

Beware of False Prophets

Text: Jeremiah 23:16-29; Matthew 7:15-23

Hymn: "Fruitful Trees, the Spirit's Sowing" (*LSB* 691)

On the face of it, it seems like an impossible task. How do you tell the difference between a true prophet and false prophet? How do you tell which prophet has sat in the council of the Lord and is speaking the words that He sent and which prophets are speaking the words they dreamt up themselves?

We ourselves have not sat in the council of the Lord, have we? But that is the key, because we do sit in the council of the Lord. We have access to the minutes of the council of the Lord. Because the minutes of that particular council are none other than the Word of God spoken through God's prophets and apostles, preserved by God's providence and grace, and transmitted to us in the Holy Scriptures.

In the time of Jeremiah, as in the times before and since, many people came forth and said, "I have a prophecy from God," and proceeded to speak not the words of the Lord but their own words or somebody else's. That kind of prophecy is usually recognized by the fact that it is incredibly successful and popular. Entire world religions have been founded on false prophecies, messages ostensibly from God.

And people have fallen for these false prophets because they don't know any better. But thanks be to God—we have no need to listen to any false prophet, because we *do* know the mind of the Lord. He has revealed it to us in plain language. We don't have to learn Arabic or Hebrew or Greek to know what God is thinking. We don't need to be able to understand or speak "angelic languages" because God has spoken to us by His Son in words that we can understand. We have access to true prophecy—

directly from the mouth of God: “In many and various ways God spoke to his people of old by the prophets, but now in these last days he has spoken to us by His Son” (Heb 1:1) And this morning we hear the voice of Jesus driving us to hear His Word and to be discerning about every other word that is not His or about which we don’t know whether it is His.

“Beware of false prophets.” False prophets are hard to spot if you look at them on the outside. They are not nasty people who come and threaten the church with violence. When we think of the enemies of the church, we often think of those who are on the outside of the church and trying to break the walls down, whether it’s the government or society or someone else. But the truly dangerous ones are the ones on the inside in sheep’s clothing. A sheep recognizes a wolf from a distance and tries to get away. But if the wolf manages to insinuate itself into the flock as a fellow lamb, the sheep will continue munching until they themselves become lunch.

Beware of false prophets, then, because you can’t simply recognize them by obvious marks that are staring at you. No false prophet comes to you and says, “Hello, I have a false prophecy for you.” They come calling out, “Lord, Lord.” They claim to come in the name of Jesus.

And they often come and tell us things that are pleasing to our ears. In the time of Jeremiah, when the Babylonian armies were threatening Jerusalem, no end of prophets came and said, “‘Don’t worry,’ says the Lord, ‘all will be well.’” And Jeremiah ultimately paid with his life for the fact that he spoke the defeatist message, “All is not well. In fact,” he said, “there’s no point even in trying to fight. Because of our sins, the Lord is not on our side.” This did not make Jeremiah a popular preacher. The Church

Extension Fund never received a request from Jeremiah for a building loan. But he spoke the truth. Even today, two and half thousand years later, the words of Jeremiah, not those of the forgotten false prophets, are ringing throughout the world, because it was the word of the Lord, a living and active word.

We are naturally programmed to hear those things that we like to hear and to reject those things that we don't. Those of us who are pleased with ourselves and like to think ourselves good people like to be told so. We don't like preachers who are too honest about our sins. And those of us who think ourselves miserable and useless and lost and without hope don't listen easily to preachers who tell us to stop staring at our own sins and look to the Cross of Jesus. But we like to shake them off and say, "I know myself. Who do you think you are?"

But the word of God is like a double-edged sword. When we hear the Word of God itself, we're not simply hearing information about God; we are being subjected to God in action—His double-edged sword, cutting right through our souls—to destroy that which does not have the right to live and to defend that creation which is His and which He has created for eternal life.

