

The Sweet Lies of False Prophets
Sermon for the 1st Sunday after Trinity
Sermon Text: Jeremiah 23:16-29

Thus says the LORD of hosts: “Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD. ¹⁷They say continually to those who despise the word of the LORD, ‘It shall be well with you’; and to everyone who stubbornly follows his own heart, they say, ‘No disaster shall come upon you.’” ¹⁸For who among them has stood in the council of the LORD to see and to hear His word, or who has paid attention to His word and listened? ¹⁹Behold, the storm of the LORD! Wrath has gone forth, a whirling tempest; it will burst upon the head of the wicked. ²⁰The anger of the LORD will not turn back until He has executed and accomplished the intents of His heart. In the latter days you will understand it clearly. ²¹“I did not send the prophets, yet they ran; I did not speak to them, yet they prophesied. ²²But if they had stood in My council, then they would have proclaimed My words to My people, and they would have turned them from their evil way, and from the evil of their deeds. ²³“Am I a God at hand, declares the LORD, and not a God far away? ²⁴Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I cannot see him? declares the LORD. Do I not fill heaven and earth? declares the LORD. ²⁵I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy lies in My name, saying, ‘I have dreamed, I have dreamed!’ ²⁶How long shall there be lies in the heart of the prophets who prophesy lies, and who prophesy the deceit of their own heart, ²⁷who think to make My people forget My name by their dreams that they tell one another, even as their fathers forgot My name for Baal? ²⁸Let the prophet who has a dream tell the dream, but let him who has My word speak My word faithfully. What has straw in common with wheat? declares the LORD. ²⁹Is not My word like fire, declares the LORD, and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?

What if you woke up one morning and met a green man on the terrace? And not just that, what if this same green man would also want to use you as a special prophet for all the people of the world? So the green man would explain to you about how Buddha, Jesus, and Mohammed had come before you, all of whom were sent by this little green man. Now it’s your turn and only you can save the world and its people. A scenario like the one I just described isn’t just found in psychiatric clinics. There are always people who feel a supernatural calling to lead people down what they consider to be the “right path.” The truly confusing part of this story is that the Living God really does send prophets to speak to us on His behalf. And there really was a Jesus who appeared exactly like a human and yet is God among us.

Precisely because there are such prophets and because the Son of God exists and because God's Word is here for people, Satan also practices this art of revelation. That’s why God allows slick politicians to rise up or extremely smart and eloquent philosophers or even a naturopath who can heal people in miraculous ways of the worst illnesses. Yes, Satan doesn’t reveal himself right away as the murderer that he was from the beginning and remains to be. Instead, he constantly runs behind God and copies what He does to deceive the children of God. That’s how it always has been. Moses had barely impressed Pharaoh with extraordinary and supernatural phenomena before Pharaoh’s priests were there and copied what Moses did. In the New Testament, Jesus not only warns us about wolves in sheep's clothing at that time, but particularly emphasizes that in the end times people would do signs and wonders in His name. Even Paul must use a considerable portion of his writings to fight against such false prophets. Even in our time, we continue to find people and movements and churches that repeatedly talk about themselves and their message with great conviction and absolute self-confidence.

How do we deal with such messages and what do they have to do with us? There are two ways to deal with such words. The first way is that of the gullible. The gullible person assumes that everyone must be right somehow. So he works out what suits him best and is satisfied that he has found the best of everything. You can do something like this with lots of things, but not when it comes to the living Word of God. When I make soup, I can mix together the advice of many different people and can benefit from a diverse mix of herbs. Or I could simply use my grandma’s tried and true recipe. In this example, you can either take the advice of lots of people or not. But when we must make a decision between the saving Word of God or not, it is a question between life and death – we can’t decide one way or another. Now many might like to say: “I’m not at all bothered by such things as false prophets. Even when people from Jehovah’s Witness come to my door 100 times, I won’t engage in any argument. I have my church and don’t want to mess around with such teachings. Therefore it’s none of my business.” Even so, we can’t simply brush off responsibility **because where God’s Word is spoken and where this Word is contradicted, it’s all about life and death.** All of this has deadly consequences, therefore we must speak out. We’re not necessarily talking here about speaking out against a psychic or about random sects, but also about normal people with flesh and blood who are exposed to the mass media from day to day and hour to hour – this has consequences. At first it starts very subtly – a thought is planted and perhaps it’s not wrong at all in the beginning. Only in the end is the deadly consequence recognized. This is what happened with Judas Iscariot. He also believed in Jesus and followed Him. Then a thought came to him that Jesus should be a political messiah. That was a completely false teaching. Later on, he had put so much stock in this idea that he was blind and mute to notice the warnings and Words of the Lord. In the end, as we know, he betrayed Jesus and hanged himself.

