

## Sweet Comfort and Peace(?)

It's clear from today's lessons that God has a real problem with false prophets and their false proclamations, and He cares greatly about what we read, mark, learn, and inwardly-digest. God is not indifferent to matters of our salvation. Jeremiah is sent to warn the faithful. Jesus warns His disciples. Living in the world we do, we know full-well that false prophets and their false messages still abound. We need to hear and heed these warnings too. And here's the thing: We **need** to hear and heed these warnings because *the devil's not stupid*. He doesn't come at us with brimstone and sulfur and the terrors of damnation on his lips, prying us away from God's salvation against our will. No. Those who corrupt and pervert God's Word *almost always* do not look or sound like evil incarnate. Not even close. Instead, these false prophets are almost always very charismatic and inviting and popular. They're admired. People love them. They love the messenger, and they love the sweet honey that the messenger pours into their ears. He (or she; let's be equal-opportunity) scratches them right where they itch. Those with itching ears love it. They can't get enough. They clamor for more. Like a dog over a puddle of antifreeze, they lap it up and can't get enough of that sweet nectar, never realizing the deadly poison they're so willfully ingesting.

Here's the thing: The Truth hurts. That's what this is really all about. The Truth hurts, and more often than not, we actually *prefer* the sweet balm of a lie over the cutting, biting bitterness of the Truth. The Truth means things have to change. The lie, however, means "not a problem; keep on doing what you're doing." That's what God is so angry about here in Jeremiah. That's what is so often missed in this lesson. The false prophets that God was angry with in this particular text weren't a bunch of demonic Baal-worshipping outsiders trying to lure Israel away from Yahweh. They weren't even fellow Israelites who were guilty of preaching *against* Yahweh. These false prophets that God is warning about actually believed that they working for God! Remember: "*Not all who say 'Lord, Lord!' will be saved.*" They were guilty of giving *false comfort and assurance in God's name*. They were giving people the lie they preferred, and then telling them that the lie was God's Truth.

Think about this, because it's our problem today too. The problem was *wrongly* bespeaking God's comfort and approval to a situation that called for the condemnation of sin and the preaching of repentance. Scripture tells us very plainly that Israel was unfaithful and stiff-necked and dead-set in their proud and sinful ways. However, I'm sure if you asked Israel, they would disagree with that assessment. They weren't all those terrible things. *They were good people who loved God. Just ask them.* God loved these fools enough to send Jeremiah to them to speak His Truth. Jeremiah was sent to tell it like it is, call sin "sin," and to call the people to turn from that sin and turn back to trust in the one true God.

*The people didn't want to hear that message of repentance though.*

Why? Because they didn't have a problem with what they were doing, believing, and practicing. I know that sounds so crazy to our ears, but it shouldn't. They didn't think they were doing anything *wrong or sinful or evil*. They were very comfortable in their own skin, and they were rather offended when they were told to repent. They weren't bad and terrible people! They could all point to "real evil" in their Gentile neighbors. They weren't evil like those wicked Gentiles. Why should they have to repent?! And this is where the false prophets *thrived*. Rather than preaching the Truth of God's Word and Law, the false prophets (on their own, not sent by God) were wrongly preaching God's approval. They didn't preach what God wanted the people to hear. *They preached what the people wanted to hear*. We do that too. We do that all the time.

For example: Normally such-and-such behavior would be a sin, but it's different in this particular case. We've progressed. Just ask former President Jimmy Carter. Apparently God's now okay with same sex marriage because how could He ever be against two people loving each other in a committed monogamous relationship? God's angry at a particular sin when "rank sinners and pagans" commit it, *but He's okay with it in our case*. It's different with us. God's okay with it when our loved ones do it. It's different. After all, He knows our hearts. He knows we love Jesus. Pick your poison. Fill in the blank. Blowing off church? Despising God's Word and Sacraments because the fish are biting or the lawn absolutely needs mowing or the pool absolutely needs cleaning this morning? **It can't wait!** Shacking up outside of marriage? Pre-marital/extra-marital sex? Pornography? Coveting? Denying Christ's real presence in His means of grace? Choosing a church, not because the Word is rightly taught and the sacraments rightly administered in accordance with God's Word and Will, but simply because of their big screen and their cool band or because they give away free groceries every week or free toys at Christmas? Sure, they don't give Christ's true body and blood, **as He commanded**, but at least the kids are having fun. Isn't that all that matters? *"At least they're in church somewhere, right?" Any of that sound familiar, O false prophet?*

