

“Beware of false prophets.” That’s Jesus’ warning to His Church, to us, this morning. And you’ll note that Jesus – the Word of God – spoke that same warning through the prophet Jeremiah in our Old Testament reading as well. It’s easily the theme chosen for this Eighth Sunday after Trinity.

This morning, then, we’ll look at two broad questions related to this theme: First, why are false prophets so dangerous, and second, what do we do in response to Jesus’ warning?

False prophets are very dangerous for a few reasons, some perhaps more obvious than others. Through their words, their false teaching, false prophets lure God’s people away from Him and to their destruction. Listen to how the Lord described the works of the false prophets: they “prophesy the deceit of their own heart, who 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.”

The false prophets in Jeremiah’s day, as in every day, were seeking to make the people forget the name of the Lord. This doesn’t mean that they didn’t remember that He was Yahweh. Rather, in forgetting the Lord’s name, they were forgetting who the Lord was. They would no longer remember all that the Lord had done for them, the right paths in which He had led them, the good gifts He had given to them, the forgiveness and mercy which He had shown to them.

They could recall His identity in their minds, but they had pushed Him out of their hearts. And when they lost this, they lost their souls, their eternal salvation. False prophets are so dangerous because they end up leading people, and even entire nations such as Judah, to damnation.

False prophets are also so dangerous because of how insidious, how secretly, they can work. Think back to the Lord’s description of them in Jeremiah. They want to make the people forget His name. Now, sometimes, as in the days of the fathers, false prophets actively promote the worship of false gods.

The prophets of Baal didn’t hide what they were doing. They openly promoted the worship of Baal as a distinct god from Yahweh. They spoke about how Baal had been a good god to the surrounding peoples, and if the Israelites worshiped him, they’d fit in much better with their neighbors. They also would’ve pointed out that worship of Baal was much more appealing to the desires of the flesh, involving things like drunken parties at their temples, complete with temple prostitutes.

Yet for as much damage as those false prophets did, with them you at least knew where the line was, so to speak. It was clear what was the worship of Baal versus the worship of Yahweh. In Jeremiah’s day, however, it was different. There, the false prophets were much more like wolves in sheep’s clothing, which Jesus warns about.

These false prophets claimed to be prophets of the true God. They stood in the temple and, with the support of the priests, claimed that their words were the word of the Lord. By this deceit, they led the people away from God, causing them to forget who God truly was, while at the same time making people think that they were still serving the true God.

As a example straight from our day, think about the Mormon church. If you were in Bible study as we examined their teachings, you'll note that they currently have a very big emphasis on claiming to be Christians just like you and me. On the surface, they'll say a lot of the same things, that Jesus is their Savior, that God is their Father, that they are saved through the atonement of Christ. But when you dig a little deeper, it becomes apparent that they have a totally different god than the true, Triune God.

Another thing that aids in the deception of false prophets is that their lies are often very appealing. While Jeremiah was rightly calling the people to repent and declaring that God would bring down His wrath upon their wickedness, what were the false prophets saying? We read, "They 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.'" Which would your sinful flesh rather hear? "Turn from what feels good, or God's judgment will come upon you," or "Just keep doing your thing; God loves you!" I know which one my sinful flesh wants to hear!

To see this at play in our day, you don't even have to go as far as the Mormons. Consider all the different denominations that wear the label "Christian" and yet have done away with the Commandments or twisted them into perversions that justify wickedness. They might have crosses on their buildings and Bibles in their pews, but through their false teaching they lead people to hell, not heaven.

It might seem terrifying to have such false prophets attacking us, springing up both outside and inside the church. But we need not fear. The reason Jesus warns us about false prophets is that He is giving us the ability to identify and resist them. The wolves in sheep's clothing cannot fool the Good Shepherd, who knows each and every one of His sheep and who has laid down His life for them. If we listen to our Shepherd's voice, we'll be able to recognize those who would lead us away from Him.

Speaking about false prophets, Jesus says, "You will recognize them by their fruits." The fruit produced on the outside will show you what lies on the inside. Coincidentally, this does away with the objection that we can't judge because we don't know what's in someone's heart. Jesus here tells His Church that we are to judge whether or not someone is speaking the truth, and we're to make that judgment based on external fruit. As Christ says elsewhere in the Gospels, "The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks."

