

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 23, 2018
Christ the Rock Evangelical Lutheran Church
Farmington, NM

Jeremiah 11:18-20 Because the Lord revealed their plot to me, I knew it, for at that time he showed me what they were doing. **19** I had been like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter; I did not realize that they had plotted against me, saying,

“Let us destroy the tree and its fruit;
let us cut him off from the land of the living,
that his name be remembered no more.”

20 But you, Lord Almighty, who judge righteously
and test the heart and mind,
let me see your vengeance on them,
for to you I have committed my cause.

“From the Mouths of Mortal Messengers”

One sports season has just gotten started. Another is just about to wrap up. Whether the season is just getting started or almost over, some teams realize the results on the playing field don't match up very closely with their own expectations. A team that had a successful season up to the All Star break in baseball is experiencing a near collapse. A squad predicted to compete for the Super Bowl finds itself without a win after two games in the NFL season. Sports writers offer their own evaluations of what has gone wrong. Radio show hosts call for the coach to be fired. There may even be breakdowns between coaches and players, fights behind closed doors in locker rooms, and publicly airing grievances over social media.

Whatever the field, wherever we find ourselves competing, no matter what struggle in life — when we experience failure, setbacks, or defeats — we witness some harmful and damaging ways of handling bad situations. We can also experience some very healthy and positive ways of dealing with disappointment and ruined plans. That is especially true in our lives of faith. In these few short verses from the Prophet Jeremiah, we see just how vulnerable he is. Because he was faithful to the Lord, Jeremiah experienced personal attacks and deadly threats. Jeremiah shows us believers have a complicated relationship with God's judgment. What he does, how he reacts gives us some very important opportunities to grow in our faith. First of all, we get a realistic picture that God doesn't expect his people to be robots. But neither does God expect you to give up or give in when you are under attack. Jeremiah teaches us to entrust ourselves to God to determine our fate and the punishment appropriate for our enemies. Last of all, and most importantly, Jeremiah helps us see God has bigger purposes behind the personal problems we face because we carry out our callings from the Lord. It all comes from the mouth of mortal messengers.

Maybe Jeremiah should not have been caught off guard. But he was. He cries out to God: **“I had been like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter.”** (Jeremiah 11:19) He had been proclaiming God's message to God's wayward people. Unfortunately, because of the difficult

circumstances at this phase in the history of Israel, it was almost entirely a message of doom and gloom. They had been unfaithful to God. Any reforms they had enacted had been purely superficial. So Jeremiah's mission from God was to point out to the people how they had failed to live up to their end of the covenant they had made with God. And because of their evil and stubborn behavior, God was about to bring on them all the curses he had warned them about. Instead of changing their ways and repenting, the people conspire against Jeremiah and plot ways to silence this uncomfortable message.

Even though Jeremiah had been prepared for the difficult nature of his prophetic work, he is still caught off guard. He had no way of anticipating just how hostile the rejection of his message would be. The message he shared had an effect. It hit a nerve. Now they wanted to hit back: **"Let us destroy the tree and its fruit; let us cut him off from the land of the living, that his name be remembered no more."** (Jeremiah 11:19)

We understand this shock. We know human nature bristles at God's word of judgment. Yet, we always hold out hope that people will respond in repentance and faith. You and I have probably never faced death threats because we talk about our faith. We are likely never the targets of murderous plots because we open the Bible in front of someone. But we have this same experience of mixed reactions to rejection. We feel this surge of righteous anger over unbelief. Rebellion, rejection and evil cause legitimate indignation in our hearts.

And it's probably just exacerbated by the spiritual trends in fashion in our world today. Our world downplays the concept of sin. Psychologists say get rid of guilt by refusing to believe in guilt. After all, it's just something made up in your mind, a result of other people forcing their moral expectations onto you. Spirituality in our world today is completely devoid of justice and judgment. Faith is turned into a meaningless mush of personal opinions. Religion gets vandalized with the spray of bigotry and intolerance. Every human heart has a complicated relationship with God's judgment and holiness. So the easiest thing to do is just ignore it. Just pretend that the real issue is in every human heart.

Scientists have a name for this. They call it 'confirmation bias.' Have you heard of that before? It basically says that if you want something to be true, you will keep looking until you find reasons to support what you already believe. We all like to think of ourselves as rational, reasonable people. But the truth is, our hearts tend to make up our minds for us.¹ We believe what we want. We see the world through those lenses. We find reasons to back up our views. We are all susceptible.

