

FIGHTING TEMPTATION ~ REFUSING TO CHANGE

The old joke goes something like this: “How many _____ (insert Lutherans or whatever group) does it take to change a light bulb?” [CHANGE!!!!!!] For as funny as that may be, the idea of change can be a very hard thing for a person, especially if you’re being asked to change from something that is comfortable, normal, routine... No one likes to change; and what’s even harder is to not just effect change, but to sustain it. There’s that temptation to revert back. Perhaps you changed to a healthier diet and to getting up early to work out. The temptation is sleep in and order up that XL deep dish oooy gooeey cheezey meaty deluxe, washing it down with a pint of double fudge delight ice cream. Change is hard.

In the Scriptures before us this morning, God’s prophet Jeremiah calls the Israelites to change, not their diet, but their hearts and lives. They had fallen into a very comfortable routine pattern of forsaking the Lord and doing their own thing. They worshiped different gods and ignored the messengers God had sent to them. Not only had they given up fighting the temptation to sin, they were actually joining in the fight against the Lord and his prophets! They needed to change, and their refusal to do so was leading them in a deadly direction. Disaster was knocking on their door and yet God gave them one more opportunity to repent and change; he sent Jeremiah to them.

Today as we hear God’s prophet and his call to repent, we not only see the importance of repenting and changing our ways, but we also learn when it’s time to *not* change, when it’s time to stand our ground. The motivation and strength to do both of these has a single source – the LORD. Jeremiah knew strength came from the Lord, the very same Lord who overcame every temptation, the Lord who never once changed from his one mission to save us, even though he knew that it would lead to the cross. From the Lord comes our motivation and strength too.

I. When called to repent by God’s messenger

Jeremiah came with a very strong message. There was no soft peddling, no beating around the bush; he was clear and direct. He... *said to all the officials and all the people: “The LORD sent me to prophesy against this house and this city all the things you have heard. ¹³ Now reform your ways and your actions and obey the LORD your God.”*

In short, this is the clear message that resounds throughout all of Scripture. Sinners repent. Reform your ways. If your words and thoughts and actions are not in line with God’s Word, then they are sinful and there needs to be a change, a complete turnabout, a 180 – or there will be consequences, eternal consequences. The majority of Jerusalem did not heed Jeremiah’s call. They refused to change their ways and reform their hearts. It wasn’t long before the Babylonians came and destroyed them – exactly as Jeremiah foretold. Jeremiah wasn’t to blame. It wasn’t God’s fault; the people were to blame because they refused to change, they refused to repent.

How fitting and timely is this passage for each of us, every single day. Each of us has this sinful nature that likes to do what good ol’ #1 likes to do. Too often my ways and my actions are not in obedience to the Lord. There’s selfishness, there’s pride, there’s lack of love and patience with others, there’s rudeness, there’s the love of and lusting after the things of this world. Jeremiah comes to us with these very same words – repent, reform your ways or there will be consequences.

And so the opportunity for temptation is before us. Will we heed the call to change, or will we refuse to repent? To repent means that we must confess our sin, we must admit we have done wrong in God’s eyes. It means that we turn *from* the false comforts of sin and that we turn *to* the Lord for the true comfort of his forgiveness. It means forsaking old ways, following in God’s ways.

The people of Jerusalem did not want to admit they were wrong. They refused to change from their sinful ways. All they wanted to do was get rid of the messenger, thinking that such an act would make all their problems go away. Indeed, it did not. Destruction eventually came because they had completely given into the temptation to refuse to repent.

This hardness of heart, is also seen when they hauled Jeremiah in for trial and only brought up the bad stuff. In verse 11, they said, *“This man should be sentenced to death because he has prophesied against this city. You have heard it with your own ears!”* They omitted a key portion of what Jeremiah also said, *“¹³ Now reform your ways and your actions and obey the LORD your God. **Then** the LORD will relent and not bring the disaster he has pronounced against you.”*

Wow! Even with repeated rejection of the LORD, grace and mercy were extended; compassion and hope were offered – because that’s simply who our God IS! God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger; he patient not wanting anyone to perish... You see this in our Savior’s words in the Gospel lesson, *“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, **how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!** (Luke 13:34)* What incredible patient love, contrasted by such stubborn refusal to repent. The bottom line is clear: if the sinner steadfastly refuses to repent, then there are disastrous consequences.

This was true for Israel, and it is just as true for every sinner today. That’s why this message is so timely for our ears each day. That temptation to not repent only creates a hardness of heart towards the very God who sent his Son to suffer and for that sin. That hardness of heart destroys saving faith. Each of us daily needs to live in this spirit of repentance and faith. As we hear Jeremiah’s words, with contrite sorrow over our sins, let us repent; and in faith let us look to our Savior Jesus. In his blood shed for us we see God’s perfect promise of forgiveness for all our sin. And from this same merciful and compassionate God, we ask for his help to reform our ways, to strengthen in us the zeal to fight against sin. In this way, our Savior continues to gather us under the safe shelter of his wings.

II. When threatened by sinful man

It’s nearly impossible to read this text and not see in Jeremiah foreshadows of our Savior. Jesus came with a message of repentance, of turning from sin and turning to God in faith. Like Jeremiah, Jesus didn’t soft pedal the message; nor did he, when threatened, back down. Like Jeremiah, Jesus was surrounded by crowds of people, shouting and foaming at the mouth as they called for his death. His enemies were convinced that if they did away with the messenger – then all their problems would be gone. In one way of looking at it, they were right.

If they did away with Jesus – if they crucified him on the cross – then there on that cross Jesus would pay the penalty for their wicked rejection and unbelief – and he did. Sadly, that was not their intent, and unless they were one of those who later on the Day of Pentecost or afterwards repented of their sin, then God’s disaster ultimately came upon them.

But Jesus, like Jeremiah, refused to change. They both refused to change the message the Lord gave them; they refused to change from the mission the Lord gave them for one reason – and one reason alone: They knew who the true God is. They knew that no matter what sinful man could try to do to them, God’s plans could not be thwarted. *“¹² Then Jeremiah said to all the officials and all the people... ¹⁴ As for me, I am in your hands; do with me whatever you think is good and right. ¹⁵ Be assured, however, that if you put me to death, you will bring the guilt of innocent blood on yourselves and on this city and on those who live in it, for in truth the LORD has sent me to you to speak all these words in your hearing.”*

That’s the good kind of “refusing to change.” That’s a spiritual resolve and steadfastness that knows God always wins and Satan will lose. That’s a spiritual stamina that stands its ground because it knows who is the judge of right and wrong. That the kind of spiritual chutzpa that comes from a faith firmly grounded and rooted in the eternal and unchangeable promises of the Almighty God – and God is very capable of working this same refusal to change from these truths in your hearts and mine.

He doesn’t just zap it there – he works through the Holy Spirit and the power of the Word of God. Through his word he not only gathers us and protects us from the lies of Satan, he also strengthens us and builds up our faith. That’s why we’re here today; that’s why we read the Scriptures; that’s why we listen to God’s messengers. May it be our resolved each today to continue hearing our Savior’s voice, hearing his call to repent, hearing his call to put our faith in him. Amen.