

*This is what the LORD Almighty says:*

- “Do not listen to what the prophets are prophesying to you;  
they fill you with false hopes.  
They speak visions from their own minds,  
not from the mouth of the LORD.  
17 They keep saying to those who despise me,  
‘The LORD says: You will have peace.’  
And to all who follow the stubbornness of their hearts  
they say, ‘No harm will come to you.’  
18 But which of them has stood in the council of the LORD  
to see or to hear his word?  
Who has listened and heard his word?  
19 See, the storm of the LORD  
will burst out in wrath,  
a whirlwind swirling down  
on the heads of the wicked.  
20 The anger of the LORD will not turn back  
until he fully accomplishes  
the purposes of his heart.  
In days to come  
you will understand it clearly.  
21 I did not send these prophets,  
yet they have run with their message;  
I did not speak to them,  
yet they have prophesied.  
22 But if they had stood in my council,  
they would have proclaimed my words to my people  
and would have turned them from their evil ways  
and from their evil deeds. (Jeremiah 23:16-22)*

### **Don't You Dare Listen!**

“Don't you dare!” Have you parents ever said that? Have you kids ever heard a parent or a teacher say that to you? I don't think I've ever said it to my kids, although they might remember things differently than I do. But I know that my parents said it to me. “Don't you dare!” Those words are designed to strike fear into your heart: if you do dare, you will suffer the consequences. Would God ever say something like that to us? Today, we don't like to talk about a God who punishes. Our society wants God to be a cheerful grandpa who smiles when the grandkids misbehave. We want him only to love, only to forgive, and never, ever to call people to account for what they've done – unless they're child molesters or pastors who dare to tell us how to live and what to believe. Well, I'm sorry, but the whole book of Jeremiah is basically God saying, “Don't you dare!” Now, those exact words never come up. But the tone is absolutely there. Today, he says something that really sounds harsh to modern ears: **Don't you dare listen!**

Listen to who? The prophets. Who were the prophets? Especially as we come up to Christmas, we remember all the ways the prophets foretold Jesus' coming. They certainly did that. But all that foretelling the future may give us an incomplete picture of what the prophets actually did in Israel. They were the preachers. The priests offered sacrifices. The Mt. Sinai covenant demanded a lot of sacrifices. It was dirty, physical, time consuming work. It absolutely served a spiritual purpose. But it wasn't preaching. That's what the prophets did. There were many more prophets in Israel than the twenty or so whose names we know. There were

“schools of the prophets.” And there were groups of prophets at the courts of the kings. They claimed to reveal the will of God to the kings. Those were the men God warned his people about.

## I.

**Don't you dare listen to the prophets who promise peace!** Now, everybody wants peace, right? God promises peace. Jesus is the Prince of Peace. We named our congregation Peace Lutheran Church. So what was the problem? You have to understand the times Jeremiah lived in. He was the last prophet before the destruction of Jerusalem. He lived through it and saw the bodies piled up in the streets and watched the survivors dragged off in chains to Babylon. He spent decades warning God's people that that was going to happen. And that made him very unpopular.

The prophets at court had a very different message. God said, **“Do not listen to what the prophets are prophesying to you; they fill you with false hopes. They speak visions from their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD. They keep saying to those who despise me, ‘The LORD says: You will have peace.’ And to all who follow the stubbornness of their hearts they say, ‘No harm will come to you.’”** They promised peace and safety. But not the kind of peace and safety God actually promises in his word – not the spiritual peace of sins forgiven and eternal life, not the peace of mind and heart that comes from knowing that God loves us and does all things for our good, especially when life hurts. If they had promised that, God would've rejoiced. But they promised physical even political peace and safety.

When Jeremiah spoke these words, Israel was a broken country. A hundred years before, the northern part had been wiped out by the Assyrians. Now, the southern part was a tiny state facing superpowers. The king of Israel was Jehoiachin. He became king because Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon attacked Jerusalem and put his father in chains and took him away. Jehoiachin would only last three months before Nebuchadnezzar did the same thing to him. Then his uncle became the last king of Israel. At the end of his reign, the Babylonians laid siege to Jerusalem for at least the third time and destroyed it. Every decision the kings made during this time was dangerous. The Babylonian army was never far away and never afraid to terrorize them to get their way.

So what did the people want to hear? Peace. Safety. The Babylonians won't come back. God will protect Israel just like he's always done. But that wasn't God's message. Why not? Because the people weren't faithful. They didn't want to trust God and show that faith by living for him. They wanted God to be a good luck charm that they could use when times got bad, but that they could ignore when they didn't need him. They wanted to do what they wanted to do and they didn't want to hear that it was sin. They believed that God owed them protection and forgiveness.

Does that sound at all familiar? This morning, we're beginning our celebration of the Lutheran Reformation. Tuesday will be 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Luther nailing the 95 Theses to the castle church door in Wittenberg. At that time, people wanted to believe things about God that God just didn't say – just like today. At that time, people claimed to speak for God and they led his people astray – just like today. In Luther's day, they peddled indulgences to create a false sense of security. The Catholic Church taught that even believers would have to suffer in purgatory until you paid for all your sins. But if you bought an indulgence, you were OK. If you went on a pilgrimage or jumped through hoops the church invented, you would be safe.

