

Jeremiah 23:16-29 (Tenth Sunday after Pentecost—Series C)

“He Chastens and He Heals”

Lutheran Church of Our Redeemer, Enfield CT

August 14, 2022

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our text is the Old Testament Reading from Jeremiah 23:

¹⁶Thus says Yahweh of hosts, “Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, who fill you with vain hopes. They speak a vision from their heart. It is not from the mouth of Yahweh. ¹⁷They keep saying to those who despise the word of Yahweh, ‘You will have peace.’ And to all who walk in the stubbornness of their heart they say, ‘Disaster will not come upon you.’ ¹⁸For who has stood in the council of Yahweh and has seen and heard His word? Who has paid attention to His word and listened? ¹⁹Behold, the storm-wind of Yahweh’s wrath goes out and the storm-wind whirling. Upon the head of the wicked it will whirl. ²⁰The anger of Yahweh will not turn until He has finished and accomplished the purposes of His heart. In the latter days you will understand it clearly. ²¹I did not send these prophets, but they ran. I did not speak to them, but they prophesied. ²²If they had stood in my council they would proclaim my words to my people and they would turn them from their wicked ways and from their evil deeds. ²³Am I a God who is near—oracle of Yahweh—and not a God far off? ²⁴Can a man hide in places and I not see Him?—oracle of Yahweh. Do I not fill the heavens and the earth?—oracle of Yahweh. ²⁵I heard what they said, the prophets who prophesy lies in my name, saying, ‘I have had a dream. I have had a dream.’ ²⁶How long will it be in the heart of the prophets who prophesy these lies and who prophesy deceit in their hearts, ²⁷the ones who think to make my people forget my name because of their dreams which they speak to one another, just as their fathers forgot my name because of Baal? ²⁸The prophet who dreams, let him tell the dream. But the one who has my word, let him speak my word faithfully. What does chaff have to do with wheat?—oracle of Yahweh. ²⁹Are not my words like fire—oracle of Yahweh—and like a hammer that shatters the rock?”

One of the prayers for the sick begins, “O Lord, You are the great Physician of soul and body; You chasten and You heal.” I really like the healing part, but the chastening? What does “chasten” mean anyway? It means “to correct by punishment; take to task; to refine or purify.” I do like the healing part, but definitely not the chastening.

God’s prophet Jeremiah preached to the Southern Kingdom of Judah during the reign of its final five kings between the years of 672-587 B.C. He had a chastening message for the people of Judah, a message of judgment and punishment from God. Jeremiah is often called

“the weeping prophet” because of the sad message of divine judgment he delivered and because so few believed him or even listened to him.

Jeremiah’s message from Yahweh to His covenant people was a word of doom. God’s people didn’t listen because their sin had made their hearts numb. They were drunk on their foolishness. The times were so bad that some people even burned up their children as part of the worship they offered to their idol-god Molech! You can read about that in Jeremiah 7:30-31. This was indeed a people whom God needed to chasten, to punish, and to purify. Speaking for God, Jeremiah begged the people to repent and return to the true God—Yahweh—in faith and obedience. Such amazing stubbornness, which is a lot like our own stubbornness at times!

The people of Judah insisted on following their own path. And the path they followed was heard in the voice of prophets who spoken a contradictory message to that of Jeremiah. In the verses preceding our text today God says, “Both prophet and priest are ungodly; even in my house I have found their evil, declares the LORD. . . . In the prophets of Jerusalem I have seen a horrible thing: they commit adultery and walk in lies; they strengthen the hands of evildoers, so that no one turns from his evil; all of them have become like Sodom to me, and its inhabitants like Gomorrah” (Jer. 23:11–14 ESV). And we remember how the Lord poured out His wrath in the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19.

And so Jeremiah speaks to the people of Judah in our reading: “Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, who fill you with vain hopes. They speak a vision from their heart. It is not from the mouth of Yahweh. They keep saying to those who despise the word of Yahweh, ‘You will have peace.’ And to all who walk in the stubbornness

of their heart they say, 'Disaster will not come upon you.'" But that's not what God has said to the people! "Behold, the storm-wind of Yahweh's wrath goes out and the storm-wind whirling. Upon the head of the wicked it will whirl. The anger of Yahweh will not turn until He has finished and accomplished the purposes of His heart."

The false prophets changed God's message from one of punishment to one of peace. "Don't listen to Jeremiah. God's not going to do anything to us. We are His chosen people. There will be peace. There is no reason for God to bring disaster. Don't worry. Just keep doing what you are doing and enjoy life." These liars should have warned sinners of the impending judgment of God against their sins and unfaithfulness to Him and His covenant promise. They didn't. They allowed and even encouraged the people to slide deeper into idolatry and immorality.

But faithful Jeremiah continued to proclaim Yahweh's message to His fallen people. The time of judgement is going to come against their sins—their breaking of God's covenant agreement, their idolatry with their worship of Baal, as well as their immorality. Seventy-four times, Jeremiah used the word "turn" and "return," begging his people to repent that God may show undeserved kindness and mercy. Repent that God may heal and forgive. But they would not and so God must chasten and punish.

That's an uncomfortable feeling, is it not? The wrath, anger, and punishment of God's divine, holy justice? Through Jeremiah, the Lord asked, "Am I a God who is near and not a God far off? Can a man hide in places and I not see him?" Yahweh is not some small local deity unaware of the goings on outside of His territory, someone from whom you could hide. He is the transcendent God who knows and sees all. God is not merely a God who is near,

but also “far off,” everywhere! God is omnipresent—present everywhere! He is omniscient—all-knowing! “Do I not fill the heavens and the earth?” Of course you do, O Lord! Nothing is hidden from you. The prophet Amos wrote, “[God said,] If they hide themselves on the top of Carmel, from there I will search them out and take them; and if they hide from my sight at the bottom of the sea, there I will command the serpent, and it shall bite them” (Amos 9:3 ESV). The New Testament writer to the Hebrews said, “And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account” (Heb. 4:13 ESV).

