

Devotions – August 18-24, 2019

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Sunday August 18, 2019

Text: Jeremiah 23:23-29

Verse: **“Is not my word like fire, says the Lord, and like a hammer that breaks a rock to pieces.”**

This text could have the title “Prophets that do not profit.” The Lord God is not pleased with a proliferation of prophets who speak not from true inspiration, but from “the deceit of their own hearts.” God was getting fed up with such false prophets, even uttering “how long?” as in how long must I put up with them? Apparently the false prophets were speaking pleasant words that people like to hear. In spite of overwhelming evidence of people ignoring or even despising God’s clear commandments the prophets said, “Don’t worry; it shall be well with you.”

The prophet Jeremiah would warn that the Word of God is not to be edited to fit our own agendas, polished up to fit popularity, or cherry picked to make us feel perfectly fine without examining our lives. So Jeremiah made it clear with a couple of powerful images: The Word of God is like a hammer, more like a sledge hammer that smashes rocks, or like fire which destroys.

God is not mocked. The Word of God does not excuse lifestyles that break commandments calling for love for neighbor and justice for the poor. So let us thank God for prophets like Jeremiah. True enough, they can be a source of discomfort. But we know that the true prophetic Word of God is not delivered to condemn. What is to be broken to pieces and burned are lives too comfortable with times of no repentance. Repentance is our refuge. Repentance reminds us of the goodness and grace of God granted in Holy Baptism. We have been born anew in baptism. We are children of God, marked with the cross of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins. Saved by grace and loved beyond any measure we are not forced to under threat, but long for lives that the Bible says are truly life, namely to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. True prophets like Jeremiah call for lives that truly profit, that is benefit others with love and mercy.

Let us Pray: Heavenly Father, prevent us from being too cozy with the ways of the world or too casual about our sinful natures. Bring on the prophets who are true to your Word. May we listen so the hard heart of indifference is broken and a new and clean heart obedient to your will come forth. Amen.



Monday, August 19, 2019

Text: Jeremiah 23:30-40

Verse: **“When this people, or a prophet, or a priest asks you, “What is the burden of the Lord?” you shall say to them, “You are the burden, and I will cast you off.”**

This selection from the daily lectionary continues Jeremiah’s complaint against the false prophets who speak “lying dreams” and their own words instead of the word of the Lord. It is a difficult reading, full of warnings of punishment not only for false prophets and priests but their households as well.

Jeremiah used a play on words in this reading. When anyone would ask him “what is the burden of the Lord?”, meaning what utterance or word you have from God, the answer is the shocker: “You are the burden”. Those who have been leading people astray with their “lies and recklessness” will discover that God will lead them away from God’s presence.

In the time of the New Testament the apostle Paul was frustrated with other preachers who proclaimed a different gospel. This different gospel was not really “good news” since the message of “saved by grace” was supplemented by “saved by Jesus plus observance of various parts of the Law”. Even the author of 2 Timothy warned, “For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires and will turn away from listening to the truth.” So Timothy was told, “Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us.” (2 Timothy 1: 13-14).

So let us have a play on words: may the church have the burden of not being a burden. Let us not burden folks with words which give the false impression that they are not good enough for God. Let us not burden anyone with any hint he or she is unlovable or unforgivable. Also may we seek “the help of the Holy Spirit” to be truthful and prophetic, even if we initially do not like to hear the truth given by God’s Word. In short the church, the people of God, have the burden of not being a burden, but being a blessing instead.

