

Sermon for November 2, 2014 - Reformation

Matthew 10:16-23 (NKJV)

Theme: The Lord's Lionhearted Lambs

- 1) *Wisely recognizing the time and danger.*
- 2) *Harmlessly confess Christ with confidence.*

<sup>16</sup> *“Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves.”* <sup>17</sup> *But beware of men, for they will deliver you up to councils and scourge you in their synagogues.* <sup>18</sup> *You will be brought before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them and to the Gentiles.* <sup>19</sup> *But when they deliver you up, do not worry about how or what you should speak. For it will be given to you in that hour what you should speak;* <sup>20</sup> *for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you.* <sup>21</sup> *“Now brother will deliver up brother to death, and a father his child; and children will rise up against parents and cause them to be put to death.”* <sup>22</sup> *And you will be hated by all for My name's sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved.* <sup>23</sup> *When they persecute you in this city, flee to another. For assuredly, I say to you, you will not have gone through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes.*

I don't know whether or not you have noticed, but our American society (which at one time took pride in its Judeo-Christian roots) is becoming less and less tolerant of Christian teaching and seems to want nothing to do with “Christ.” It's all rather “shocking” isn't it?

The situation is certainly sad and distressing, but it shouldn't shock us. The warnings Jesus issued to the disciples in his day are warnings the Church has always needed to take seriously. The world has always been hostile to Christ and the visible Church is in constant need of reforming.

Instead of being numbed into silence out of shock by what is happening, the Lord wants us to take courage from Scripture to be his **lionhearted lambs in the world**: 1) *Wisely recognizing the time and danger we are in.* 2) *Harmlessly confessing Christ with confidence.*

Part One: Wisely recognizing the time and danger we are in.

Our text is part of a larger speech Jesus gave to the disciples before he sent them on a mission to witness *to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.*<sup>1</sup>

In this house of Israel, the Scriptures were read every Sabbath and its members took pride in considering themselves to be God's dearly loved people. And yet, Jesus described the Jewish people as lost. How were they lost? They neither knew Jesus nor his salvation. Even though the Scriptures were being taught, the truth was being obscured through the addition of manmade teachings and human interpretations. Their rabbis were constantly telling them that they could and must earn salvation through their own works; sort of like the Catholic Church taught in Luther's day.

Jesus moved his disciples to have the same compassion for the lost that he had. And once they had it, he prepared them for their work of calling the lost to repentance and faith. He warns them, however, that their job will not be easy.

*“Behold, Jesus says (which means, “Take special note of what I am about to say.”) I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves.*

Serpents are crafty creatures that are keenly aware of their surroundings. God, therefore, does not want his disciples to be naïve, but keenly aware of the world around them and the dangers it possesses. Doves are iconic pictures of peace, showing that Jesus wanted the disciples to conduct their ministry in such a way that they were not a threat to anyone.

Jesus continues: *Beware of men.* The Lord wants his disciples to realize that the sinful nature in every person is hostile towards the Gospel. This is the nasty reality of our sinful condition. The disciples needed to be aware of the fact that many people will try to subvert their efforts to proclaim the Gospel. Some would use threats and brute force. Others would try to gain the confidence of the disciples, only to betray them at a later date. The point is that the disciples will be in constant danger from the very people they shared the Gospel with, and this is why Jesus encouraged his disciples to be wise to the dangers that surround them.

And what sort of danger would the disciples face from their countrymen? Jesus says: *For they will deliver you up to councils and scourge you in their synagogues. You will be brought before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them and to the Gentiles.* And a couple verses later he adds: *brother will deliver up brother to death, and a father his child; and children will rise up against parents and cause them to be put to death.* <sup>22</sup> *And you will be hated by all for My name's sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved.*

You don't have to read to far into the book of Acts to see Jesus' warnings come true. Shortly after Jesus' ascension, Peter and John were called before the Sanhedrin for healing a lame person in Jesus' name. Herod beheaded James and arrested Peter. Stephen was murdered by his own Jewish countrymen. And the things that the apostle Paul suffered for the sake of the Gospel are almost too numerous to list in this sermon. He was arrested many time and brought before councils like the Sanhedrin, governors like Festus and Felix, and Kings like Agrippa and Nero. The New Testament is crystal clear regarding the vehement hate the Christians experienced – especially from the Jews.

And it is no different today. The world hates Christians as much as it always has, and as more and more people fall away from the faith, the intensity of this hatred grows. You see it in the fact that the worldwide persecution against believers is worse now then it has ever been. Christians are being betrayed by friends and family. Some Muslim and communists governments are arresting, torturing and even killing them.

