

Jeremiah 20:7-13; Matthew 10:5a, 21-33
3rd Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 7)
June 21, 2020—Shepherd of the Mountains, Pinetop, AZ

INI

F.D.R. said in his inauguration speech, “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” Hogwash! There are so many things to fear! On top of the COVID-19 pandemic, rioting near our loved ones across the nation, and the daily unknowns and worries, we also have the fear of Jesus’ words coming true (which, by the way, they always do.) We fear it, because there is some discomfort.

No one likes to be rejected, and most of us probably have had experiences that give us a deep fear of rejection. Many today reject not only the message of the Gospel but also those who proclaim this message. Statements like “*you Christians are so close-minded.*” Or “*Organized religion is just a tool to keep the masses in line.*” Or “*That’s fine if you believe that way, but don’t force your God on me.*” are undoubtedly reasons we shrink from bearing witness to Christ more boldly and consistently.

That bold statement we adopt from Joshua “**as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord,**” hangs in our homes. Yet, as we go out into our communities in a world that is increasingly hostile to Christianity, we’re tempted to change it. In our daily behavior it becomes less of what we find in Joshua 24:15 and more “*As for me and my house, we will not rock the boat.*” After all, *it’s improper to discuss religion in polite company.* And they can’t reject us if we don’t give them the chance. And so often the people of God keep their heads down, the Word of God hidden under a bushel, not ruffling any feathers, not taking any risks. And you’re not alone when you have this attitude and engage in this behavior. This kind of behavior also comes from the guy who stares at me in my bathroom mirror.

But is the world really increasingly hostile to us? Or has it always been? What should we really expect?

Hundreds of years before Jesus’ incarnation and ministry, His life, death, and resurrection, His prophet Jeremiah was struggling with great expectations and disappointing letdowns. He hadn’t chosen the life of a prophet. It was thrust upon him at an early age. Normally, you had to be in your 30’s to preach publicly, yet God chose this teenager to deliver His Word.

“Dress yourself for work; arise, and say to them everything that I command you. Do not be dismayed by them, lest I dismay you before them. And behold I make you this day a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls, against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests, and the people of the land. They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, declares the Lord, to deliver you.” Jeremiah 1:17-19

This morning, we find Jeremiah lamenting his task. He doesn’t feel like a fortified city, an iron pillar, or a set of heavy, sturdy, bronze walls. Instead he feels like crying out. **“O LORD, you have deceived me, and I was deceived; you are stronger than I, and you have prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all the day; everyone mocks me. For whenever I speak, I cry out, I shout, “Violence and destruction!” For the word of the LORD has become for me a reproach and derision all day long.”**

Jeremiah has been thrown in the stocks for his proclamation. His friends and family have turned against him. He is left alone to suffer with the Word of God burning in him. He doesn’t want to proclaim it, but he has to. And there was more than fear for Jeremiah to fear. Danger and terror is on every side.

But where was the deceit that he spoke of in his complaint? The Lord had laid on Jeremiah the expectation of hostility. **“They will fight against you,”** he said at the very beginning, **“but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you.”** Still, in moments of suffering, it’s easy to doubt, to lose focus, to get sidetracked from the promises that should sustain a person. Jeremiah’s

response to suffering is a perfectly human response, and so it is a perfectly imperfect response.

No one likes rejection. Not Jeremiah, not you, not me. But what did you and I expect? What should we have expected? Our calling is not that different from Jeremiah's after all, and not that different from the disciples. And just as God did when calling Jeremiah, the Son of God does also when sending out the disciples and you and me. As Jesus sends them out as sheep in the midst of wolves, He doesn't dare pull the wool over their eyes. No, He tells them exactly what to expect. He never promised sunshine and roses here and now. Quite the opposite. Hatred for His name's sake, opposition even from family members and even to the point of death, persecution perhaps by an entire town. The mission of a follower of Yahweh, a follower of Jesus Christ, is no walk in the park. There are lots of things to fear.

Yet, Jesus says **"have no fear of them...do not fear those who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell."** According to today's reading, those who follow Jesus have absolutely nothing to fear. Rejection? Intimidation? Persecution? Execution? Jesus has already been there and done that. He has stood for us as a dread warrior to conquer everything that we would otherwise have to fear permanently. Sin? He nailed it to a tree. All of it: yours, mine, the next guy's. Satan? Crushed his head and any power he once had to accuse us. Death? He has issued a death sentence for death itself as He left His own tomb.

Jesus does not ask us to follow Him anywhere He has not first gone. And because He has faced every enemy that causes us fear and every temptation that we face (yet without sinning), we can be sure that He understands our fears and will provide mercy and grace to help us in our time of need. He knows our every need and our every weakness, and every perfectly imperfect response we will have to temptation and doubt and fear. Yet still He takes care of us. Not even one of His sparrows, some of the smallest creatures in His vast creation will fall to the earth without His knowledge. They are possibly worthless from our point of view, a nuisance, a pest, a germ factory—sky-mice. Yet He takes great care even of them. If He has such great concern for them, how much more does He have for you and me who are worth more than a penny? We, who He sends us into this hostile world with His message of salvation were purchased with a much greater price, His very own life.

Fear will have its day and its say, but Jesus will have the last word. Think of the Apostle Peter. Out of fear, he denied knowing Jesus three times. And still Jesus forgave him. Because that sin was nailed to the cross too. So, even when we fail to "rock the boat" by sharing our faith in God's Word with the hostile world, that sin has been paid for too. Even when we can't understand what God is doing and we shake our fists to the sky in despair like Jeremiah in his lament, that sin is forgiven too.

No faithful under-shepherd of the Good Shepherd would stand before his flock and glibly tell them: "You have *nothing* to fear." According to Jesus in Matthew 10, those who seek to follow Him have *much* to fear from a *human* point of view: rejection, intimidation, all kinds of opposition, even persecution that, in many cases throughout history, has led to martyrdom for Christ.

From God's point of view, however, we have nothing to fear. Why? Because Jesus has faced the source of every fear, has overcome every enemy that causes us fear, has promised to be with us and watch over us in every fearful situation and to guide us safely to our heavenly home, where fear will be banished forever. With the boldness that comes from that reminder, let us and our households boldly serve the Lord, not just in our homes and in our churches, but everywhere with everyone we meet. Amen!