Jeremiah's sermon was similarly a sermon that decided between life and death. There we find ourselves in the time of King Zedekiah after the first time Israel was led into captivity. Now a decision had to be made. Babylon's power was seen as God's rod of discipline which would then mean repentance and contrition or rising up against the Babylonians on the basis of false optimism and false prophecies. Again and again, King Zedekiah also heard Jeremiah's message, but he ultimately decided to side with the false prophets. That had deadly consequences for King Zedekiah and for his people who were then led into captivity and were never free again. So don't say that it doesn't matter if what is preached is true or false – **It's about life and death.** It's about life and death when God's Word is preached here every Sunday; it's about life and death when people would rather here other messages every Sunday instead of God's Word; it's about life and death when we let ourselves be inundated with all kinds of entertainment media every day and not give God's Word any room in our lives. If it's true that God's Word brings life and the words of the false prophets bring death, we should nevertheless ask ourselves why people always choose death. It's clear to see from the story of Jeremiah. His message was certainly a very unpopular one. It was even so unpopular that Jeremiah himself no longer wanted to hear it. He said it himself in Jeremiah 20:9 - *"If I say, 'I will not mention Him, or speak any more in His name,' there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones..."* What's amazing about this passage is that the word that is preached remains strange even to Jeremiah. For 50 long years, Jeremiah had to preach without success or being heard. From this we learn that God's Word far surpasses our thoughts, plans, and dreams. It even surpasses the comprehension of the one who must preach it. When we hear the Word of God, it's about humbling ourselves before God and leaving it as it is, even if we don't like what we hear. Jeremiah's colleagues, the false prophets, were called to be prophets just like Jeremiah was called as a prophet. They spoke in the name of Yahweh just as Jeremiah did. However, the other prophets spoke what pleased them and what the people wanted to hear. It was a word intended to indulge and entertain the people. It was not God's Word but man's word. God's Word, when it's really God's Word, strikes us deep in our hearts and challenges us. "Am I a God at hand, declares the Lord, and not a God far away?" God's Word is certainly not far away for us. We all have the Bible at hand – we can read the Bible at any time, even when we are out and about, we can look up Bible passages on our phone. Then there are also the many times to be in God's Word during the week at church or through Bible studies. God's Word is far away? That doesn't apply to us. In Leipzig, I know a man for whom God's Word is not as easily accessible as it is for us. He can neither read nor write. The only time God's Word reaches his ears is when he comes to church once a week on Sunday. I have often noticed that he quietly repeats the message he has heard. Only recently did I realize that he actually wants to memorize the Bible text. What he now knows about the Bible is certainly not much more than a child knows who just goes to Sunday School every once in a while. But this man keeps what he has heard close to his heart and always talks about how different the Bible is from his experience of the Quran. I have now noticed that he is closer to God's Word than many people who can read and write and who have gone to Bible studies and the like. When we see that God's Word is being contradicted and broken in the most brutal way, we wonder if, despite all the knowledge people may have about the Bible, if much has truly penetrated their hearts. Perhaps we have watered down God's Word, maybe we have taken away the worth of God's Word – we see it as a story, maybe even in a certain way, as a part of our history and culture.

Jeremiah warns us that it's about life and death. The false prophets were just like some fog that comes over the people. They obscure everything and give a false sense of security. The false sense of security is there because you can't see. God's Word creates clarity, but because it creates clarity, it can sometimes hurt. Mountain climbers can understand what this means very well. When fog suddenly envelops the whole mountain, you can no longer see anything. The steep cliffs and sharp points of the mountains are no longer visible. Instead, there is a just a thick blanket of fog all around. Every mountain climber knows how deceptive this fog is. If the fog suddenly clears and you can see the edge of the cliff right in front of your feet, it is terrifying and shakes you to your core. But it is a good shock. Only a clear view before us can save us from the missteps that cause us to fall over the edge! This is how God's Word works on and in us. The clear view shows us everything. God's Word doesn't spare us, it shows us that we are falling over the cliff's steep edge. But it does lead to us turning around, to us repenting. That's what God wanted from the people of Israel in Jeremiah's time. He wants the same from us. He doesn't want us to be lost over the cliff's edge. That's why He continually never ceases to show us where we are going wrong. That hits us, and it hurts. But thanks be to God that it is like this, thanks be to God when His Word frightens us and is completely contrary to our feelings. Thanks be to God. The fog must go away and the bright sun of His Word must and can shine brightly on us. Amen.