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Weekend of Sunday, August 18, 2019
10th Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 20/Proper 15/Year C
Primary Text: Jeremiah 23:23-29
Sermon Title: “Secret Places”

Theme

Because Jeremiah preaches the unpopular message of God’s judgment, he suffers rejection. Today’s reading distinguishes between the true prophet, like Jeremiah, who speaks God’s word, and the false prophet who misleads the people through dreams. One is like wheat; the other like worthless straw.

Text

²³Am I a God near by, says the LORD, and not a God far off? ²⁴Who can hide in secret places so that I cannot see them? says the LORD. Do I not fill heaven and earth? says 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? Will the hearts of the prophets ever turn back—those who prophesy lies, and who prophesy the deceit of their own heart? ²⁷They plan to make my people forget my name by their dreams that they tell one another, just as their ancestors forgot my name for Baal. ²⁸Let the prophet who has a dream tell the dream, but let the one who has my word speak my word faithfully. What has straw in common with wheat? says the LORD. ²⁹Is not my word like fire, says the LORD, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?

Sermon

Not a fan of that Gospel Reading. And now over 22 years as an ordained minister of the Word of God, I have likely preached on it seven times. Seven times I have tried to explain what was on Jesus' mind when he said those threatening and angry words. But not this year. Not gonna do it! This year I am departing from the Gospel Reading and preaching on the First Reading from Jeremiah, ... which is God expressing anger!

Most of you know, I am the fourth of five children. Though we were a large family, we did not live in large houses. My older two brothers shared a room and bed and I and my younger brother shared a room and a bed. There was never enough space get away from my brothers and sister, and I was the type that sought that out. So, I found or created "Secret Places".

On the farm in Indiana, we could build tunnels through the bales of hay in the hayloft. In Marion, Ohio, I found a place above the oil fuel storage tanks in the basement. I was also fond of climbing trees, and I would climb up as high as I could go, then wrap my belt around the limb I was clinging too and hang out there for a while. When I got a little older, I would get on my bike and ride for hours. It wasn't a "secret place" so to speak, but I was alone and no one knew where I was. I guess I have always been the kind of person that needed some solitary time, time alone, to be by myself.

But was I? Strictly speaking, I was never on my own. Strictly speaking, though no one was around, or at least no one who knew me, I was never alone. God was always with me. Oh sure, you say, God is always with us, but that doesn't really count. Oh but it does.

I went to Luther Memorial Camp for a middle-school retreat and we had a local Jesus freak rock band come and perform for us. It was the 70's. Something happened to me that night, and I was aware of it. It drew me outside into the cold dark night and to the outdoor chapel. It was there that I prayed, "Jesus, I don't know what is happening to me, but I like the way it feels. If you lead the way, I will try to follow you." Ever since that day, more or less, I have felt the presence of God in my life. And who and what I am today was formed to a great deal, by that experience.

I don't know if you have had that or a similar experience, but if you have I would like to hear about it.

Now that is one way of saying we are never alone; that there really are no "secret places". God can always find us. In fact, we cannot hide from God; we are never lost from God; God is always watching over us. And that is both good and bad; law and Gospel. More on that in a moment.

I don't often preach on the Old Testament readings and that is because they do not directly teach us about Jesus, and he is, after all, our example, our Lord, and our savior. But as I said, I don't want to preach on the Gospel Reading so today is the day to hear from the Lord through the voice and writing of the prophet, Jeremiah.

The first thing that you need to know is that being a prophet is a divine vocation, meaning that the prophet is called by God to do what he or she does and really cannot help it. It is often a thankless and unwelcome vocation. Priests were well-paid for their work in the Temple. Scribes were too. But prophets were not paid to do what they did, and if they were, well then, we ought to be suspicious of what they say.

