

I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.

¹⁷ *“Be on your guard against men; they will hand you over to the local councils and flog you in their synagogues. ¹⁸ On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles. ¹⁹ But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, ²⁰ for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.*

²¹ *“Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. ²² All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. ²³ When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another. I tell you the truth, you will not finish going through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes. (Matthew 10:16-23)*

A Funny Kind of Fortress is Our God

When my kids were little, they used to play with these neat toys that were called Playmobils. Do you know what those are? They're really a system of all kinds of themed toys. There are pirates, dinosaurs, Romans, Egyptians, police stations, airports and on and on. My kids loved them. They had a mish mash of different themes and they would divide them into worlds. They don't want me to tell you this, but sometimes, they still play with them. Well, one of the early pieces that we bought was a castle. It had a tower and trap doors and even a section of the wall that came out so you could play like enemy knights had broken in. But it was a funny kind of fortress in one respect: it didn't have all four walls. Later editions of it corrected that flaw, but when we bought it, you had to pretend like the fourth wall was there. Now, what does all that have to do with Reformation Day? Just a moment ago, we sang the battle hymn of the Reformation: a Mighty Fortress is Our God. A few minutes before that, we sang the psalm that it's based on, Psalm 46, which reminded us that God is our refuge and strength. To Luther, "A mighty fortress is our God" was saying the same thing. But when I read the gospel lesson for today and I hear the dire warnings that Jesus utters there, the two things don't seem to go together very well. As a Lutheran pastor, I want to stand up here on Reformation Day and preach a triumphant sermon of the pure gospel going forward and even the gates of hell will not stand against it. But the appointed gospel lesson for today speaks of persecution and betrayal and flight. I'm left to conclude, **a funny kind of fortress is our God.**

I.

What do I mean by that? Well, real fortresses aren't like the Playmobil castle my kids had. They have walls that go all the way around. They have defenses that keep the people inside safe from attack. But Jesus doesn't talk about safe places in our gospel lesson today. He doesn't talk about seeking shelter behind thick walls. He talks about sending us out like sheep among wolves. **A funny kind of fortress is our God: he sends us out of safety.**

You all know that sheep have no defenses, right? Our Good Shepherd is the one who defends us and keeps the enemies away. So it's striking today when the Shepherd sends us out right into the teeth of the wolves! The wolves, of course, are the enemies of the gospel. They're all those people out there who hate our message and mock us and do everything in their power to silence the gospel. They're always going to have the upper hand in a sinful world. On this side of heaven, there will never be a truly Christian nation here that lives up to God's Word and embraces the truth. The closest we'll ever come is a nation that has a roughly Judeo-Christian set of values and thinks that obeying the Ten Commandments is the same as trusting in Jesus. But those two are not the same thing. One is law. The other is gospel. We obey. God saves.

So Jesus sends us out to face opposition and even violence. And he does not give us any defenses. He doesn't tell us to get a concealed weapons permit and pack heat. He doesn't tell us to keep lawyers on retainer. He doesn't tell us to stand our ground. He tells us, **“Be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.”** Notice, Jesus does not say, “Just be passive. Just let them do whatever they want.” He tells us to be as shrewd as snakes. He's telling us to use our heads. We don't have to walk into every trap that the enemies of the gospel lay. We need to understand when it's the right time to speak and when it's the right time to silently glide away. We need to recognize that there are moments when the only thing we can do is stand up for the truth and take our lumps because silence would equal a denial of the faith. But there are also moments when we can wait

for a better opportunity to share, moments when we're preparing the ground for that chance to speak, moments when we don't cast our pearls before swine. We are shrewd about when and how we give our witness. But we also remain as innocent as doves. We don't need to trick people into coming to church. We don't need gimmicks and silliness. And we don't live like we belong to the sinful world around us so that no one can tell we're different. We keep ourselves free from this world's attitudes.

What will be the result? Persecution. Jesus said, **"Be on your guard against men."** You can't trust unbelievers when it comes to faith. They will arrest us and use violence against us. Now, here the United States, we've been blessed in that the power of the state and the violence of the mob have largely left us alone for more than 200 years. But do you think that will always be true? Do you think that we can still stand up in this society for what the Bible says? Now that the pope is opening the doors for gays in the Catholic Church, how long do you think it will be before there are consequences for churches who stand up for what the Bible says? Our society no longer considers itself to be a Christian nation. How long will it be before all the things Jesus says here begin to literally come true in our society? Already, there is persecution. Already, you cannot stand up for what the Bible really says without criticism. How much worse will it get? Jesus says that children will betray their parents to death and parents their children. He says, **"All men will hate you because of me."** If you are faithful to Christ, the unbelieving world will hate you.

