

But as soon as Jeremiah finished telling all the people everything the LORD had commanded him to say, the priests, the prophets and all the people seized him and said, "You must die!⁹ Why do you prophesy in the LORD's name that this house will be like Shiloh and this city will be desolate and deserted?" And all the people crowded around Jeremiah in the house of the LORD.

¹⁰When the officials of Judah heard about these things, they went up from the royal palace to the house of the LORD and took their places at the entrance of the New Gate of the LORD's house. ¹¹Then the priests and the prophets said to the officials and all the people, "This man should be sentenced to death because he has prophesied against this city. You have heard it with your own ears!"

¹²Then Jeremiah said to all the officials and all the people: "The LORD sent me to prophesy against this house and this city all the things you have heard. ¹³Now reform your ways and your actions and obey the LORD your God. Then the LORD will relent and not bring the disaster he has pronounced against you. ¹⁴As for me, I am in your hands; do with me whatever you think is good and right. ¹⁵Be assured, however, that if you put me to death, you will bring the guilt of innocent blood on yourselves and on this city and on those who live in it, for in truth the LORD has sent me to you to speak all these words in your hearing."

(Jeremiah 26:8-15)

God Says Hard Things

What do you do when somebody doesn't want to hear the truth? Sometimes, we find ourselves in a situation where we have to decide if we're going to tell somebody something that they really don't want to hear. The easy thing is often just to keep our mouths shut because they're not going to thank us for telling them the truth. But if we care about people, sometimes we have to say things that are hard for them to hear. That's not just true about us. It's true about God. In the Old Testament lesson that we have before us this morning, God said things that his people didn't want to hear. While the circumstances we live in are very different from those that the prophet Jeremiah addressed, God's purpose still applies to our lives today. **God says hard things.**

I.

Jeremiah lived at the end of the independent kingdom of Judah. God called him to stand up in an unbelieving generation and call sin what it is. Today's lesson follows one example of that preaching. God told Jeremiah to go to the temple and preach that unless the people repented and returned to God's Word, Jerusalem would become like Shiloh. What was Shiloh? It was a town about twenty miles north of Jerusalem. It was the site of the first worship center in Israel. For three hundred years the tabernacle – the tent Moses had made to worship God – stood at Shiloh. But then the Philistines defeated the Israelites in battle and captured the Ark of the Covenant. Apparently, they destroyed the city of Shiloh and burned the tabernacle. It was never a worship center again. Later, King David brought the Ark to Jerusalem which became the new worship center. His son Solomon built the temple there and by the time Jeremiah spoke this warning, four hundred more years had passed.

God commanded Jeremiah to tell the people of Jerusalem that their temple and their city would suffer the same fate as Shiloh – the temple would be destroyed and the site would be abandoned if the people did not repent and return to God. And God had Jeremiah preach that message right in the temple courts. It would be like someone coming in here and telling us that this building would be burned down and Peace Lutheran Church would be disbanded, if we didn't change our ways.

How popular do you think that message was? God speaks hard truths to his people and sometimes, people who claim to worship God don't want to hear those things. As soon as Jeremiah finished telling them what God had said, the priests and the prophets and the people seized him and said, **"You must die! Why do you prophesy in the LORD's name that this house will be like Shiloh and this city will be desolate and deserted?"** Then they put him on trial before the king's officials. They said, **"This man should be sentenced to death because he has prophesied against this city. You have heard it with your own ears!"**

Who actually attacked Jeremiah? The priests. God had established the priesthood in Israel. Their job was to offer and to explain the sacrifices that represented the coming sacrifice of Christ, and to offer prayers in behalf of God's people. They pictured the work of Christ for the people. How were they different from the prophets? The prophets were preachers. Their job wasn't to foretell the future as much as it was to proclaim

God's Word. In the case of almost all the true prophets whose names we know, God did tell them the future. But if we had lived at that time, you might have called me a prophet because my primary job is to preach and teach.

In Jeremiah's time, the priests no longer believed all that God said in the Bible and there were large numbers of false prophets – men who claimed to preach God's message but who really were telling people what they wanted to hear or what the prophet wanted them to believe. As is so often the case, false teachers say things that are much easier to hear. When Jeremiah threatened God's judgment, the priests and prophets told the people that God would never say this. Our God loves us. He wouldn't ever say anything that is this hurtful. And as is the case today, to say that, they had to ignore what the Bible says.

The issues are different today. But the dynamic Jeremiah faced is the same. All over America, people who call themselves pastors and professors – today's prophets – deny the hard things that God says in his word. Take, for example, the prevailing attitudes about sex and marriage. God says that sex is only for one man and one woman who are married to each other. Our society says that God would never say something that old fashioned and unloving. If two people truly care about each other, it's nobody's business what they do in the privacy of their own home. And they can have one home, even if they aren't married. Of course, if they do get married and it doesn't work out, God wants them to be happy. So, they can just get a divorce. Clearly, if God made them gay, then it would be homophobic for us to point to all those Bible passages where God condemns homosexuality and say that it's wrong. In fact, our society says that there's something wrong with churches and people who try to deny the right of gays to be married. It rejoices in the fact that more and more states are "seeing the light" and allowing gay marriage.

