

Text: Philippians 3:17-4:1 (Jeremiah 26:8-15, Luke 13:31-35) ✝ Reminiscere (2nd Sunday in Lent)

Deadly Discourse

In the name of him who finished his course on the third day when, after having died for our sin, he rose from the dead, dear friends in Christ: It's not difficult to detect the common theme of today's three Scripture readings. They all have to do with God's Word, and specifically with how well (or not) the intended audience receives both the message and the messenger.

Take Jeremiah; he was called by God to deliver a warning to the people of Jerusalem. The message was simple enough. The Lord's patience with his people was at an end. For too long they had turned from him, rejected his commandments, and allowed the mixing of the true faith with Canaanite idolatry and all sorts of sexual excess. The city was a moral cesspool. Its system of justice was corrupt. The rich oppressed the poor by buying favorable decisions from venal judges. There was no love or charity evident in the lives of the people. In addition to that, when threatened by the worldly powers of the day, instead of seeking the Lord's counsel and his divine protection, they were turning to other nations for their hope of defense – and this despite the Lord's prohibition against it. Time and again he had told them, "Don't trust in political alliances. Don't make treaties with Egypt or Babylon. Trust me. I'll take care of you." But they refused to listen.

And so Jeremiah was sent to Temple courts to declare the Lord's coming judgment. "Unless you repent and return to the Lord, this house (meaning the Temple) will be like Shiloh and this city shall be desolate – without inhabitant." By way of explanation, Shiloh was the place the Tabernacle had been set up in the time of the conquest of the Promised Land. For about 400 years it was the dwelling place of God among his people, pretty much up until the time Solomon built the Temple and moved the center of Israel's worship to Jerusalem. The point was that now, over 300 years later, Shiloh was a ruin. There was no trace that the Lord had ever called that spot his home. You see, one of the chief arguments being made by Jeremiah's opponents was that the Lord would never allow his Temple to be defiled or destroyed. As long as "God was in the building", they said, the city of Jerusalem was incapable of being defeated – no matter how far his people strayed from his Word. Their thought was "As long as we've got the Temple, we're safe." Jeremiah is saying, "Way back when, the folks at Shiloh thought the same thing. Look at it now. And understand that this place is next unless you repent and return to the Lord."

To the ears of the priests and people, Jeremiah's words were blasphemy. To speak against the Temple was the gravest offense they could imagine. The irony is delicious. To worship idols along side of the Lord, to turn the Temple into a brothel, to sacrifice children on burning altars there – none of that's blasphemous; but for Jeremiah to say because you're doing all this in the Lord's house he's going to tear the place down, *that's* blasphemy. They paid far more honor to the Temple than to the Lord who dwelt there. Or rather, they were despising the Lord and trusting in his house, which effectively made it an idol. And that's why it had to be destroyed.

But that's not the way the priests and people saw it. They didn't want to hear what the Lord had to say through Jeremiah. And they certainly didn't want to admit that they were doing anything wrong. Their answer was to kill Jeremiah. "For speaking against the Temple, you must die!" And Jeremiah replied, "I'm here to deliver the Lord's message. I've told you exactly what he told me to say. Do with me what you want; but understand this: if you kill me you'll have innocent blood on your hands." As it turns out, Jeremiah was not killed. He was persecuted, he was ridiculed, he was imprisoned; but in the end the Lord rescued him. And as for Jerusalem, the people did not repent. Jeremiah's prophecy came true. The city along with its Temple was laid waste by the armies of Babylon. All the inhabitants were either slaughtered or sold as slaves.

In today's Gospel, Jesus is the one people want to silence. It's the Pharisees who don't like his message. Jesus keeps saying that as hard as they try to make themselves holy by keeping all the commands of God, they are still falling far short of the mark. If they want to enter the kingdom of God, they too must repent and trust in him. They hate that. They *are* keeping God's Law. They have no sins to repent of. But to silence Jesus, they aren't ready to kill him – not just yet, anyway. And so they try to scare him off and shut him up with the threat that King Herod wants to kill him. It's not true; but it *seems* plausible. Herod has recently put John the Baptist to death. And everyone knows that John and Jesus were associated. In truth, Herod didn't want to kill John. He had to be tricked into it by his wife and step-daughter. And he was afraid of Jesus. He thought that Jesus might be John the Baptist come back to life. Even two years later, when Jesus stood before him under trial, Herod refused to condemn him. He sent Jesus back to Pilate.