There is no one who can escape the attention of our omnipresent and omniscient, our all-present and all-knowing, God. The Lord says, “I heard what they said, the prophets who prophesy lies in my name, saying, ‘I have had a dream. I have had a dream.’” He knows their sins. He knows my sin and your sin. We are exposed before the God of angelic armies, the Creator of heaven and earth, Yahweh the almighty. You and I cannot deny, hide, or sugar-coat our sins to make them in any way, shape, or form to be “okay.” Sin is never okay. Thinking, speaking, desiring, and acting contrary to God’s revealed Word in Scripture is never okay. Try as we might to say “I will have peace” and “Disaster will not come near me,” it simply is not true. The wages of sin is what? Death. Hell. Eternal, forever and ever, separation from God (Rom. 6:23).

When we hear this truth about sin and God’s holy and just judgment against sin and sinner, we should tremble. We understand what God means when He says through Jeremiah at the end of our text, “Are not my words like fire—oracle of Yahweh—and like a hammer that shatters the rock?” Professor Luther, lecturing in Wittenburg on the Book of Galatians,

said, "God cannot soften and humble this man or make him acknowledge his misery and damnation any other way than by the Law. Therefore the proper and absolute use of the Law is to terrify with lightning (as on Mt. Sinai), thunder, and the blare of the trumpet, with a thunderbolt to burn and crush that brute which is called the presumption of righteousness. Hence God says through Jeremiah (23:29): "My Word is a hammer which breaks the rock in pieces." For as long as the presumption of righteousness remains in a man, there remain immense pride, self-trust, smugness, hate of God, contempt of grace and mercy, ignorance of the promises and of Christ. The proclamation of free grace and the forgiveness of sins does not enter his heart and understanding, because that huge rock and solid wall, namely, the presumption of righteousness by which the heart itself is surrounded, prevents this from happening. Therefore this presumption of righteousness is a huge and a horrible monster. To break and crush it, God needs a large and powerful hammer, that is, the Law, which is the hammer of death, the thunder of hell, and the lightning of divine wrath. To what purpose? To attack the presumption of righteousness, which is a rebellious, stubborn, and stiff-necked beast. And so when the Law accuses and terrifies the conscience—"You must do this or that! You have not done so! Then you are condemned to the wrath of God and to eternal death!"—then the Law is being employed in its proper use and for its proper purpose. Then the heart is crushed to the point of despair. This use and function of the Law is felt by terrified and desperate consciences."¹

¹ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, Vol. 26: Lectures on Galatians, 1535, Chapters 1-4*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 26 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1999), 309–311.

It is to our discomfort that no sin escapes God's attention. But it is equally true, to our comfort, that no need can escape His attention either. Yahweh is the omniscient and omnipresent God of heaven and earth. He condemns sin and sinner with His Word of Law that acts like a fire and hammer. But He also offers healing. Remember, He chastens and He heals. We cannot rescue ourselves from His wrath and condemnation. We cannot escape the punishment of death and hell. But God uses His Word that burns and breaks us for the purpose of restoring and making us whole.

The prophet Joel, chapter 2, "Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster" (Joel 2:13 ESV). Yahweh your God relented over the disaster that was to be your punishment for idolatry and immorality, for all your sins. But He didn't ignore sin. He didn't say it was okay. He said, "I will punish My beloved Son in your place." 2 Corinthians 5, "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21 ESV). Jesus took upon Himself our status and standing before God's righteous council. He was declared guilty of all the sin and evil in the world as He hung in cosmic darkness, forsaken by God the Father, on the cross. All your sins and mine received full punishment as the wrath and anger of God was poured out upon Jesus as He bled and died our death and suffered our hell.

Because of Jesus' sacrificial death and glorious resurrection on the third day, by God's immeasurable grace through faith, we have received the forgiveness of sins. We are rescued from death and hell. God is no longer angry at us because all our sins are covered, atoned for, in the blood of Christ, our Risen Savior. In Christ, God has reconciled us to Himself. He

doesn't count our sins against us because they were all counted and charged to Jesus (2 Cor. 5:19). They were paid for in full. Now, we receive the blessings of Jesus' cross and resurrection—forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.

This is the Gospel, the Good News Word of God to us, that pulls out from the depths of despair because of our sins and the punishment we so feared. We have the Lord's own promise that our sins stand forgiven in Christ. We have been given the Holy Spirit who, through the Gospel Word, leads us to daily repentance and faith in the promises of God that are all Yes in Jesus (2 Cor. 1:20). Even as the holy Law chastens, so the powerful Gospel brings us healing in body and soul unto life everlasting through the forgiveness of sins. Again, Professor Luther, "The Gospel is a light that illumines hearts and makes them alive. It discloses what grace and the mercy of God are; what the forgiveness of sins, blessing, righteousness, life, and eternal salvation are; and how we are to attain to these."²

And these gifts are all yours by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, your Savior. He is the great Physician of soul and body who does chasten through His Word of Law and heal by means of the Gospel. Do not listen to those who speak visions from their own hearts, who do not pay attention to Word given to us in the Bible. By the power and grace of the Holy Spirit, continue to listen to the whole counsel of God in His Law and Gospel centered in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Hear His Word from Scripture and know by faith that you are healed of sin through His blood shed for you. Amen.

² Ibid., 313.