So what do we do about it? Jeremiah opens our eyes to see that God's people can expect to experience persecution, plots, and plenty of reasons to complain. God doesn't expect us to be robots. We're not computers planned to just operate according to algorithms. But there are times when our own confirmation bias kicks in. We tell ourselves sharing God's Word with an unbelieving world isn't worth the risk. It just doesn't work. Sinful hearts won't believe it. Complaints about wickedness turn into venting. Cries to God become prescription for what God should do if he really cared about us and was willing to work for

¹ Scrivener, Glen. 3-2-1: The Story of God, The World and You. 10 Publishing: Leyland, England; 2014, p. 125.

what's best for our world. God's vengeance needs to come down in our way and in the exact way we propose. Since God already knows human hearts and searches minds, he is perfectly clear about our innocence. He understands we don't deserve personal problems because of our connection to Christ.

Coming to grips with our own confirmation bias helps us see the amazing example of Jeremiah as he experiences extreme antagonism. He entrusts himself to God. He commits his enemies to the power and judgment of the Supreme Judge. He doesn't stand by idly while enemies attack. He cries out to his mighty and majestic Rescuer: **"But you, Lord Almighty, who judge righteously and test the heart and mind, let me see your vengeance on them, for to you I have committed my cause."** (Jeremiah 11:20) From the mouth of God's mortal messenger we hear humility. Jeremiah humbly entrusts himself to God in times of violent opposition. Jeremiah humbly trusts God's deliverance despite his own personal feelings.

To combat our own confirmation bias, we need the same thing our world needs. Instead of swallowing the spiritual assumptions of our world, we need to put the focus back on God's nature and character. We need to take the focus off our ourselves and see God's power to protect and preserve is the same power that he uses to save sinners.

There are people who are heroes because they make sacrifices that would never even pop into my head. There's a group of doctors called Doctors without Borders. Their motto is "medical care where it's needed most." So when people flee a war zone, in come the doctors. When a terrible epidemic causes a mass exodus, they rush to the scene. You can think of aid workers in the wake of Hurricane Florence or firefighters, people who aren't so naive they aren't aware of personal dangers. But they are pulled by a greater desire to alleviate human pain and suffering.

When we have a proper understanding of God's holiness and justice, we see he puts it to use for our good. The Lord of limitless power knows every human heart and scrutinizes every mortal mind. He recognizes every single person has a deep need no matter what we want to believe, no matter what particular confirmation bias we suffer from. Then he sends his champion. His champion is the one who teaches: **"Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all."** (Mark 9:35) And then Jesus shows that standard for greatness isn't just empty words. Jesus knows what kind of enemies and attacks await him: **"The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise."** (Mark 9:31)

Jesus knew he wasn't an emotionless robot mindlessly carrying out a computer program. Jesus had pain in his heart over the personal persecution he was about to suffer. And yet he entrusted himself to his Father in the face of attacks and abuses. He understood there was a much bigger purpose to what he was about to face. Through his suffering, and only through his death, could God bring about a rescue for people under attack. People being preyed upon by their own rejection and rebellion. People at risk of hatred over the judgment God himself was pronouncing on them. People vulnerable to the opposition of enemies of God.

Weakness and vulnerability aren't contradictions of God's plan. They are essential experiences for us to grasp God's rescue plan. Martin Luther describes how God works in the exact opposite way our human logic thinks he should: "it is only when the total inadequacy of human concepts of righteousness... is recognized that man is driven to look for the one righteousness which has any value...the alien righteousness of Christ."² Jesus is the only one who comes out squeaky clean under God's judgment of the heart and mind. And at the cross, that innocence becomes yours.

The cross is our focus when we feel criticized for our faith, under attack for our beliefs, or intimidated for sharing God's good news. Focusing on the vengeance Jesus experienced on the cross for every evil thought and wicked action will help us be more like Jeremiah. It might not be comfortable or convenient, we might not always enjoy every part of our calling as Christians, but living and sharing our faith is absolutely worth it. Full strength law and gospel coming from our lips is the one antidote everyone in our world truly needs.

We were privileged to hear about what I think is a great example of that last Sunday. Our brothers and sisters in Christ from White Mountain shared their own personal struggles, defeats, and hurts. And yet they were all testifying to the power of the gospel in their lives. Not that God took away all their problems. Not that the Bible made everything easy in their lives. But their identity as children of God triumphs over every other struggle that would attempt to define them. And being pulled closer to Christ through his Word and the support of his people might actually be more challenging than going back to old, unhealthy behaviors. But Jesus gives us something better.

You have a champion. The Lord of Armies understands your struggles. He knows your hurts and weaknesses. Your ultimate victory rests in Christ Jesus. In the victory accomplished by Christ's resurrection from the grave, you have something more solid than the shifting sand of popular opinion. You are part of something more meaningful than fads and trends. Jesus is your vindication. When persecution and opposition come at you, the world watches and notices. God gives you the opportunity to share his message boldly. God carries out his plan through you. Even from your mouth, God delivers his deliverance. It comes from the mouths of mortal messengers. Amen.

² McGrath, Alister. *Luther's Theology of the Cross*. Blackwell Publishing: Oxford, UK; 1990, p. 136.