But then Jesus said, **"He who stands firm to the end will be saved."** Life here has to hurt. We live in a sinful world. But we don't live for this world. The world that's coming makes all the things that hurt here worth it. The world that's coming makes standing up for Christ and suffering the hatred of all men worth it. And why does Jesus send us out like sheep among wolves to be devoured and persecuted? He says, **"On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles."** That's what it's all about. When the unbelieving world uses violence and the power of the state or the power of the mob to stamp out the Christian Church, Jesus uses those moments to declare the gospel. The gospel is the power of God. And you know what? Men like St. Paul can tell you that the gospel can take people who hated Christ and turn them into disciples. The gospel does that every single day. Every one of us here was born a hater of Christ. We may not remember that, but it's true about us. We are what we are today – children of God and heirs of eternal life – we are because the gospel reached into our hearts and gave us faith. Our job is to proclaim that gospel until the Lord comes. His promise is that he will work through that message.

Now, does that seem like an awful burden to you? It's one thing to be a pastor who spent years training to teach and preach, who can read the Bible in Greek and Hebrew and explain it to others. But what about you guys? Do you feel prepared to proclaim the truth especially when you're being attacked for your faith? Jesus says, "Don't worry. The Holy Spirit will speak through you." What a promise, huh? God will use your faith and he will make sure that you proclaim the good news of Christ with your life and your death. Now, that does not mean that you shouldn't ever take the time to study and prepare. Right now is your time to prepare, to grow in God's word, to grow in faith and wisdom and knowledge. But when the moment of persecution comes, trust in Christ's promise that he will make you the witness you need to be. Only God can do that. And he says he will.

II.

So he sends us out. Our God did not make the Church a fortress that we can hide in while the world goes on around us. He didn't give us permission to keep our heads down until he comes back. He sends us out there, every day, like sheep among hungry wolves. While he tells us to be wise and innocent, he promises us that the world will hate us and persecute us even while we're sharing with them the one way that they can escape from hell and reach eternal life. So why do we even bother to sing, "A mighty fortress is our God"? Because it's true. But he isn't like any fortress we will ever see in this life. Our fortress moves. **A funny kind of fortress is our God: he brings his protection to us.**

That's the key to seeing the love and the joy in this dark and scary text. We are not alone when we go out there among the wolves. Our Good Shepherd goes with us. He is indeed our refuge and our strength, a very present help in time of trouble. We will never face the wolves without him standing next us to guard us. When we're as wise as serpents and we manage to sidestep the wrath of the wolves, that happens because Jesus blessed that wisdom and kept us safe. When we're as innocent doves and still they hate us, Jesus loves us. If he allows them to arrest us and use violence against us, if he allows our society to turn against the Christian Church completely and drive it out, Jesus will still turn every blow, every angry word, every moment of hatred

into blessing for us. And when this life is done, he will bring us home to heaven. And he will watch over those we love and leave behind here among the wolves.

Jesus said that when they persecute us in one city, we should flee to another. He told the disciples that they wouldn't go through all the cities of Israel before he returned. Of course, he didn't mean that they had a list of cities in Israel that they were crossing off as one became too hot to live in. His point is that he is coming quickly. When he returns, all the persecution ceases. When he returns, the Church won't be weak and helpless anymore. When he returns, we will triumph over all the enemies of the gospel, we will triumph over all that sin has done to us here, we will triumph over the sin in our own hearts – we will be set free from that sin and be made perfect and holy forever. And we will live with him for all eternity.

That is what we're looking forward to. That is what Christ came into this world to give us. It is our job to spread that good news and to endure persecution and to flee from homes and comfort rather than cave in. Jesus said, **“He who stands firm to the end will be saved.”** But you know what? That statement has always scared me just a little. What if I'm not strong enough to stand firm to the end? What if I give in to pain and persecution and make compromises with the enemies of the faith or even deny my Lord? I don't like pain. And I know how often sin wins in my heart. I know how often I'm afraid to stand up for the truth. I know how weak and sinful I truly am. What if I don't make it? Do you ever share that fear?

If we truly don't stand firm to the end, we will not make it to heaven. But the grace of our Lord is amazing. Jesus died even for the weakness in our faith. Jesus died and paid for all the times that we compromised with the world and did not stand up for the truth. Jesus died for all the times that we weren't innocent as doves, for all the times we weren't shrewd as serpents, for all the times we refused to go out like sheep among the wolves. He even died for those times that we denied the faith. He rose and God has wiped all that sin away. He rose and God says that we are perfect, just like Jesus was. God sees Jesus always standing up for the truth when he sees us. God sees Jesus allowing himself to be tortured and crucified rather than betray his Father when he looks at us. God sees us as holy and righteous, even though you and I constantly remember all the times and all the ways we've failed. And God promises to work through that gospel and keep us strong. You and I cannot stand firm to the end on our own. But we are not on our own. Our God and Father, our Savior Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit who makes us holy, our Triune God stands with us. And he will make us stand until the end. A mighty fortress is our God – the most mighty fortress we will ever see or need. Amen.