The issues are different today. The atmosphere is different today. But way down at the root, the lies are the same. Prophets – pastors, professors, teachers of the church – promise you peace if you're just a good person. If you're tolerant to people with a different sexual orientation, if you support gay rights and gay marriage, if you oppose hate filled preachers who insist on what God says, then God owes you peace and safety. Now, God does not say that the Babylonians are going to conquer America if we don't repent. But God does say that Judgment Day is coming and he will repay people for their sins. God does say that in the last days there will be wars and rumors of wars, that upheaval and violence and godlessness will be on the rise. God does tell us, “Don't you dare listen to false prophets who promise you peace!” There is no peace in this world, at least not the kind that people want. So many pastors and preachers today are more worried about civil rights than they are about the gospel. They're more worried about transforming our society than they are about changing hearts. They care more about the threat of nuclear war than they do about war with the devil. The peace they're trying to bring about is an illusion: a world without hate or violence or sorrow.

God does promise a world like that. But not until after Jesus returns. The Reformation is about knowing God's real promises and avoiding the lies of men. Don't listen to false prophets that promise you

peace here and now. Listen to the gospel of Jesus Christ. It promises you peace in your heart while the whole world crashes and burns. It promises you eternal peace with him in a perfect world after he returns. It promises to transform our hearts and give us new life, but that life is hidden with Christ until he comes back.

How do you know that promise will come true? Because Jesus came to save you. The Son of God took on human flesh and lived a perfect life in your place. He was never fooled by false prophets. He never pined for peace that we can't have here. He never promised to bring peace to this earth, but a sword. He was perfect in his trust of his Father and perfect in his life in our place. Then he died and paid for all our sin. The blood of the Son of God paid for all the billions of sinners who have ever lived. That blood means that for us, there is no hell and there is no death. We will live with him forever. Jesus rose to tell us that we are free. He came to us in that gospel message and gave us faith. Every time we hear that message, he reaches into our hearts to give us peace. He lives inside us and fights against our fear and our sin. For as long as we walk this earth, he walks beside us working real peace in our hearts. He will come again and take us back to Eden and we will have true physical peace and safety for all eternity. That's what the Reformation is about. That's what all true prophets proclaim.

## II.

“Don't you dare do that!” When my mother said that, you had to be pretty brave to go ahead and do it. Or just plain stupid. I'll let you decide which one I was in my youth. When God says it, the consequences of disobedience are far greater. God sent Jeremiah to wake his people to how great their danger was. He didn't do that because he was abusive father in a dysfunctional family who liked scaring his children. He didn't do that because his people were primitive and fear was all they understood. He did that because they were racing toward hell and he wanted them to stop and live. But they liked their false prophets because those false prophets told them exactly what they wanted to hear. That was the heart of the problem. God's warning echoes down through the ages: **Don't you dare listen to the prophets who have not stood in God's council.**

He says that twice in our reading for today. At the very end, he says, **“I did not send these prophets, yet they have run with their message; I did not speak to them, yet they have prophesied. But if they had stood in my council, they would have proclaimed my words to my people and would have turned them from their evil ways and from their evil deeds.”**

In Jeremiah's day the prophets didn't have the whole Bible, so sometimes God gave the prophets special messages. False prophets just made up their own messages. It still happens today. Just turn on your cable TV to the religious stations and you'll find all kinds of people who claim that God speaks to them. Or go to your local Catholic church. Official Catholic doctrine teaches that Holy Spirit works in the shrine of pope's heart and makes it impossible for him to speak in error when he speaks as the official head of the church. He claims to get messages from God. The truth is, none of those people do. And you can tell that because they haven't stood in God's council.

What does that mean? The picture is a king sitting in a circle with his advisors and officials and then sending them off to carry out his instructions. Those officials knew what they were supposed to do because the king had told them. God pictured true prophets sitting in a circle with God and listening to his word and then carrying it to the people. Now, in Jeremiah's day, that did mean that God spoke directly to them, at least some of the time. But already in his day, a large part of the Bible did exist. Jeremiah clearly knew it well. And God expected his prophets then and now to know and study that word. In our day, that word is all that God gives us and we need nothing else.

What good does studying that word do? **“If they had stood in my council, they would have proclaimed my words to my people and would have turned them from their evil ways and from their evil deeds.”** No one who stands in God's council proclaims any message other than the one he has given us in his word. That's how you know that all those TV preachers are making up their messages. That's how you know what Luther knew, that the Catholic Church leads people away from Christ because it does not teach what the Bible clearly and plainly says. That's how you judge every pastor who ever stands up here. Does he stand in God's council? Does he know the word of God and speak the word of God and live by that word of God? You know what? If he does, there will always be a result. The Holy Spirit will strike sinning hearts with guilt and fear. Then he will comfort and heal them with the good news that Jesus has won forgiveness for all our sins. He will renew them and then they will turn from their sin. They will want to live a new and holy life. Will it be perfect on this side of heaven? Of course not. But it will happen. Because God works through his word.

That is the key insight of the Lutheran Reformation. God works through his word. Anything or anyone who drags us away from God's word is working against God, no matter what position that person holds in the church. God speaks in his word. That is the only way for us to know him and his love. The truth is there in his word. The truth is a gift he has given us. While it takes effort and it can be hard, we can learn the lessons God teaches. We can be his ambassadors. We can gather in a circle around him and then run with his message. Listen to that truth of Jesus and his love. Amen.