What is the fruit of a prophet, then? What's on the outside? You might say how he lives his life, and there's some truth to that. But remember, a prophet's main job is to speak, and so it's the words that a prophet speaks that are his fruit. It is by what a prophet, or pastor, or Christian teacher says that Christians are to judge if he is false or true.

How do we recognize if the fruit, the word, of a prophet is bad or good? There are two ways you can go about this, one wrong, one right. The wrong way is to consider the words and judge them by your own feelings or thoughts or reason. Do I like what this person is saying? Does it make sense

to me? Does it seem to fit in with what most people around me are doing? This is the sort of thing that landed the Israelites in Jeremiah's day in so much trouble, because those false prophets were saying nice sounding things.

For a related example, one with literal fruit in it, think back to when the devil tempted Eve in the Garden. After he lies and tells her that she won't die but will be like God if she eats the forbidden fruit, how does she respond? "So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate." It looked good. It made sense that it should be eaten. It offered wisdom. Eve's reason and feelings all told her that it was a good thing. Yet by eating it, she and her husband brought death into the world.

The words of false prophets and teachers always appeal to human emotion and understanding – it's what gives them such appeal! And yet they always serve to draw us away from God and His goodness, away from life and toward death.

Rather than relying on our own reason or understanding, we Christians must instead judge the words of prophets and teachers by comparing them to the word of God Himself. This has been the standard since time began. Eve should've compared what the serpent told her to what God had said, and if there was confusion, she could've just gone and asked God Himself, since He still walked and talked with them in Eden.

The same goes with the people listening to Jeremiah. If they weren't sure who was telling the truth, they could've gone back to the Scriptures. There, the people would've heard Moses tell the people exactly what Jeremiah had been saying, that if they didn't repent, God would bring down His wrath and expel them from the Promised Land. King Solomon had also prayed about this very thing at the dedication of the temple.

And those are just the more specific examples. Moses and the Psalms and the prophets are full of words calling God's people to turn away from sins and to walk in His ways.

This is still true for us today. Knowing the voice of the Good Shepherd enables us to know when something isn't His voice. As Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me." You might also remember that, in Revelation, one of the great evil beasts has the appearance of a lamb, yet it speaks with the voice of a dragon. As we spend time in God's word, we learn more and more to recognize His voice, to pick it out from other voices that would lead us in different ways.

To go back to our midweek study on Mormonism, you might remember this when we looked at different passages from the Book of Mormon. Even if there wasn't always an exact chapter and verse of the Bible that sprang to mind going against it, it was often very easy to realize that something was off, it wasn't right. It didn't pass the sniff test, so to speak. You might say that the more you are in the true word of God, the keener your spiritual sense of smell will be.

Being in the word will better inform your conscience on what is right and wrong, as these come from God. God is the one who created each and every one of us, who formed the entire universe. He knows exactly what is best for us, what will bring us the greatest good, full and lasting pleasure.

To relate back to the example that Jesus uses in our Gospel reading, a master gardener who's been growing certain plants for decades will know exactly what is best for those plants – much, much more than someone who thinks himself an expert because he had a dandelion spring up in a crack in his driveway.

The true master will know how best to feed and fertilize the trees so that they get what they truly need. The Lord God gives us what our souls truly need in the bread of His word. The master gardener will know when branches are diseased or harming the plant and prune them accordingly. The Lord God knows our sins and idols and will seek to cut them out of our lives through rebuke and discipline. The gardener does all this because he loves gardening and desires to see his plants be as fruitful as possible. God feeds us and corrects us and guides us all because He loves us and desires that we bear fruit that will bless us and those around us.

The promises our Lord gives to us in His word are better than any promises the world might give. False prophets give fruit that tastes sweet but leaves one sick. True prophets, speaking God's word, give fruit that might not always delight the eyes but which nourishes the soul. False prophets direct us to the temporary treasures of this world. True prophets direct us to the eternal treasures of heaven. False prophets direct us to ourselves. True prophets direct us to Jesus Christ, the God who loves us and gave Himself for us.

In His holy name, amen.