

When Athaliah the mother of Ahaziah saw that her son was dead, she proceeded to destroy the whole royal family. ² But Jehosheba, the daughter of King Jehoram and sister of Ahaziah, took Joash son of Ahaziah and stole him away from among the royal princes, who were about to be murdered. She put him and his nurse in a bedroom to hide him from Athaliah; so he was not killed. ³ He remained hidden with his nurse at the temple of the LORD for six years while Athaliah ruled the land. ... Jehoiada brought out the king's son and put the crown on him; he presented him with a copy of the covenant and proclaimed him king. They anointed him, and the people clapped their hands and shouted, "Long live the king!"

¹⁵ When Athaliah heard the noise made by the guards and the people, she went to the people at the temple of the LORD. ¹⁴ She looked and there was the king, standing by the pillar, as the custom was. The officers and the trumpeters were beside the king, and all the people of the land were rejoicing and blowing trumpets. Then Athaliah tore her robes and called out, "Treason! Treason!"

¹⁵ Jehoiada the priest ordered the commanders of units of a hundred, who were in charge of the troops: "Bring her out between the ranks and put to the sword anyone who follows her." For the priest had said, "She must not be put to death in the temple of the LORD." ¹⁶ So they seized her as she reached the place where the horses enter the palace grounds, and there she was put to death.

¹⁷ Jehoiada then made a covenant between the LORD and the king and people that they would be the LORD's people. He also made a covenant between the king and the people. ¹⁸ All the people of the land went to the temple of Baal and tore it down. They smashed the altars and idols to pieces and killed Mattan the priest of Baal in front of the altars.

Then Jehoiada the priest posted guards at the temple of the LORD. (2 Kings 11:1-3, 12-18)

What Peace is there for Us?

This week, I read an article on the internet called "Top 10 Right Wing Conspiracy Theories." I was curious to see what the author would come up with. And he did list some pretty outlandish ideas. But one in particular caught my eye. There is a belief in some circles that the government is preparing to merge our country with Canada and Mexico and in the process do away with leaders of conservative movements. One of the specific things the article mentioned was the fear that "anti-gay pastors" would be arrested. That caught my eye in part because I was talking to another pastor just a few weeks ago, and he believes that within ten years, the government is going to start moving against churches like ours that won't marry gay people. He thinks they'll take away our tax exempt status which would make it very expensive for us to survive and then move up to more extreme measures, in the name of working against "hate crimes" and "hate speech." Now, I don't know if that's all really going to happen or not. But the Bible is quite clear about what it means to be Christian in a sinful world: conflict with the forces of unbelief. This morning, in our Old Testament lesson, we have an example of that conflict. And it's kind of a depressing read. When you fast forward from Israel to today, you wind up asking yourself **what peace is there for us Christians?**

I.

Now, the story that we have before us might be new to you. It happened between eight and nine hundred years before Jesus was born. At that time, the northern kingdom of Israel was ruled by Baal worshippers. King Ahab was the most famous of those wicked kings. His daughter, Athaliah, married a prince of the southern kingdom, which we sometimes call Judah. Her husband eventually ruled in Jerusalem. Athaliah brought the idol worship and the wickedness that she learned from her parents into her new home. Her husband was an evil king. He ruled for eight years and then their son became king. He ruled for only one year and then he was killed in battle. When he died, Athaliah seized control of the kingdom. She murdered her own grandchildren so that she could rule Judah and lead that country deeper into Baal worship.

For six years, she ruled. But when she seized control, her daughter worked against her. Her daughter's name was Jehosheba and she was married to the high priest, a man named Jehoiada. Jehosheba saved one of her brother's sons, a baby named Joash. She hid him and his nurse during the slaughter and then she and her husband kept them safe at the temple until the young king was seven years old. Then Jehoiada presented him to

the people as the rightful king. The people welcomed this child as their king. The temple guards killed Athaliah and the people destroyed the temple she had built to Baal.

How does that story strike you? At first glance, it might seem like a parable of intolerance. After all, Athaliah is portrayed as evil because she has a different religion. She and her high priest are killed and their worship place is demolished. How can that be a good thing? Am I going to stand up here and preach that we should do the kinds of things that Jehoiada did? Am I going to call for a bloody religious war against everyone who doesn't follow our beliefs? Not at all. Jehoiada lived in very different situation. Israel was a theocracy – that means it was a country that God ruled openly, through the kings. In Israel, God commanded the death penalty for leading people away from the true God. So what Jehoiada did was necessary and even God pleasing in that situation. But God has not placed us under a theocracy. God has not established a New Testament kingdom in which believers are supposed to execute those who try to lead people astray. God has not called us to engage in a bloody religious war.

But what was true then and is true today is that in this sinful world, believers will always be at war with unbelievers. In the gospel lesson for today, Jesus said, **“Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division.”** The Savior, the Good Shepherd, the one who loves all people said that he would divide families and bring fire on the earth. Again and again, Jesus warned us that living our faith brings us into conflict with the sinful world around us. It can't be any other way, because every sinner is born an enemy of God and he fights against God. He strives to replace what God says and what God wants with what he says and what he wants. And nothing makes an unbeliever angrier than coming face to face with Christians who insist on the Word of God.

