

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“We have thought on your steadfast love, O God, in the midst of your temple. As your name, O God, so your praise reaches to the ends of the earth. Your right hand is filled with righteousness.”

We gather this morning on this 8th Sunday after Trinity. This season continues with the Lord’s teaching about the faith, our new life in Christ, and who we are as the church. That’s what’s before in the readings today. Even though the readings are harsh in their tone and content the care of the Lord and who you are as the church is at the forefront. You see that in what your Lord teaches you today.

The church is precious to God because you are his people. The Lord cares for the church. The devil, though, wants to destroy the church. To him, the old evil foe, it doesn’t matter how it happens, just so long as God’s people are separated from Jesus. There are more overt ways he does this as you can look at the vast landscape of many parts of the world today, even our own country, and see empty cathedrals and churches all the while other places are erected and occupied where people put their fear, love, and trust in whatever god they have fashioned. Roads appear empty driving to church on Sunday morning, but other days traffic is alive and well. Today though, Jesus warns against a more subtle yet just as deadly danger for God’s people.

Jesus said “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits.” Now, let’s stop there for a second and think about what going on and the in which Jesus makes this statement.

The Sermon on the Mount begins in Matthew 5 with the Beatitudes. In this Sermon on the Mount, which is Matthew chapters 5–7, Jesus says and teaches so many things. Today’s Gospel reading is near the very end of this Sermon. When he had taught His disciples everything they were to know, he went on and warned them to guard against false teaching, as all good preachers are accustomed to do and should do when the sermon is done, namely, that they admonish the people to remain with the true teaching and guard against false teachers. Part of teaching and confessing the faith is showing what is good and rejecting what is false. It’s a “both/and” thing and this is for the sake of clarity and protection.

For example, when Paul was departing from Ephesus, he said among other things in the second reading today from Acts, “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears.” God teaches and he warns. Why? God cares for the church.

So Jesus did this instructing and warning and so did St. Paul in two of our readings today. Even in the Old Testament this happens as God speaks the words against false prophets. The church is in this world and do you remember who Jesus says is the prince of this world? It’s the devil and the devil is a liar and the great counterfeiter. He deceives and seeks to subvert the work of God by packaging up what appears to be godly but is inwardly vicious. Jesus warns that false prophets appear in sheep’s clothing but are inwardly ravenous wolves. Not only is the devil a liar but he’s no dummy. He knows how to infiltrate and be in it for the long haul. He knows too what works to try and tear people away. In the church he doesn’t stand among the sheep as a wolf with teeth exposed and watering at the mouth. He covers himself in sheep’s clothing.

Jesus though tells you that you will recognize them, the wolves in sheep’s clothing, by their fruits. What does he mean by this? He goes on to say, “Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good

fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.”

The fruits Jesus speaks about are twofold. It is doctrine and life. The Scriptures teach you this and this is why you, as the sheep, are to be disciples. You are to be students of the word. In the second reading St. Paul said to the Ephesians elders, the pastors, and he was speaking to the people as well, “For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears.” St. Paul preached the whole counsel of God to the people. He gave them God’s word.

The devil is the author of all false doctrine. False doctrine is poison to the soul. Jesus warns his disciples to beware of false prophets as they would beware of hungry wolves. He who is the Word made flesh knows the power of the written and spoken word of God. And he knows the danger of false teaching. When Jesus says, “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves,” he is talking to all Christians. A Christian is a disciple of Jesus Christ. A disciple is one who is taught. Jesus gives the right and responsibility to Christians have to judge the teaching of those who are sent to teach them.

Pure doctrine is not the concern only of the preachers. Just because you cannot preach doesn’t mean you cannot judge the teaching of preachers. Jesus said, “My sheep hear my voice.” They know it. They recognize it. They don’t recognize the voice of the stranger. This means that they have the duty to know doctrine. God’s people have the duty to judge doctrine. You can’t judge doctrine by looking at the teacher and judging him by his appearance. Jesus warns us that the false prophets are wolves in sheep’s clothing. The sheep’s clothing is the sincerity and winsomeness they may present, the vast learning they may demonstrate, the piety they display, and all the other things that convince the naïve and gullible that their teaching must be true because they appear to be such sincere Christians.

Faith lives on the word of God. God’s word is truth. False doctrine cannot nurture anyone in the faith. It can only poison faith, destroying genuine spiritual life. When false teaching is tolerated in the church, it covers up the truth. It replaces the truth with lies in the affections of the people. This is how souls are poisoned and faith is destroyed.

Many soul-destroying errors come from preachers who question the truthfulness of the Bible. They operate with the assumption that the Bible contains errors, or God’s word isn’t clear. It scratches itching ears, which is to say, it tells people what they want to hear. Rather than calling to repentance, it affirms sin. Rather than teaching a new life in Christ and following the word, it preaches a message of therapeutic platitudes and meaningless slogans. Rather than real forgiveness, there’s self-help.

“You will know them by their fruits.” The second way you know them by their fruits is their lives. Not only do the Scriptures teach about the content of the preachers but about their lives. There’s a reason why the Bible gives concrete qualities and requirements for pastors. This is the case in more than one place. For instance, in Titus 1 it says, “For an overseer, as God’s steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.” Or another well-known passage is in 1 Timothy 3, “The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. Therefore, an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church? He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the

devil. Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.”

