

Jeremiah 23:16-29

Trinity 8, July 21, 2024
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Thus says the LORD of hosts: "Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you. They make you worthless; They speak a vision of their own heart, Not from the mouth of the LORD. ¹⁷ They continually say to those who despise Me, 'The LORD has said, "You shall have peace "' ; And to everyone who walks according to the dictates of his own heart, they say, 'No evil shall come upon you.'" ¹⁸ For who has stood in the counsel of the LORD, And has perceived and heard His word? Who has marked His word and heard it? ¹⁹ Thus says the LORD of hosts: "Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you. They make you worthless; They speak a vision of their own heart, Not from the mouth of the LORD. ¹⁷ They continually say to those who despise Me, 'The LORD has said, "You shall have peace "' ; And to everyone who walks according to the dictates of his own heart, they say, 'No evil shall come upon you.'" ¹⁸ For who has stood in the counsel of the LORD, And has perceived and heard His word? Who has marked His word and heard it? ¹⁹ Behold, a whirlwind of the LORD has gone forth in fury-- A violent whirlwind! It will fall violently on the head of the wicked. ²⁰ The anger of the LORD will not turn back Until He has executed and performed the thoughts of His heart. In the latter days you will understand it perfectly. ²¹ "I have not sent these prophets, yet they ran. I have not spoken to them, yet they prophesied. ²² But if they had stood in My counsel, And had caused My people to hear My words, Then they would have turned them from their evil way And from the evil of their doings. ²³ "Am I a God near at hand," says the LORD, "And not a God afar off? ²⁴ Can anyone hide himself in secret places, So I shall not see him?" says the LORD; "Do I not fill heaven and earth?" says the LORD. ²⁵ "I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy lies in My name, saying, 'I have dreamed, I have dreamed!' ²⁶ "How long will this be in the heart of the prophets who prophesy lies? Indeed they are prophets of the deceit of their own heart, ²⁷ "who try to make My people forget My name by their dreams which everyone tells his neighbor, as their fathers forgot My name for Baal. ²⁸ "The prophet who has a dream, let him tell a dream; And he who has My word, let him speak My word faithfully. What is the chaff to the wheat?" says the LORD. ²⁹ "Is not My word like a fire?" says the LORD, "And like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?"

Imagine that you are being hunted by a wild animal with white-hot fangs, terrifying speed, and first-rate tracking abilities; and it would love nothing more than to make you its next meal. You are constantly on the lookout for this predator. You know you're being chased, you're always looking over your shoulder, but there's one big problem—you can't see the creature because it's a master of camouflage. With the unique ability to blend in with its surroundings, even if you're always vigilant and watching out, you're never really safe.

It's a terrifying premise, and because of that, you've probably seen monster movies in the past with just such a monster—a dangerous predator that can't be seen. But what if I told you that this isn't *just* a reality on the big screen? In fact, Jesus spoke about a similar threat, a very real predator to you and me, and He spoke about it in our Gospel reading. ***"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves."*** (Matthew 7:15) He wants you to be aware and to stay vigilant, because out there are those who would work to drag you to hell, *but* you can't tell who they are just by looking at them—after all, they look just like harmless sheep. In fact, Paul writes to the Corinthians that ***"even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light."*** (2 Corinthians 11:14)

So, when it comes to God's Word, how can we tell who are the *false* teachers and who are the *Truth* teachers? The answer is not going to be found on the surface. It's not something you can detect with your eyes. You won't be able to tell based on whether a preacher is old or young or handsome or ugly

or boring or exciting—these are not the signs to be looking for. And you won't even be able to tell based on the churches these preachers serve! One church might have 3,000 members and be rapidly growing, one might have only 20 people in the pews on a given Sunday, but neither of these facts would tell us anything about whether or not the preacher is truly teaching God's Word. Again, the difference isn't something that you can see.

