



**Northeastern
Ohio Synod**

God's work. Our hands.

NEOS Summer Sabbath Sermon Series

June 25, 2023

Lectionary 12, Year A

Bishop Laura Barbins

First Reading: Jeremiah 20:7-13

Jeremiah accuses God of forcing him into a ministry that brings him only contempt and persecution. Yet Jeremiah is confident that God will be a strong protector against his enemies and commits his life into God's hands.

⁷O LORD, you have enticed me,
and I was enticed;
you have overpowered me,
and you have prevailed.

I have become a laughingstock all day long;
everyone mocks me.

⁸For whenever I speak, I must cry out,
I must shout, "Violence and destruction!"
For the word of the LORD has become for me
a reproach and derision all day long.

⁹If I say, "I will not mention him,
or speak any more in his name,"
then within me there is something like a burning fire
shut up in my bones;

I am weary with holding it in,
and I cannot.

¹⁰For I hear many whispering:
"Terror is all around!
Denounce him! Let us denounce him!"

All my close friends
are watching for me to stumble.
"Perhaps he can be enticed,
and we can prevail against him,
and take our revenge on him."

¹¹But the LORD is with me like a dread warrior;
therefore my persecutors will stumble,
and they will not prevail.

They will be greatly shamed,
for they will not succeed.

Their eternal dishonor
will never be forgotten.

¹²O LORD of hosts, you test the righteous,
you see the heart and the mind;
let me see your retribution upon them,
for to you I have committed my cause.

¹³Sing to the LORD;
praise the LORD!
For he has delivered the life of the needy
from the hands of evildoers.

Gospel: Matthew 10:24-39

Jesus warns his disciples that their ministry in his name will meet with opposition. However, he assures them that they need not fear for the truth will come to light. Life is found in Christ.

[Jesus said to the twelve:] ²⁴“A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; ²⁵it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household!

²⁶“So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. ²⁷What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. ²⁸Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. ²⁹Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. ³⁰And even the hairs of your head are all counted. ³¹So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

³²“Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; ³³but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.

³⁴“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.

³⁵For I have come to set a man against his father,
and a daughter against her mother,
and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;
³⁶and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household.

³⁷Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; ³⁸and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. ³⁹Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

Sermon Text

The easy button – the quick fix – the shortcut. I’m often looking for those in many arenas in my life.

I remember going to a concert in my younger years for a Christian Pop singer. I did not do this often, but I went enough to know that in the “intermission” there would be a time when the singer would show a video or make a plug for a Christian mission of their choice.

At this particular concert the singer had chosen the mission of getting bibles onto Native American Reservations. And he showed a video. A video which depicted the poverty and

addiction that does indeed plague these First Nations. Then, the video turned to how, by putting bibles into the hands of these Indigenous peoples, life would improve. The video implied that a bible in their hands would improve their economic situation and cure addiction.

Jesus, Jeremiah, St. Paul – not a one of these guys would tell you there is an easy button for faith. Not a one.

In today's reading from Matthew, Jesus is pretty clear that the way of the Kingdom, the way of Christ is anything but easy – and it will not bring peace.

St. Paul is notorious in his letters for lamenting the pain and suffering that being an apostle for Christ has caused.

But I think that Jeremiah is the most vivid. In the reading from the prophet, Jeremiah laments that he was “enticed” by God, overpowered. In a sense, he was duped. In fact, in one translation the word that is used is “suced.” Almost like, “God, you tricked me into thinking this gig as your mouthpiece was going to be great – only now everyone is laughing at me.”

For those of us who have grown up in the Church of the past 70 years, we have not known this sort of lament. When we were growing up, everyone went to church. It wasn't “Do you go to church?” The question was “Where do you go to church?” When we bowed out of an event because we were “going to church,” no one blinked an eye.

This is not the way of the world now. To be honest, it takes courage – real courage – to admit church-going in our society. For those of you who are millennials or young: I commend your courage. Because your peers do not assume your churchgoing. And, in fact, find it skeptical most of the time, downright suspect at others.

Those of us “insiders” in the church need to know this – need to be aware of the courage, the skepticism, the cynicism that is out in the culture. We need to watch out for our own frustration and criticism at those who live in a world that we don't necessarily get.

And yet... But... even so...

There is life. God promises life. Christ promises that even though there is strife – there is life. Even though there is conflict, Christ is present.

Candice recently shared her call to ministry for Living Lutheran. In the article she talked about how, as a queer woman, she came to an ELCA congregation and found love and acceptance. But, when she went to a local Pride Parade, she saw signs of hate and condemnation from other Christians. Such conflict between children of God and other children of God. And yet, in the midst of that conflict – her own and a clash of Christian beliefs – she heard God's clear and certain call to be a messenger to the outcast and marginalized.

In another place, a congregation was experiencing some friction over a recent decision (you can insert your congregation's favorite one here). People had set up their "camps," but most people just wanted the whole thing to go away. Somewhere in their heads were: can't we all just get along? But what if that friction were merely a way for the Holy Spirit to get us to slow down and think. To reassess? To stop, breathe, and listen to what others are saying?

In both examples, strife – conflict – is not bad. It is horizon expanding. It is a way in which the Holy Spirit can enter in the fabric of our lives and, when we are willing, transform us to be more like the people God has in mind for us to be.

Perhaps Jesus is letting us know that conflict is not the opposite of faith, but the avenue to deepened faith.

There is an invitation in these readings today. An invitation to live more courageously. To investigate the strife in our lives. To look for Christ to be present in ALL aspects of our life. To expect that the Holy Spirit is going to appear even when we disagree.

There is an invitation in our lives today. To stop and listen to the people who are living in a society where church is not a given and for whom church is a risk. It is from these people that we can really hear the urgings of the Spirit. Be gentle with these people – compassionate for the courage they have to actually be in church.

There is an invitation for you, today: stop looking for the easy button of faith. Step into a world where God is not just in peace, but is also present in arguments and conflict and disagreements. For God is present in the whole world.

I know – that all sounds rather scary. But the really good news? God is with us. In the past, right now, and into the future. God is with us. And because God is with us, we can step out in courage.