Jeremiah was not paid to be a prophet, but in his time the King of Israel paid to have professional prophets on his staff to tell his future: Would he prevail in battle against an enemy? Was a trade deal going to be favorable to him? Was his nation going to be safe from drought? And so on. Now if you were a professional prophet, paid by your king, would you prophesy negativity that could, at the least, cost you your job, and at the worst, cost you your life? "No, sire. Only good things, sire."

And so that is what they did. They just prophesied what the king wanted to hear, and all was good. It is as if the King was in his "secret place" in plain sight. He did not trust God, he trusted his yes-men, his professional prophets who were inclined to tickle his ears.

Do you know how to tell a true prophet from a false one? Watch and see if what they said comes true. It's the only way!

Well, God had had enough, and so he sent his elect, the prophet Jeremiah to speak on his behalf, and the First Reading is what he had to say to the people Israel. So the voice of the prophet is really God's voice.

And what are the first words God said according to this passage?

²³Am I a God near by, says the LORD, and not a God far off? ²⁴Who can hide in secret places so that I cannot see them? says the LORD.

Hmm, seems like I said that a moment ago. I told you that as child I sought “secret places” where I could be alone and yet, I knew I was never really alone. I was always aware of God’s presence in my life to some degree.

The LORD God says the same to the people Israel, from the King, to the prophets, on down to the every citizen. “Do you think I don’t know what you’re doing down there? I can see you ya know.” “²⁵I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy lies in my name.”

You see, the people from the king, to his professional prophets, to the priests who the king ordered to worship Baal, a false god and idol, had gone astray, and there was plenty of blame to pass around.

Now in the OT days, this was meant as a warning. Repent or suffer the consequences. “What happened?” you ask. Most of the time they did not repent, and God allowed them to go their own way to their own peril. Their enemies, or famine, or some other disaster would overtake them and then maybe they would come back to God.

But that is not how God has operates in the New Testament and beyond. In the New Testament, out of God’s great love for his creation, God sent Jesus to be the example of the godly life to all human beings. But even when we do not get that right – which is all the time - God sent Jesus Christ as the savior of the world who died in our place on the cross, thus gaining our forgiveness. And then, after the Resurrection, through the Holy Spirit, God continues to watch out for us.

Now in the Lutheran tradition, we try to reveal the Law and Gospel in all scripture though it is not always obvious to you. The Law in this passage is pretty

transparent. God said, through the prophet Jeremiah, “There are no secret places. I see everything. You better change your ways or suffer the consequences.”

Time and time again in the news we see people getting themselves in trouble. Is God punishing them? No, they just get caught doing their sinful thing. So that Law for us is the same. There are no "secret places." God sees everything. We had better change our ways or suffer the consequences, now and for eternity.

But where is the Gospel you ask? You are wise to ask, because it is not as easy to find. The Gospel is, there are no "secret places". God sees everything. We had better change our ways or suffer the consequences, now and for eternity.

But Pastor, you just repeated yourself. How can the Law and Gospel be the same thing? I am so glad you asked. Because at least in this passage, we see God loving his people so much that he tells them he's watching, that they had better change their ways, or bad stuff may happen to them.

You who are parents of children do this all the time. When you warn your children is it Law or Gospel? It's both, is it not? Out of your great love you set boundaries for your children for their own safety. So it is with God. God tells us exactly how we should live. Even gave us a human example in our Lord Jesus.

Of course there is already forgiveness even before we sin, but knowing God's great love, that we are already forgiven, ought to compel us to live for him, don't you think?

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

This week, as the summer comes to an end, and school is set to begin, and routines are once again being established, let us recognize that there really are no “secret places”, no places that we can separate ourselves from God and hide. This is good news, because God loves us so much that even when we want to hide he refuses to let us. The apostle Paul said, nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Not even our sinfulness. And when we finally admit that and turn back around, we are confronted with the loving face of Jesus Christ our Lord, who welcomes us home.

Prayer

O God, you hate sin and disobedience and denial that you even exist. And yet, you love, and forgive, and continue to draw us to yourself. Make us love the godly life and hate that which separates us from you. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen