hand of their enemies, into the hand of those who seek their lives. He shall strike them down with the edge of the sword. He shall not pity them or spare them or have compassion.’

As a sign of this catastrophe, God commanded Jeremiah to wear an ox yoke on his shoulders, a sign of the yoke of slavery in Babylon. But the false prophet Hananiah spoke lying words in God's name against Jeremiah. He took the yoke from Jeremiah's neck and broke it, declaring that within two years God would break the yoke of the king of Babylon. And the people believed Hananiah, rejecting the word of the Lord. Yet Jeremiah's words proved true, and in the seventh month of that same year, the prophet Hananiah died.

In the same way, when Pashhur the priest heard Jeremiah prophesying against Jerusalem, he had Jeremiah beaten and put in the stocks. But Pashhur and his household went into captivity in Babylon, and there he died.

These examples are stern warnings for all preachers today, warnings against speaking lies in God's name. God will surely bring false prophets to justice. And these examples teach all of us to be wary of those who preach security and ease in this world. A preacher of prosperity is not speaking for God; he is lining his own pockets. A preacher who always tells you what you want to hear is a mouthpiece of Satan. On the other hand, true prophets warn the unrepentant of judgment for their good. True prophets are hated and despised, they have nothing to gain. You will know them by their fruits, fruits not of mammon or the praise of men, but faithfulness to God's word,

faithfulness that produces hearts turning to the Lord in repentance.

The false prophets of this world love to mock the true prophets of the church. They say, “Where is your Jesus now, that man who said he would come again soon to judge the world? We can do as we please, what you call sin is harmless. We have nothing to fear, because there is no God.”

Do not listen to their lies. Listen to the words of your Lord, calling you to stand firm. Matthew 24, Jesus said, “See that no one leads you astray. For many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and they will lead many astray. And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are but the beginning of the birth pains. Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name’s sake. And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.”

A true prophet does not shrink from declaring all this, the whole counsel of God. Not only does he warn of judgment; he also comforts the repentant. Jeremiah foretold disaster, but he also spoke of restoration. Jeremiah 31, “Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”

A true prophet speaks of peace, real peace. Not the false security of this world, not a momentary shadow of peace. He speaks of peace with God in Christ Jesus, iniquity forgiven, sin remembered no more. A true prophet declares eternal peace won for you by your loving God.

And the word of God’s true prophets always prevails, for the word of the Lord stands forever. Jeremiah said in chapter 23: Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who care for my people: “You have scattered my flock and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. Behold, I will attend to you for your evil deeds, declares the Lord. Then I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will set shepherds over them who will care for them, and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall any be missing, declares the Lord. 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.’”

The Lord is our righteousness, our shepherd, our rock. The Son of David is our true prophet, the only way of salvation. Those who do not come to God through him, seeking refuge in false religions or atheism or secularism, all of these will perish. There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name but the name of Jesus, true God, who came down for us men and for our salvation, to redeem us by his blood. He who believes and is baptized will be saved.

Believe in him, your true prophet. He is the word of God. He spoke not for his own gain, but to save you. His word overcomes all lies, it overcomes the world. He was hated and despised. He suffered scorn and crucifixion, to bring about a kingdom not of this world. And all who love the truth take refuge in him. As he said to Pilate, “For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world – to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.”

Listen to the voice of Jesus, he who is the way, the truth, and the life. Listen to your good shepherd, the righteous son of David. His word is like fire, like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces. And he is the healthy tree who alone bears good fruit. He knows you as his own, and he will keep you to the final day. Against him none shall stand. For he is the true Word of God who was and is and is to come, and he shall stand forever. Come quickly, Lord Jesus. Amen.