Again, the problem here is preaching and/or following after the sweet antifreeze of **false comfort**. Such a poisonous message is quite evident in the false gospel of works-righteousness; the false gospel that gives people the *false comfort* that they can right their wrongs and they can achieve atonement (at-one-ment) with God by virtue of enough hard work and clean living. They can win God over with enough money, enough good intentions and good deeds and personal sacrifices. This was true in Jeremiah's time. This was true in Jesus' time (e.g., the Pharisees), and it's true today in our time...even amongst good old Lutherans.

*Don't believe me? This is what passes for your average funeral sermon today, regardless of what denomination you claim as your own.* The message,

time and time again, is a message of works. We “celebrate the life” of the deceased, seeking peace in the remembrance of how good they were. I’ve heard with my own ears a pastor give the false comfort from the pulpit that “heaven is now a better place” because the deceased was now there. ***That’s how good of person he was! He actually made heaven better!*** **No** mention of Christ or His sacrifice. **No** mention of salvation through faith alone in God’s grace alone, which God shows to us poor, miserable, undeserving sinners only because of the all-redeeming work and person of Christ alone. Nope. It was all about the guy in the box and how good of guy he was. The grieving people were sent away with the “peace and assurance” that heaven is now brighter and better because the guy in the coffin was now gracing it with his presence.

That, my friends, is false comfort. ***Such works-righteous false comfort robs Christ of His cross, His glory, and His all-redeeming sacrifice.*** Such false comfort essentially calls Jesus a liar. He declares victoriously, “*It is finished, once and for all,*” and the works-righteous corpse dares to say, “*Yeah...not so fast. I still need to do my part, and THEN it will be finished. You did your part, Jesus, and now I need to do mine.*” ***I understand why God is so angry at such false comfort!*** Salvation through faith alone in God’s grace alone because of Christ alone (***like Scripture teaches***) OR salvation through good works and good intentions with a ***side-helping*** of Jesus’ blood and God’s grace sprinkled in for good measure? “*It doesn’t matter, does it? Six one way, half-a-dozen another. We all love Jesus. Hey...at least we’re in church somewhere, right?*” Folks: That’s comfort that only a wolf (or a serpent) would give. That’s **NOT** the comfort that Lamb of God gives.

Doctrine matters. Practice matters. Truth (singular) matters. Here’s the bitter truth (and you may not like it): You are a sinner who deserves ***nothing*** but present and eternal punishment. So am I. Sin put Jesus on that cross...the sin of the world, the sin of the people you don’t like, my sin, and—yes—***even your sin.*** That’s how great and damnable your sins are—God had to die for them! He died for them precisely because there is **NOTHING** you could possibly do to make atonement for even one of them, let alone an eternity’s worth of them.

But here on this cross and in these means of grace is the **sweetest** comfort and peace you will ever know. The Gospel Truth is that your sins have been ***paid for in full*** with the blood of Christ Jesus. The Gospel Truth is that this same victorious Christ is still keeping His Word and Promise to be with you always, holding out to you this same victorious Body and Blood for your peace, your comfort, and your blessed assurance. You have been baptized into this Tree of Life. You have been baptized into Christ. You bear His name upon your head and your heart. You are forgiven. ***It doesn’t get any sweeter or better than that!***

Sanctify us in this Truth, O Lord, for Your Word is Truth...and life. **AMEN**