Let us Pray: *Heavenly Father, you have entrusted your people with a priceless treasure, the good news of Jesus Christ. Come Holy Spirit and help me today, along with all my brothers and sisters in Christ, to share my faith in Jesus, the Savior, and the guilt-lifter and burden bearer. Amen.*



Tuesday August 20, 2019

Text: John 15:7-11

Verse: **“As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.”**

The church remembers the 12th century monk and theologian Bernard of Clairvaux, who died on this date in 1153. Bernard was an abbot or leader of a monastery. He was known to be strict and authoritarian. He got things done. He helped organize sixty-eight other monasteries. He wasn’t one to fool with when it came to debates and controversies over doctrine. If he caught any wind of what he felt was heresy, he would go after the heretics. From what you have read so far you may feel Bernard was one to avoid. Yet he was a man of spiritual depth and he blessed the devotional life of the church. We have three hymns attributed to Bernard in the hymnal. They are familiar and favorite hymns. Hymn #658, “O Jesus, Joy of Loving Hearts” asks Jesus to fill our deepest hunger and thirst for him: “We taste you, ever living bread, and long to feast upon you still; we drink of you, the fountainhead; our thirsting souls from you we fill.” Hymn #754, “Jesus, the Very Thought of You” is thankful for our Lord’s compassion and grace for sinners: “O Hope of every contrite soul, O Joy of all the meek, how kind you are to those who fall! How good to those who seek!” Some have attributed the hymn “O Sacred Head Now Wounded” to Bernard, a hymn that has inspired our time of devotion and prayer during Holy

Week. From his monastic history we learn of Bernard's administrative skill—he ran a tight ship or shall we say no monkey business in his monasteries. But from his hymns we see a deeply spiritual man who illustrates well the reading for today, abiding with Jesus, or making one's home in his love, is a true source of joy.

Let us Pray: *Almighty God, your servant Bernard of Clairvaux was filled with zeal for your house and was a radiant light in your Church: Grant that we, like him, may be filled with your zealous Spirit, and walk always as children of light, through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.* (From "New Book of Festivals and Commemorations" by Philip Pfatteicher)



Wednesday, August 21, 2019

Text: Jeremiah 25:30-38

Verse: **"...and the peaceful folds are devastated because of the fierce anger of the Lord. Like a lion he has left his covert..."**

Be ready to cover your ears! According to Jeremiah the Lord is like a ferocious lion ready to roar. The target of God's anger is everyone. The Lord has an indictment against all the nations. Earlier the prophet had a vision of God's cup of wrath. Jeremiah was to take this cup and go throughout the world and have the nations drink. Even God's own chosen people, the inhabitants of Jerusalem have kindled God's wrath for their persistent and pernicious ways of evil and injustice. If God won't spare God's own chosen people, the nations surrounding Jerusalem will soon know God's judgment against them.

There is nothing in today's reading to cheer us up. We may wonder if Jeremiah has had enough. For decades he has been faithful with the work of calling both high and low to repentance. But the worship of other gods continued along with injustice desecrating the land. Nothing changed, things just got worse. Have you felt like Jeremiah? Maybe you would have an indictment against the nations: nations that pollute the earth, plunder the poor, and prepare for war. But then what about ourselves? We still are faithful sinners, in thought, word,

and deed. Hopefully Jeremiah is not coming around with a cup of God's wrath for us to drink.

In the night in which he was betrayed, Jesus took the cup, gave thanks, and gave it for all to drink saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, shed for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sins. Do this for the remembrance of me." Jeremiah's cup reminds us of the truth of our sinful natures. Jesus comes to us with his own cup, the cup of salvation in his blood that is his sacrifice for us on the cross. The apostle Paul who pondered why he continued to sin when he knew the Law, when he knew better, proclaimed nevertheless the miracle of grace: "But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely, then, now that we have been justified (forgiven) by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God." (Romans 5: 8-9).

Let us pray: God of gavel and judgment, we certainly fear your wrath; your servant Jeremiah did a good job of making clear the truth, your indictment against the nations, against us, because of our stubborn disobedience. But this indictment has been nailed to the cross. Thank you, Jesus, for instead of indictment you speak an invitation to come, repent, trust, and rejoice in salvation. Amen.