God says hard things – and by that, I mean anything that's hard for us sinners to accept. God tells us to repent of our sinful attitudes and listen to what he says about sex and marriage, about abortion, about church fellowship, and the list could go on and on. If we say those hard things, people are going to object: "God would never be so unloving!" Why do they think that? Because our society no longer believes in sin. It doesn't believe that we are all sinful from birth and that left to ourselves, we can only make God angry. So it believes that everyone should choose for themselves what's right and what's wrong for them. God just wants us to be happy.

So our society can never understand why God says hard things. God doesn't enjoy our hurt. He doesn't relish the torment that guilt causes our hearts. But God does inflict that torment because he loves us. Jeremiah was really saying, "Repent!" He offered God's people a way to avoid being destroyed like Shiloh. But they didn't hear an offer of life. They heard a threat of death. And that will always be true for unbelievers. But when God hits us with the hammer of the law, he does it because he loves us. He wants us to repent and to avoid hell and to spend eternity with him.

We are bombarded with messages that God wouldn't do that, God wouldn't say that, God isn't like that. That will continue until the Lord returns. And don't we all feel the pressure? Don't we all struggle with some hard truth of what God says? Most of us don't have a problem with God's teaching on gay marriage. But what about living together? What about divorce? What about refusing to fellowship with people who don't teach all that God says? What about disciplining members who refuse to repent? What is your struggle with God's word?

The Old Man in our hearts is always ready to join the priests and the prophets of Jeremiah's day and make God say what we want him to say. That would be a terrible sin, a sin that endangers the very existence of our faith. It's a sin that deserves God's punishment in hell forever. But it is also a sin that Jesus paid for. He was the only person who ever perfectly accepted all that God said. Jesus had the only perfect faith. God gives us credit for his life and faith. Jesus went to the cross and died for that Old Man in our hearts and for all our struggles to accept what God says. His blood wipes that sin away. Repent and live. Be sorry for the sins you have committed and trust that Jesus has taken those sins away. Then turn from those sinful attitudes. **God says hard things. Listen to his Word!**

II.

When Jeremiah preached God's message, he wound up on trial for his life. He made the only defense that he could: God sent him to prophesy those things. Then he tried to get them to hear the real point: "**Now reform your ways and your actions and obey the LORD your God. Then the LORD will relent and not bring the disaster he has pronounced against you.**" Killing the messenger wasn't going to change God's

message. But repentance would change God's actions. Then Jeremiah said, **"As for me, I am in your hands; do with me whatever you think is good and right."** But he went on and pointed out that if they killed him, they would be guilty. That's where our text stops. But if you read on, you'll see that the people and the court officials were moved and they even cited an earlier prophet, Micah, saying the same things about Jerusalem. And they let Jeremiah go.

Faith always stands with the word of God. Every time a pastor stands in front of you, you have to examine his words and determine if he is true to the Lord. When you join a church, you are declaring that you support the teachings and the work of that church. When you join a WELS congregation, you're saying that you accept the teachings of the evangelical Lutheran church as true to the Word of God. How do you know that's true? You have to know the word. You have to listen to what is taught. It is your job to insist on the proper teaching of law and gospel in this church. It is your responsibility to insist that your pastors and your teachers conform all their teaching and practice to the word of God. If you don't, you sin.

And in an unbelieving society, God calls us to identify ourselves with the truth no matter how unpopular it is. We must understand that it is going to be harder and harder for us to stand up for what God says. If you put Christian doctrine to a vote in our country, it would be defeated. If you asked even people who call themselves Christians to vote on how churches should practice their faith, on almost every issue, the vote would go against the truth today. It's even worse than that. A few weeks ago, I read about a survey that asked people to rank what influenced the moral choices they made. And overwhelmingly, people answered that their church's teachings had no influence whatsoever on the choices they made. In their comments, many people made it clear that religion should not tell people how to live.

How does that make you feel about standing up for the truth? Isn't it a little scary? I think it is and it's my job to teach this stuff to you. Where does the fear come from? In the end, it shows that our faith is imperfect. We are weak and sinful and sometimes we don't show the cool courage that Jeremiah showed on this occasion. But that doesn't mean that God abandons us. He promises to be with us, and sometimes even in this life, we'll win like Jeremiah did on this occasion. When fear keeps us silent, the only way to clear our conscience is to repent. To recognize our sin and to trust in Christ for forgiveness. Jesus' blood covers all our weakness and sin. God has forgiven us, even for our fear and our silence!

God knows how hard this is for us. He will work through that gospel message to make us stronger so that when we are tested, we can show the faith Jeremiah showed. If you read Jeremiah's book, you'll see that he struggled, too. A number of times, he complains to God about how hard it all is. His faith was imperfect, too. But God gave him the strength to stand when it counted. He did that through the gospel, through the promise of forgiveness. So if you've failed in the past, there still is hope for the future. Every time we hear about Jesus, every time we wrestle with our weakness and God forgives us, every time we hear God's promises of love and life and power, the Holy Spirit reaches into our hearts and strengthens us. It may take a lot of time and a lot of gospel to make us as courageous as Jeremiah was. But God has the time and the gospel. Keep coming back to hear that message and then go out and take your stand. **God says hard things. Stand firm on the truth!**

It's always a struggle to hear hard truths. But when we listen and we see the truth about ourselves, tremendous blessings can result. Sometimes, when we do that for other people, they do thank us for saying what they needed to hear. Sometimes it even happens right away. God loves us. That's the only reason he says these things to us. He wants us to repent of our sin. And he wants to find comfort and strength and love in Christ. See that love in all that God says to us. And thank God for his love by living according that word. Amen.