Herod didn't have an axe to grind with Jesus; the Pharisees did. And Jesus knew who the real threat was. The danger to one who speaks God's truth rarely comes from secular rulers like Herod. It comes instead from religious leaders and people like the Pharisees. Jesus knew that he would die in Jerusalem – the city of God. There it would be the most overtly religious people who condemned him to death. Pilate, you will recall, had to be pressured into going along with it.

So, what we've got in these two readings is both ends of the spectrum. The people Jeremiah was calling to repentance were engaged in all kinds of gross violations of God's Law. Jesus was calling self-righteous Pharisees to repentance – people whose outward behavior was really quite stellar and whose sins were far less obvious, but every bit as damning. But the point to be made is that they were both speaking to folks who considered themselves to be God's people. In today's terms, they were both addressing the church. And in both cases the church responds by rejecting the message and wanting to silence and/or kill the messenger.

The Lord places in the mouths of his prophets and preachers words that are hard – even painful – to hear. Or to say it another way, if a preacher is faithfully speaking God's Word, you're not going to like it. The call to repentance always hurts. It's deadly discourse: it's meant to terrify and kill the sin nature in you. But this is the preacher's task: to put his finger on your sin, whatever it is, and say "This, what you're doing – or you are neglecting to do – this is wrong. It's a violation of God's Law. You cannot keep doing this and call yourself a child of God. You must repent. And if you don't, you will be condemned."

And let me make this clear: the declaration of God's Law and the call to repentance is a manifestation of God's love. That he sends someone to proclaim his word of warning demonstrates that he is trying to save you, to rescue you from your sin and restore you to fellowship with him through trust in Christ Jesus. As uncomfortable as it is to hear, the preaching of God's Law and the call to repent is intended to keep you from perishing eternally.

The question is: how will you respond? We heard what the Pharisees and the people Jeremiah addressed did: they reacted with anger and indignation: "How dare you accuse us of sin!" They wanted to kill Jeremiah, and in the end they did kill Jesus. I said before that the call to repentance is deadly discourse. When God's Law is faithfully proclaimed, somebody is going to die. It may be the preacher, which is not very attractive from my perspective. It may be the sin nature in you, which is God's goal. Or it may be your eternal soul, if you reject the Word of the Lord.

Of course, there's another option. You can find a preacher who will tell you what you want to hear. That's what Paul is talking about in today's Epistle. He's telling the church at Philippi to keep their eyes on those who are following the example that he and the other missionaries who

were with him gave them; that is, those who are preaching and teaching the same things they did. Why? Because, he says, many I warned you about and now tell you again even with tears are enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and the glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. What were they doing? Making themselves popular and well loved by teaching things people like to hear. Some were libertine. They taught that certain things that the Bible condemns really aren't sin. And if they're not sin, you don't need to repent. Others, we know, were Judaizers. They taught that the way to be a real Christian was to keep the ceremonial laws of the Jews. And so they divided the church into two camps: the real Christians, like us, who keep Sabbath, circumcise our sons, celebrate Old Testament feasts, and stay away from forbidden foods (and as a result we are super holy – far above the need to repent); and there are those others who don't do all this stuff and therefore really aren't Christians anyway.

The thing to see is that both the libertine preachers and the Judaizers were enemies of the cross of Jesus. The purpose of preaching the Law of God is to show sinners that they need a Savior as great as the one God sent in his Son, a Savior to suffer and die in your place for your sins. The faithful preacher's deadly discourse is to save you from death by pointing you to Christ who died for you. There on the cross God's justice is satisfied. There in the crucified and risen Lord is your righteousness and salvation. But a libertine preacher tells you you're not sinning. And a Judaizer tells you that while faith in Jesus is good and necessary, the way to be truly righteous before God is to keep a bunch of laws. Either way, you can avoid repentance and you don't need to trust in Christ and his death for your sin. And thus such preachers also deliver a certain kind deadly discourse. Unfortunately, it's the kind that leaves their hearers eternally dead in hell.