Thursday, August 22, 2019

Text: Numbers 15:32-41

Verse: **"So you shall remember and do all my commandments, and you shall be holy to your God."**

We may find it troubling to read of a man executed by the community for gathering sticks on the Sabbath. Why would the Lord give the command for the man to be stoned to death? You would have to read the whole 15th chapter of Numbers to get an idea as to why this man was not forgiven. The gathering of sticks revealed the man was intentional about making a fire, perhaps to make a cooking fire. But making such fires was a Sabbath prohibition. Since he acted with such an intention, he would be judged as acting "high-handedly", despising the Word of the Lord. We know that keeping the Sabbath holy is part of the Ten Commandments. Breaking any of the commandments intentionally

meant serious trouble for the perpetrator since such an act threatened the well-being of the community. Forgiveness was possible if the commandment was broken “accidentally”, and then only after a prescribed set of burnt offerings followed. Certainly we are thankful for Jesus for a more compassionate view of commandment breakers. Remember in the Gospel of John when people wanted to stone a woman caught in adultery? Jesus said, “May the one without sin throw the first stone.” Jesus then told the woman that he did not condemn her, that she was forgiven. Jesus also told her “to sin no more,” meaning the importance of observing the commandments for one’s life and the well-being of the community. But Jesus made it clear that punishment was not God’s verdict for sin, but forgiveness, peace with God, through repentance.

To help the people remember the commandments, the reading today called for making fringes on their garments. On each corner make a blue cord; the blue cord would be a reminder that the commandments should stand out in the minds of the Lord’s people. The people of the Lord are to be holy, that is set apart as witnesses for God in daily life. The commandments show the way of holiness through love for God, and love for neighbor. It is important to note that the people of God, ancient Israel was holy because of God’s choice, God’s will, or as the text said, the Lord “brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be your God.”

Our baptisms declare we are named and claimed by Jesus, we belong to him, and nothing can cancel his love. We are saved by grace and forgiveness is always a gift. We are a holy people as well, gifted by the Holy Spirit for faithful discipleship and service. The Ten Commandments ever remain a guide for our lives. We may not make fringes on our garments to remind us of them, but we do see the cross. The cross reveals the good news of God who has transferred us from the kingdom of sin and death, to the kingdom of God’s beloved Son, forgiven and blessed to serve.

Let us Pray: *Holy God, you have called us to be holy as you are holy. Your Son our Savior said we are to be merciful as you are merciful. Your commandments and Jesus’ teachings set the highest standard for the church. Help your people truly represent you with lives of mercy. When we sin guide us to the cross, send us to Jesus where we have forgiveness and peace with you. Thank you. Amen*



Friday August 23, 2019

Text: 2 Chronicles 8:12-15

Verse: **“They did not turn away from what the king had commanded the priests and Levites regarding anything at all.”**

This text may seem like a routine list of ‘who does what’ at the Temple during the time of King Solomon in a unified Israel. The priests were organized by groups, each taking their turn of service. There are the Levites, the assistants who looked after the ministry of praise—I wonder if this meant the music for liturgies and psalms were under their care. And then there were the gatekeepers who probably kept order at the various entrances. There were different responsibilities, but all had their work, their service, and their ministries. In our church we have bishops, pastors, diaconal ministers and the laity. But we are all ministers, all gifted by the Holy Spirit to serve.

The role of gatekeeper is interesting. Are we not all gatekeepers charged to welcome people into the congregation? Gatekeepers are more than Sunday ushers. Gate keeping is ministry every day for through our words and deeds we are to project the welcome of Jesus: “Welcome one another just as Christ has welcomed you for the glory of God” (Romans 15: 7).

The text is like a mini-liturgical calendar for the festivals of Israel: the festival of Unleavened Bread (Passover), Festival of Weeks, and Festival of Booths. These three festivals reminded people of God’s grace and provision, whether it is for the harvest of grain, grapes, and olives, or the deliverance from slavery in Egypt. These festivals would include feasts, and when you read other texts giving more detail about who was invited, you read the gate was open to resident aliens, strangers, orphans and widows. Those on the margins were not to be forgotten because of the memory of slavery in Egypt, when the ancestors were on the margins and suffering. This is a theme you read on other occasions, because of that traumatic time of slavery, Israel was to be merciful, welcoming and not forgetting the least and poor.