So, what's the key? You *can* tell apart *false* teachers from *Truth* teachers, not by using your eyes, but rather by using your ears. The test is simple, and it's this: "Does God agree with what's being said?" And so, for our sermon today, we're going to compare what God says with what the so-called "prophets" say. And our comparison will revolve around an idea that both God and the false prophets proclaim, **"It Shall Be Well With You."**

In our Gospel reading, Jesus warned us about the false prophets who look like innocent sheep but are really ravenous wolves who would destroy you. But Jesus also tells us how to recognize them. He says, **"You will recognize them by their fruits."** (Matthew 7:16) The fruit of a false prophet is his preaching, so to discern false preaching from *truth* preaching, we don't look at the beauty of the building or the size of the congregation or the pastor's characteristics—we listen to what he's saying. And in verse 17 of our text, we see an example of this. Jeremiah writes, **"They continually say to those who despise Me, 'The Lord has said, 'You shall have peace''; And to everyone who walks according to the dictates of his own heart, they say, 'No evil shall come upon you.'"**

What type of people is he describing here? Who are the listeners? They're people like you and me: sinners who are desperately in need of forgiveness. But that's not what these prophets are offering, is it? The false prophets are going to sinful men and women, and rather than warning them about their sin, they're giving them the false reassurance that their sin doesn't really matter!

And that's exactly what the devil wants to happen to us. When we sin, he has won a *small* victory, but his real aim is to take it one step further. Either he will seek to make us despair because of our sin, or he will strive to make us ok with our sin or to make us feel comfortable with it! And so, he whispers lies into our ears. So, for example, if you struggle with greed, he says, *"Oh, you're not being greedy, you're merely being financially prudent! It's the other people that are greedy."*

Or, if you are having a difficult time forgiving someone and would rather hold a grudge, he says, *"Hey, you're not in the wrong! You only want what's right. Besides, they were in the wrong, you are the victim here! If they hadn't done what they'd done, then you wouldn't feel this way!"*

Or, if you think little of your spouse and lust after another, he says, *"That's not lust, that's true love! And hey, what if that's really your soulmate? God just wants you to be happy, doesn't He?"* In the heat of sin, these excuses sound pretty good to us. So, the false prophets tell us what we want to hear, **"It Shall Be Well With You...(because how you live doesn't really matter)."** And if we listen to these excuses and feel secure in our sin, no longer feeling any sorrow or repenting of them, then the devil has won. And verse 19 of our text presents the only conclusion for the secure sinner: **"Behold, a whirlwind of the LORD has gone forth in fury—A violent whirlwind! It will fall violently on the head of the wicked."**

I'm sure you've read the children's story, "The Three Little Pigs." Three pigs leave their mom's house to

build their own houses. Two of them carelessly build their houses out of straw and sticks, thinking they'll be just fine. But then the big, bad wolf comes; he huffs and he puffs and he blows their houses in. When we listen to the false prophets who speak empty words to us, words that sound like a pretty appealing solution for our guilt, then we're following in the steps of the first two pigs. Building our case for salvation on the premise that we're not really that sinful and that we're pretty good people—if that's the house you've built, when God comes along and huffs and puffs, a whirlwind of judgment will be upon you.

Now, Lutherans have been accused of focusing too much on sin, and I have been told in the past that maybe I could focus on the happier stuff, but that's not what God would have, not *always* anyway. He says in verse 22: ***“But if they had stood in My counsel, and had cause My people to hear My words, then they would have turned them from their evil way and from the evil of their doings.”*** In other words, a *Truth* preacher will bring people to repent of their sins. A *True* prophet, that is one who teaches God's Word, doesn't *avoid* the topic of sin—he can't, because God's Word condemns sin in all its forms. And preaching the Law is not fun at all, but the *True* prophet doesn't have a choice in the matter. If you are truly teaching what God says, some of it will be difficult to stomach.

After all, listen to how God describes His Word: ***“Is not My word like a fire?” says the LORD, ‘And like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?’***—that's describing God's Law, because that's exactly how God's Law works. Imagine you were tasked with building a case for why you should be saved—why you deserve to go to heaven. The temptation, of course, is to start by looking inward. To say, “Well, yes, I'm not perfect by any means, but I try my best! I may be greedy *sometimes*, but I've never stolen from anyone! I may feel angry at times, but I'd never kill anyone! I don't even think I've ever hit anyone! And I lust *sometimes*, but everyone does, and I've done far less than other people. Deep down, I'm a pretty good person. Not perfect, no, but pretty good!”

