**Weekend of Sunday, June 25, 2023**

**4th Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 12/Year A**

**First Reading: Jeremiah 20:7-13**

**Second Reading: Romans 6:1b-11**

**Gospel Reading: Matthew 10:24-39**

**Sermon Title: *“Bold & Courageous Faith”***

**Theme**

*God does not promise that the path of the disciple will be easy. Jeremiah feels the pain of rejection from those who do not want to hear what he has to say. Jesus declares that his words may bring stark division. Even so, we need not be afraid for God accounts for each hair on our heads. Though we may experience rejection, frustration, division, and death, God’s grace and love make us a new creation each day. Marked with the cross and filled with holy food, we are sent from worship to witness to Christ in the world.*

**Texts:**

**First Reading: Jeremiah 20:7-13**

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.

**Second Reading: Romans 6:1b-11**

1bShould we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? 2By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? 3Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? 4Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.  
 5For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. 6We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. 7For whoever has died is freed from sin. 8But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. 9We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. 10The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. 11So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

**Gospel: Matthew 10:24-39**

[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**

Well that was a pleasant trio of readings, wasn't it? Today we gather to seek inspiration and strength in the timeless words of Scripture, and what are we given, but some blistering words!

In the book of Jeremiah, the prophet exclaims, "O Lord, you have enticed me, and I was enticed; you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed." In Romans, we read, "Should we continue in sin so that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it?" And finally, in Matthew, Jesus tells his disciples, "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul." Oh yea, Jesus! That sounds great!

These passages remind us of the challenges we face as followers of Christ, the temptations that lure us away from our calling as his disciples, and the courage we must muster to remain faithful in the face of adversity. Let us dig a little deeper into each passage and see if we can find any sweeter water to drink that will inspire our lives today.

Referring to the First Reading from the prophet Jeremiah, I don't know what your thoughts are about the role of a prophet, but let me tell you, it was almost always a bad gig. Being a prophet of the Most High God was not a job anyone asked for; it was a calling – a holy calling, but *an offer that can't be refused if you know what I mean.* If the Israelites were faithful to God and behaving themselves, doing what God commanded them to do, there would be little need for a prophet. But that was rarely the case. When they misbehaved, it was often because a faithless king, surrounded by his paid false prophets, was leading the people astray. So the LORD would send in a prophet to tell them what they were doing wrong and warn them to change their ways. And when they didn't heed the warning, the prophet would announce their pending punishment. How do you think the king received that?

Such was the call of Jeremiah, and we can hear his frustration in his voice. In Jeremiah, we witness the inner struggle he was confronted with - a faithful servant of God, who finds himself overwhelmed by the weight of his calling. He faces persecution, mockery, and rejection from the very people he seeks to guide. Yet, amid his struggles, Jeremiah acknowledges the power of God that possesses him. He recognizes that God's presence compels him to continue his mission, to share the truth and righteousness, even when it feels overwhelming and potentially hazardous.

In our lives, we often encounter challenges that test our faith. We may face opposition, doubt, or fear. But like Jeremiah, we must remember that we have been chosen and empowered by a mighty God who strengthens us in our weakness. The same Spirit that moved through Jeremiah's words is alive within us, urging us to press on, to persevere, and to proclaim the Good News despite the difficulties we face. And while we most certainly will not face the difficulties Jeremiah faced, likely we will have internal struggles that will challenge our faith.

Last weekend I told you that the covenant God made with us at baptism will not be broken by God. My Lutheran theological education would indicate that that means we are saved for eternity already. The only thing left is to live faithfully knowing we have already been given that prize. But to be honest, I am not clear what happens if one denies their faith. The Lutheran pastor me wants to tell you that the decision "for us" has already been made, and there is nothing we can do that can change the outcome God has committed to. But the human me wonders, if indeed we have a covenant with God and we break it by denying God and God's sovereignty over our lives, what does that mean for salvation? And so that is why I always tell people, "You can have all the rest, give me Jesus!"

Moving on to the words of Paul in Romans, this passage is paraphrased in the gathering litany at our funerals, and that is fitting because these words remind us of our union with Christ and his death and resurrection. We are called to live as new creations, no longer enslaved to sin but alive in Christ. Paul challenges us, "How can we who died to sin go on living in it?" Through baptism, we have died to sin and have been raised to new life in Christ. We are no longer bound by the chains of our past, our mistakes, or our shortcomings. We are free to embrace the transformative power of God's grace and live into the righteousness that Jesus won for us on the cross.

Let us not take this freedom for granted. Instead, let us live with gratitude, continually surrendering our lives to the Lordship of Christ. May we not only declare that we have died to sin but may our actions and choices reflect the new life we have received. This is a daily decision and commitment. As we face the temptations and trials that come our way, let us remember that we have the power to overcome, for the Spirit of Christ lives within us.

Finally, in Matthew, after Jesus was called Beelzebul, also known as the prince of demons and Satan, Jesus reminds us not to fear those who try to hurt by hurling insults or even doing physical harm, because they cannot touch the soul. He acknowledges the challenges his disciples will face and prepares them for the opposition they will encounter. Yet, amid these warnings, Jesus assures them of God's care and protection. He encourages them to trust in the Father, who knows the number of hairs on their heads and values them far more than the sparrows.

“But Pastor, what about the many Christian martyrs of the past and yes, even the present?” I’m so glad you asked. God in Christ never promised a walk in the rose garden. It never was for him. Why would we think it would be for his disciples?

Let us presume for the moment that there is really only one preeminent question. “Does God exist?” If your answer is “no” then we have nothing further to discuss. You accept the notion that what you know and see is all there is, and at your end, you’re done, the gig is up. To be honest, it’s a very popular line of thinking, but it seems hopeless to me and that confounds me.

But to accept the possibility that God does exist, necessarily means that you are filled with hope. The Christian hope, expressed by Paul in his letter to the Romans, is that God’s Messiah, our Lord Jesus Christ, died and rose again, and through the ritual of baptism, our sinful selves die with him in a death like his and will therefore share in a resurrection like his. So, with the hope of resurrection already won, we are free to live our lives of discipleship according to the example of our Lord Jesus, without the burden of constantly having to sanctify ourselves.

“But Pastor, we can’t “know” any of that!” You are right. But if God doesn’t exist you are hopeless – an unenviable position. And to have faith in God revealed in Jesus Christ, is to have unlimited hope, both now and in the eternal future.

Today, we face a world that may not always understand or appreciate our faith. We may encounter rejection, persecution, or ridicule for standing up for what we believe. But let us take heart, for just as God watched over the prophets and the disciples, God watches over us. God sees our struggles, knows our fears, and stands beside us in every trial we face.

**Raisin’ the Bar Challenge**

Therefore, let us have "bold & courageous faith." Let us embrace the challenges and hardships, knowing that we are not alone. Our God goes before us, empowers us, and promises to never leave us.

**Prayer**

Understanding God, you fight all our battles, even ones we aren't aware of, and all you ask is that we have faith in you. Redouble the efforts of your Holy Spirit that we may indeed have "Bold & Courageous Faith" so that we too are faithful in our calling to be your disciples. We pray this in the name of our Lord Jesus. Amen