Our Christian faith celebrates three major festivals: Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost. We celebrate the birth of Jesus, the Word became a human being to dwell among us and bear all our grief and infirmity. Jesus carried the cross and was raised from the dead to deliver us from the slavery to sin, death, and devil. The Holy Spirit was poured out to call and gather the people of God to be living communities of faith and service. As with the faith of Israel, so with the Christian faith, we celebrate the deliverance of God, we belong to God who

loves us beyond measure. And may we be about the good work of the glory of God, which is welcoming people to know God's healing power and love revealed and proven in Jesus Christ.

Let us pray: God of grace and glory, equip us to be your faithful gatekeepers today. May our words and actions help others to know your steadfast love and mercy. In the name of Jesus, who welcomes all to know his grace, Amen.



Saturday August 24, 2019

Text: John 1:43-51

Verse: “And Jesus said to him, ‘Very truly I say to you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.’”

Our Lutheran Church calendar commemorates St. Bartholomew today. You might think Saint BartholoWHO? Not a whole lot is known about him except he is listed as among the twelve disciples in the first three gospels. Over the centuries church leaders have thought Bartholomew is the same as Nathaniel, featured in the reading today. Nathaniel is famous, I suppose we could say, for his skeptical remark about Jesus of Nazareth, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Why would he say such a thing? Maybe the reason is Nazareth had no claims to fame, not featuring prominently in the history of Israel. The snooty Nathaniel-Bartholomew thought the one whom Moses and the prophets wrote about would not come from such a podunk place as Nazareth.

But Jesus had his eyes on Nathaniel. He said here is a man who speaks his mind! And when Nathaniel wondered how Jesus knew his character, Jesus said, “I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.” In the gospel of John words like “see” have the meaning of insight or true knowledge. Jesus’ knowledge of Nathaniel drew him to make the confession, “Rabbi, You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” Jesus does not mind conversing with skeptics and changing their minds. Think of another famous scene in the Gospel of John. Thomas refused to believe in the risen Jesus until he saw and touched the wounds of the cross. Jesus obliged and Thomas changed his “I will not...” into “My Lord and my God!”

Dealing with a disciple who supposedly has two names should not prevent us from rejoicing in Jesus and his choice of followers. Peter wanted Jesus to leave him because he was a sinful man. But Jesus said in so many words, “No way. You are now a forgiven sinner; follow me and I will show you how to fish for people.” Matthew would have a bad reputation among people who knew him as a tax collector. What people thought did not matter to Jesus; he saw potential for discipleship and said, “Follow me.” James and John were nicknamed the “sons of thunder”—I wonder what that meant? Were they loud and obnoxious? But Jesus called them and guided them to use their voices, use their lives, to share the good news of the Kingdom of God.

There is Peter, Matthew, James, John, Nathaniel-Bartholomew in all of us. But Jesus calls us to follow him. And think of the promise he gave to Nathaniel-Bartholomew: “Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.” Jesus is the one who has come down from heaven to reveal God’s love for the world, God’s love for you. Nathan Soderbloom, writing in the book “New Book of Festivals and Commemorations”: “Where God’s rule has penetrated one’s heart and life, so that divine love and righteousness become the main factor, we speak of a saint...a saint is one who reveals God’s might. Saints are such as show clearly and plainly in their lives and deeds and in their very being that God lives.” Saved by grace, called by God, we are saints like Nathaniel-Bartholomew. By the grace of the Holy Spirit may our lives reveal God’s might, the might of God’s mercy, forgiveness, and life-changing love.

Let us Pray: *“Almighty and everlasting God, who gave to your apostle Bartholomew grace truly to believe and to preach your Word: Grant that your church may love what he believed and preach what he taught; through your Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.”*