Well, ***“Is not My word like a fire?” says the LORD, ‘And like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?’*** He comes in with His Word and tears down this altar that we have built to our supposed goodness. So, maybe you haven't stolen, but God says, ***“Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction.”*** (1 Timothy 6:9) Maybe you haven't actually killed someone, or even hit anyone, but God says, ***“Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.”*** (1 John 3:15) Maybe you haven't physically broken your marriage vows, but God says, ***“When lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death.”*** (James 1:15) God huffs, and God puffs, and God demolishes this temple we have built to our own goodness. His Word, like a fire, has reduced us to ashes, and His Word, like a hammer, has broken down every stone so that we cannot stand before Him puffing out our chest saying, “I am good enough!” God says, ***“You must be perfect,”*** (1 Peter 1:16) and we have been far from that.

So, the false prophets say, ***“It Shall Be Well With You!”*** And this vain message is based on the lie that sin just isn't that big a deal, we're all good enough just the way we are. God clearly says otherwise. And yet, God also declares to you and me a message that ***“It Shall Be Well With You.”*** This is not based on us being good the way we are, but based upon God not willing to leave us the way we are.

You see, God's Word is like a hammer breaking the rock in pieces, but do you know what else a

hammer is good for? Hammers are also, obviously, used to build. And so, God did not abandon us in the rubble and ashes of our sinfulness. He huffs and puffs and blows our house down so that we seek shelter somewhere else, namely, in His Son.

You see, while some say that sin doesn't matter, that God doesn't care how we live, God tells us He does indeed care. Verse 20 says, ***"The anger of the LORD will not turn back until He has executed and performed the thoughts of His heart. In the latter days you will understand it perfectly."*** God cannot just sweep sin under the rug. He demands justice. His anger cannot be abated until His wrath has been poured out against sin. And He *did* so, pouring out His wrath and anger on His Son.

Your sin and mine grieve Him so much that when His Son prayed, ***"Let this cup pass from me..."*** (Matthew 26:39) the Father's answer was, "No." And when Christ hung on the cross and carried every one of your sins—even the ones that exist only in your minds, even the ones the haven't been accomplished yet—the Father was so repulsed that He forsook His Son. But the sacrifice was accepted. And now, your sin is forgiven. In Christ, your sins have been swept away.

So, it is true, ***"It Shall Be Well With You."*** I can say that, because you don't need to build a case for why you should go to heaven. God has built a different case for you. He spoke of it in Peter's first letter, ***"Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in Him will not be put to shame."*** (1 Peter 2:6) On Christ you can build, and on Christ you can stand, and when God returns on Judgment Day with the whirlwind of His wrath to dispense justice against sin; built on Christ you will not be shaken, and your house will not be blown down.

"It Shall Be Well With You"; not because your sins don't matter, but because Jesus' death for your sins mattered a great deal! ***"In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses."*** (Ephesians 1:7) And if you're having a hard time with that, the idea that simply because Jesus died on the cross, your sins have all been forgiven and forgotten, then I'd encourage you to search the Scriptures. That's what the Bereans did with the Apostle Paul's teaching: ***"Now [the Bereans] were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the Word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so."*** (Acts 17:11)

That's what you should do too. When I'm standing in the pulpit, don't take me at *my* word, take God at *His* Word. You should not trust your pastor. You should trust God. I am not trustworthy; I don't care how well you know me or how long I've been here. You should trust Christ and God's Word, and you should judge my preaching and teaching *against* God's Word. And you should pray for me, that what I teach will always be what God teaches and *only* what God teaches.

And by the way, if that seems a daunting task, comparing *everything* I say (or what anyone else says for that matter) to the Bible—here's an easy test for you that can help at least in part. If you're listening to me or someone else, ask yourself the question, "Does he throw the burden of salvation back on the listener?" If so, that's someone to avoid. Because God makes it very clear: Jesus ***"has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows,"*** (Isaiah 53:4) the burden of salvation was placed on Him, and by ***"His wounds we are healed."*** Jesus bore that burden, so you don't have to. Jesus bore that burden, so that I can say to you today, ***"It Shall Be Well With You,"*** even to the end of the age, in Jesus' name. Amen.