And this is the fruit that we are to look for: "You will recognize the prophets by their fruits." Instruction for preachers in the Scriptures is extremely clear and simple: There's no great trick about preaching. Jesus sent His apostles out to preach repentance and the forgiveness of sins in His name. And Paul, in the letter to the Corinthians, writing to a congregation that wanted something more interesting and sophisticated than the simple message of repentance and forgiveness, wrote, "I came to you knowing nothing except Christ and Him crucified."

We are always tempted to move on. “I’ve heard the Gospel. Tell me something new.” Well, I’ll tell you something new. Since you last heard the Gospel, you’ve been guilty of new sins, new disobedience, new unbelief, for which new repentance, renewed faith, a new washing in the blood of Christ, is required. That’s what’s new. And if need be, you need to hear that every day, because it’s true every day. The moment we move on from the cross of Jesus and its life-giving Gospel to other things, however great they seem, we move our house from the rock to shifting sand.

But as long as we cling to the Word of Jesus, we in fact are active recipients of His grace. He points out our sin, our faults, our weakness, our mortality, all the things that make us squirm and uncomfortable, because He loves us enough to want to diagnose us properly. And He loves us so much that He not only diagnoses us, He treats us. He treats us with the medicine He Himself acquired from the tree of the Cross and which receives its power from the resurrection: He brings His own life and unites us with His life. He doesn’t simply give us instructions from afar but He infiltrates, He breaks in. The false prophets break in to the flock in order to devour it. The true, good shepherd, infiltrates us from within so that we might live of His life.

So you will know the false prophets by the fruit that their false prophecies bring about. Don’t look at the power that appears to be at work. Many healers walked the earth in Jesus’ time healing people and still do. Many people claim to have access to the world of the spirits and still do. Many people went about casting out demons and still do. That is not where we are to look. The fruit of the Word, the fruit of the Spirit in those who hear it, is what comes from the seed that is planted. Is it renewed, sustained, and maintained faith in Jesus Christ? Is it the reception of the forgiveness of

sins and the joy that comes from those who have been redeemed from sin, death, and the power of the devil? Or is it something else? Is it joy but not in the Lord? Is it deliverance but not from sin?

Then, however attractive, it is not what Jesus has sent his prophets out to do. Not everyone who says, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of God. It's reported in the Book of Acts the time the Apostle Paul was in a new place and was casting out demons in Jesus' name. Seven sons of a Jewish high priest saw what Paul was doing and they said, "That's a good one." And they went to some poor person possessed by an evil spirit and the demon turned on them with violence, beat them up, and said, "We know Jesus. We know Paul. But who are you?" In other words, we do not know who you are; we do not recognize your authority" (Acts 19:11-20).

The mere utterance of the name "Jesus" is not enough. It's to do the will of the heavenly Father. The will of the heavenly Father is that all those who have rebelled against him, who are his enemies by their own sinful rebellion, repent of their sins and turn to His Son Jesus Christ so that they might be forgiven. To believe in His Son is to do the will of the Father (John 6:29).

Anything else is at best a distraction and more likely detrimental to your faith. And so in the Scriptures we are instructed not to tolerate or even to ignore false teaching. Not to try to come to terms with false teaching or find common ground with false teachers, as we are tempted to do. No, we are told to shun, to flee from false teaching. Every time you come across false teaching, you are dealing with a wolf in sheep's clothing. And the devil is like a hungry lion, prowling, seeking whom he may devour.

We do not make terms with the enemy. The enemy is doomed for destruction. We take our stand on the side of the Victorious One, Jesus Christ, who has defeated the powers of evil, in whose presence evil cannot survive. As long as we cling to Him, and His Word, we are safe. That will not make us popular. That is not the quickest way to grow a church. It is not a recipe for worldly success or earthly comfort. But it is a recipe for something far better: The eternal inheritance of the children of God which Jesus has prepared for us by His life, His death, and His resurrection, and which He now distributes from His throne at the right hand of God where He is subjecting every enemy under his feet. By whose gifts we live. Branches in the tree, bearing the fruit that His Word bears, fruit that will never spoil but last into life everlasting.

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