I wish I could report that these kinds of false preachers all disappeared at some point in the history of the church; but I can't. If anything, they've morphed and metastasized. They're everywhere and they wear all kinds of disguises. You want libertine preachers? Name your biblically condemned sin of choice, and you can find a church where they teach it's okay. I guarantee it. Some places they'll even celebrate it: idolatry, adultery, divorce for unscriptural reasons, homosexuality, murder—yes, murder. Did you know that on that Sunday in January when many churches were marking with sorrow the 40th anniversary of the infamous Roe vs. Wade decision that has resulted in 50 million slaughtered American infants, there were other nominally Christian churches that were actually rejoicing over it – calling the ruling of the court enlightened and God-pleasing?

And the Judaizers and their modern mutations are every bit as prevalent, and perhaps more dangerous because they're harder to detect. That's because they have the appearance of biblical authority and godliness, even while steering people away from the righteousness that comes alone through faith in Christ. Many (I daresay most) of today's evangelical preachers fall into this category. They teach that repentance and faith in Christ gets you into the kingdom of God, but true Christianity is not so much about what you believe about Jesus as it is about what you do. "Now that you are a believer in Jesus, here's how you are to behave." And then come their rules for Christian living: don't drink, don't smoke, don't dance, don't listen to that kind of music, and so on. Sinners do that stuff; and we're not sinners. Very often too they redefine sin, teaching that it consists only of actions. Sinful thoughts, they are prone to say, aren't really sin; and so you can achieve true holiness of life simply by keeping our rules. This is nothing less than the doctrine of the Pharisees. It leads away from trust in Jesus to self-righteousness and eternal death.

So, let me state this and clearly and emphatically as I can: If I or any other preacher is doing what God called him to do, namely preach his holy Law in all of its truth and power, it's going to hurt you to hear it. It is deadly discourse, designed to attack and kill the sin nature in you. You should come here expecting that. And if you are able to sit through a sermon without becoming uncomfortable with your spiritual state, then either the preacher is not doing his job, or you are

resisting the work of the Holy Spirit to convict your heart and show you your need for forgiveness and salvation in Christ Jesus. That's always the goal of preaching God's Law: to show you your sin and its consequences so that you will hunger and thirst for the righteousness of Christ which he gives to you by faith in him.

And I hasten to add that it's not just in the public proclamation of the Law that this is to happen. There are times, like when the prophet Nathan confronted King David privately with his sin, that the pastor must do the same thing. I confess it's a part of the job I least look forward to, when I have to go seek out someone privately and ask, "What's this I've been hearing about you?" That's when I'm most likely to get more or less the same response Jeremiah got. Sometimes they demand to know, "Who told you this?" As if it mattered. What matters is whether it's true. And if it is, you need to repent. Another common response is to tell me to mind my own business. Hello? Your spiritual health is my business. I'm your pastor. Another dodge is to ask, "How come you haven't said anything to so and so who's doing the same thing?" There are lots of possibilities there. One, which is usually the case, is that I didn't know. If that's the way it is, I can thank them for the information and say, "But I'm here to talk about you and your spiritual wellbeing." Another possibility is that I have spoken to so and so or I'm looking for that opportunity. I don't make these things public. If anyone does, it's usually somebody who's beside themselves with fury because I dared to come speak to them about their sin.

But remember: to deliver God's Word of warning to a sinner is a work of love. It's meant to turn the sinner back to the Lord and to the forgiveness and restoration that he gives freely through faith in Christ Jesus. And this is a job not only for pastors. To the pastor belongs the public proclamation of God's Word. But any one of us, when we know a brother or sister in Christ is living in ongoing and unrepentant sin – we're all called to go privately and show God's love by delivering his deadly discourse. To fail to do so is to act the part of the libertine who denies sin and its danger, and thus allows souls to perish.

We have a higher calling and a higher citizenship. We are not to conform to the ways of this world, but rather allow ourselves to be transformed by the living Word of God that kills sin in us and makes us alive through faith in Christ. This work goes on now through the ministry of the church and our mutual care and concern for one another; and it will be completed when Christ comes again in glory, and transforms our lowly bodies to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him to subject all things to himself. Therefore, dear Christian friends, let us thus stand firm in the Lord and let his deadly discourse do its sanctifying work on us until he comes. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!