This isn't to say pastors are sinless, far from it! What God teaches is that the life of a pastor can also bring scandal to the word he preaches. It doesn't negate the word, but he is to be an example and honor with his life the word he is preaching. If the fruits of the pastor's life are marked by drunkenness, being quick tempered, constantly quarreling with people, and not able to control his self, he is not fit for the ministry. Rather than suffering and sacrificing all for the sake of the body of Christ, even those who might be against him—sheep sometimes bite the shepherd, he seeks his own desires, self-interests, and pride. Those fruits are not to adorn the life of God's ministers.

So what does this all mean? Well, God is calling you to be diligent and serious as his people. In Colossians 3 God tells you, “And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.” Treasure God's word and keep it. Use discernment when it comes to the things of God and in things of this world. Learn your Scriptures, memorize the Small Catechism, the liturgy, and good meaty hymns and judge preachers according to these things. Don't go searching for preachers to suit what you want to hear but pray for faithful preachers. Pray for your pastors too and all those in authority over you. When God's word is rightly taught and preached, don't take that for granted but receive it with thanksgiving and take it to heart. Don't neglect hearing the word of God. Don't neglect studying the word of God. Make these things not just a priority but something you cling to and it defines your very being every single day.

Be certain of this, dear saints of God, so much of what Jesus says to you today is for you to cling solely and completely to him. It's to know him through his word and trust him. In the Gradual for today you sang, “Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me! In you, O Lord, do I take refuge; let me never be put to shame.” This is what happens when God's word is preached faithfully in your midst and you as the children of God listen and lead lives according to it. It's a diligence to be students of the word of God and care about these things. It's to have a mindset that doesn't create a spirituality that is shallow and think it doesn't really matter what one thinks about Jesus or believes. It's a life that looks around us in the world and realizes how so much of what we see is going on which tries to lead us into false belief, despair, and other great shame and vice. But you know who is faithful in all of this? The Lord who came down from heaven in order to save you; Jesus Christ is the one who is no deceiver but is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Listen to those words of St. Paul in the second reading, “And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.” Paul commended the people to God, which is great, but notice what this means, “and to the word of his grace” and this word of grace does something, “which is able to build you up and to give to you the inheritance among all the those who are sanctified. The Lord cares for his church. The Ephesians in Acts 20 were given pastors as the Holy Spirit called them and they delivered the word of God to the people which built them up and gave them an eternal inheritance that all God's saints have in Christ. It's the same for you today.

You see that's the joy of what it means to be the church, to be God's people. You are sheep of the Good Shepherd and together the church. God cares for his church. Rejoice in who God has called you to be today as you sit here in this place. Look around you and see your brothers and sisters in Christ who share the same inheritance of eternal life with you as the Lord has given it to you.

Jesus is your faithful Shepherd, and he takes care of you. As Jesus speaks those harsh words of warning go running to him who is no wolf in sheep's clothing but the very Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The Father sent the Son of God to accomplish your salvation. He was sent and spoke the very words of God because he alone has the words of eternal life. Not only did he preach these words, but his whole life was lived in accordance with it as he perfectly obeyed God's law. He was known as the Messiah by his fruits of his preaching and life. He fulfilled all that was spoken by the true prophets of God sent by him to prepare the way. And how was Jesus received? Did he amass for

himself great wealth and was the favorite preacher of the day that everyone walked away from saying, “I feel really good about what he said?” No, many of those who heard him preach later cried out “Crucify him!” Others, though, by the Holy Spirit through his word believed him, one even who was dying next to him on another cross and have eternal life. There is great glory in the obedience, suffering, weakness, and faithfulness of Jesus. It’s the same for you today.

As many and as much as the devil and men might try to destroy the church, it can’t be done. Not even the gates of hell of will prevail against the church of Christ. Take comfort in Christ who promises this to you. Take comfort also in the faithful preaching of the word of God and the right administration of the sacraments. It’s all for your sake and benefit that God has set it up this way and operates in this manner. God will not put you to shame as you cling to him in faith through these means. God uses sinful men to accomplish his purposes. St. Paul said also to the people in the second reading, “And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.”

That’s you dear saints of God. You are the beloved church of God, the ones sanctified through this preaching by those called by the Holy Spirit and ordained, set apart, by God to do so. God takes care of you. The word of God is preached to you today and you know for sure that it’s for you and it is God who speaks to you. Your sin is forgiven dear Christians. You are God’s children, his holy flock. You are sheep who hear the voice of your Shepherd, and you call upon the Lord in the faith he has given you and keep you in through that same word.

In his great and abundant mercy toward you he has laid down his life so that your sin is forgiven and you have eternal life. Even in times of trial and tribulation and when false prophets may arise the Lord still preserves his people through his world. He will not let someone snatch them out of his Father’s hand. Thanks be to God that he is the Lord and even despite the best or worst efforts of sinful man the Lord will guard and preserve his church. That’s the wonderful comfort in all of this today and it’s what you rejoice in as you go through this world on this side of glory. Jesus is faithful to you for he has been crucified and is risen for you and called you his own. There’s nothing sinister in what he has done or what he says. He says “your sin is forgiven. Come, and I will give you rest.”

You do have rest and protection today. Living as his bride, the church, you rest safe in his care as he has given himself up for you. Beware of wolves in sheep’s clothing but go running to the Lamb who has laid down his life and gives you all that is his in return. You are his sheep clothed in his righteousness, his salvation, his life. This is your baptismal garment God has covered you in and given you a new life, new heart, new spirit, and new mind. Thanks be to God that he is faithful. Cling to Christ who is your crucified and risen Lord for he is your Good and faithful Shepherd and you are his dear beloved sheep now and forever.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.