Christian warfare is inevitable. But God never told us to take up the sword – or a gun – and defend ourselves. Why not? Because people are not our primary enemies. In fact, it's always our hope that God will bring even our most dedicated enemies to repentance and faith. We hope and pray that they will live with us in eternity forever. Our real enemy is someone we can't see. St. Paul said in our epistle lesson, **“For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but ... against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”**

Our real enemy is the devil. We're locked in a battle with him from the moment God gives us faith until the moment we leave this life. The battles we fight with the enemies of the gospel here are really battles with the devil. That means that we can expect persecution here. It's part of life in a sinful world. We can expect that those who follow the devil are going to do everything in their power to make life difficult for us. Maybe that does mean that at some point in our lives, we'll face government persecution. Certainly, it means that most governments are dominated by unbelievers, so they don't care whether we like their policies or not. It means that unbelievers will characterize us as ignorant and backward and narrow-minded any time we insist on living as God says. In that climate, should we expect the media to transmit messages that agree with what God says or with what the devil says? Of course, the devil always will dominate.

We are at war. That war began in the Garden of Eden. When God made the world, it was perfect. But when Satan rebelled and then tempted Adam and Eve to rebel, he set the stage of an endless conflict between the followers of the devil and the followers of Christ. But Jesus already won the war for us. On the cross, Jesus died and paid for our sins – he paid for the sinner that we were born with, that sinner that still lurks inside us and betrays us to the devil. He died and paid for all the times and all the ways that every human being followed the devil instead of following God. Jesus died and paid for all the sin of all people everywhere. And then he rose and said that it's all forgiven. We have beaten the devil because Jesus beat him for us. That gospel gives us faith in Jesus. The gospel takes dedicated enemies of God and transforms them into soldiers who fight against the devil.

The battles we fight here are almost over. As soon as we leave this life, we will have peace. We will live with God in heaven. The devil won't be able to hurt us anymore. The sinner in our hearts will be gone at the moment God takes us out of this life. And he will wipe away all that hurt here. When Jesus returns, he'll send the devil and all his allies to hell forever. He'll remake this world and wipe away all the scars of this endless war here. He will raise our bodies and renew them so that we will live him in peace and joy for all eternity. That's the promise that we cling to, every day. God never promises us peace while we live here. The devil is dedicated to destroying us and our faith. So **what peace is there for us Christians? The peace to come in heaven.**

II.

By an odd quirk of God's working, that peace is ours now, even while we fight the endless war. Jesus won the war when he died and rose. What we're living through might be called "mopping up operations." I just read a book about President John Adams. He was involved in the negotiations with Great Britain to end the Revolutionary War. The war was won in 1781 when Lord Cornwallis surrendered at Yorktown. But the peace treaty wasn't signed until two years later. During those years, on and off fighting continued. In fact, the son of one of the American negotiators was killed in a meaningless battle a year after the war was won but before the peace treaty was signed. We live in a time like that. Jesus defeated the devil once and forever at the cross and the empty tomb. On Judgment Day, God will send him to hell. But until that peace arrives, he still fights against us here.

The Bible says that the devil is full of fury because he knows his time is short. He wants to inflict as much pain and hurt on us as he can because once Jesus comes back, he'll never be able to hurt anyone again. So he fights against us. He fights in the ordinary hurts of life that sweep around us – disasters, sorrows, hardships. He fights in the temptations he brings and the despair that he calls us to. He whispers in our ears and challenges our faith: "If God really loved you," he says, "would he let that happen to you?" And of course, he stirs up his followers against us. He wants to kill our faith and drag us to hell with him. But if he can't do that, at the very least, he wants to make us miserable while we live here.

All that means we still have to fight against the forces of evil in this dark world. But our weapons are not violence – even though violence was a part of Israel's arsenal before Christ came. Our allies in this war will never be the government, even though God charges all governments with keeping peace and order and justice in this life. We can never legislate Christianity. We can never compel people to believe and behave themselves.

Our weapon is the gospel. God built his power into the gospel. Every time we announce that Jesus loves us, that Jesus lived and died for us, that Jesus rose and defeated our enemy, the Holy Spirit is working. And the first place that he works is in our own hearts. I never feel more encouraged in my own faith than after teaching or preaching or comforting. When God calls me, as he did this week, to sit down with a family who is suffering and tell them all that God promises them in that situation, I almost always leave them encouraged in my faith. That's the power of the Holy Spirit fighting against the devil. And when those words that he sends me to share touch your hearts, here in church, or in my office, or in your living room, or in a hospital room, it's not because you have a good pastor. It's because the Holy Spirit comes in that announcement that Christ has won the battle for you and he is standing by you in this mopping up phase and he will bring you home, so that you can lay your weapons down and live with him in peace. You and I are the first recipients of that gift. And God calls it peace. That's why we named our congregation "Peace Lutheran Church" because we have peace in our hearts, even when we struggle and fight against the devil here. When we hurt the most, when the devil gives us no rest, Jesus comes in the word, in communion, in the memory of our baptism and he comforts our hearts. He gives us peace.

Day after day, week after week, we proclaim that peace to the world. Again and again, God takes people who are born his enemies and he makes them his friends. He makes them our allies in the war against the devil here. He puts them in the trenches next to us and we fight together until our Lord returns or he calls us home. That's God's plan for us. That makes all the difference in this war we face. **What peace is there for us Christians? The peace in our hearts that the gospel gives.**

I don't know what tomorrow is going to hold. And Jesus told us once not to worry about it. Each day has enough evil of its own. Today, we stand under the cross. Today, our Lord stands next to us. Today, we face the enemy in the power of the Holy Spirit. If we wake up tomorrow and we're still here, that will be true again. But one day soon, we will see the Lord with our own eyes. Everything we face between now and then is designed to bring us to him. Trust in Jesus and hear his gospel. And have peace. Amen.