By God's grace we have not experienced the physical kind of persecution our Christian brethren in places like Pakistan or Saudi Arabia have. But don't let our nation's supposed "religious freedom" fool you. Our secular society hates Christians as much as Muslim and Communist societies do. But instead of engaging in physical persecution, our postmodern society is waging a different kind of war. Our public education system and entertainment industry have joined forces to brainwash our youth as to what is morally acceptable – often creating a rift in families as some follow world and others remain faithful to Christ. Christians are being shamed for not tolerating things the Bible calls sin. The government is starting to force Christian businessmen to provide services for things they consider morally wrong – charging them with discrimination if they don't. Worst of all, visible Christianity is starting to fall more and more away from Christ – accepting the teachings and morals of this world.

And this last point about Christianity falling away from Christ is exactly why Jesus encourages us to be as wise as serpents. Why? Because he doesn't want us confused and lost by false doctrine.

Jesus loves us – so much so that He laid down is life in order to save us from our sins. In love he called us to faith through the preaching of the Gospel - rescuing us from the devil's powers. We are Jesus' little lambs whom he dearly loves; but he also has other lambs lost in the world, whom he also needs to rescue.

And this is why he asks us to be lionhearted lambs in the world, who are unafraid to confess the Gospel in its truth and purity so that many more might believe and be saved.

Boldly proclaiming Christ in truth, purity and love – this is heritage of confessional Lutheranism. So much of Christianity is in the process of denying part of all of God's word. The visible church is falling away. It needs modern day Lutherans who are willing to confess the truth plainly and clearly – not in anger and hate, but with honesty and love. Our times are not too far off the times of the apostles or that of Lutherans in that it is not only the world that needs to hear about Christ, but the visible Church itself!

Part Two: Harmlessly confess Christ with confidence.

Yes, the times and days are perilous for faithful Christians, and it is good for us to realize it. At the same time, we should not be afraid. Why not? Because the LORD is in control, and He will help us boldly speak His truth in love, as Jesus says:

*When they deliver you up, do not worry about how or what you should speak. For it will be given to you in that hour what you should speak; <sup>20</sup> for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you.*

When God provides the opportunity for us to witness, we should not worry about what we are going to say or how we are going to say it. Rather, God wants us to speak the simple Gospel we know, trust and love. God will do all the rest. The Lord promises that, when the occasion arises, his Spirit will remind us of the Scriptures we have learned and direct our mouths to speak the words he wants spoken – all to the glory of his name.

And as we speak, we will show ourselves to be as harmless as doves. What does this mean? Think about it in the context of the early Christian Church. The enemies of the Gospel were getting Christians in trouble by telling the Romans that Christians were rebels who followed a different king than Caesar. This made the Romans nervous and led to the arrest of many Christians.

When the Christians were given a chance to answer their accusers, their testimony to the Gospel showed that they in no way were trying to overthrow the government or influence Roman politics. No, the Christians were actually rather harmless. The kingdom they preached was a spiritual kingdom. They preached a message of spiritual peace through faith in Christ Jesus.

So we also have no political agenda as we share the Gospel. We are not trying to start a revolution and influence politics. The message we share is a spiritual message – a message of peace, hope and love. We want people everywhere to repent and believe the good news of Jesus for the salvation of their souls.

But, just because we preach our Gospel harmlessly, doesn't mean that the devil and world won't continue to rage against us. No, they will. Consider Luther: when he nailed the 95 theses to the Church door in Wittenberg, he didn't set out to break apart the Church. No, he simply wanted to reform it by bringing it back to the Gospel. But the fallen away Church felt threatened with the truth. Like the Jewish leaders during apostolic times, the bishops, cardinals and pope did all they could to persecute the truth and try to stop the Gospel. But as history shows, God often used their very vehemence and against Luther to provide more opportunities for the Gospel to be shared. May the Lord do the same for us in our time.

Witnessing the Gospel in this wicked world can be a scary prospect. The devil and world hate the Gospel and will stop at nothing to try to silence us. This is a scary truth that God wants us to take to heart. But he also wants us to realize that – even when we face hate, persecution or even danger of death for our

witness of the Gospel, we don't have to be afraid. And why not? Because the Holy Spirit stands with us. He will watch over and protect us from all harm, and He will give us the very words He wants us to share. Let us then be God's Lionhearted lambs – using the opportunities God gives us to, like Luther, boldly share his Gospel with others. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Matthew 10:6, NKJV