

“Discerning the True and False Prophet”

Matthew 7:15; Jeremiah 23:16-17

Sermon for the Eighth Sunday after Trinity 2022; August 7, 2022

Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Rifle, Co

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Both the Gospel and Old Testament readings today have an interesting theme. This theme is discerning between true and false prophets. Jesus says, “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves” (Matthew 7:15 ESV). Christ says through the prophet Jeremiah: “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’” (Jeremiah 23:16 ESV). Both Jesus and Jeremiah tell us not to follow them. But how can you tell false prophets from true ones?

This is tricky because Jesus says that the false prophets can masquerade like a sheep: harmless, cute, if you think sheep are cute; cuddly, if you think of sheep as cuddly. Jesus says that a false prophet could appear to be the way a sheep is, but certainly not like a wolf. So how can we tell the difference?

Jesus does provide guidance for discerning true from false prophets. You will know them from their fruits. Jesus goes on to say in verse 23: “Then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness’” (Matthew 7:23). In other words, the false prophet is ultimately a law unto himself or herself.

Discerning the true from the false prophet is also tricky because of what Jeremiah says about the false prophet. The false prophet preaches *vain* hopes. What is tricky about this is that the false prophet seems to be preaching hope. Hope is good, right? It certainly is if its true. But how can you tell the difference between the true and false hope?

Now I have already used the word “prophet” many times. Basically, it involves the preaching and teaching of God’s word, whether formally or informally; or teaching and preaching what is true and right in terms of morality and ultimate things. In the Old Testament, that is what a prophet was for: to speak the word of the LORD; to reveal the will and mind of God. We see this in Jeremiah, when he himself says: “Thus says the LORD” (Jeremiah 23:16). Jeremiah goes on to say that the false prophets “speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD” (Jeremiah 23:16b ESV). I did not send them, yet they ran” (Jeremiah 23:21). The true prophet is supposed to preach and teach what comes from the mouth of the LORD.

There is a fascinating story about true and false prophets in the Old Testament. It happened when Ahab was king of Israel and Jehoshaphat was king of Judah. The kingdom of Israel was divided at the time.

Ahab was not a good guy. He was an idolator. Ahab served and worshipped Baal, instead of the LORD God. He set up an altar for Baal in the temple of Baal that he built in Samaria, the capital city of the northern kingdom of Israel (1 Kings 16:31-32). Ahab was the king in the story of the prophet Elijah in the showdown with the 450 prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18).

Jehoshaphat was generally a good guy. He had faith in the LORD God and tried to abide by the word of the LORD that God had given to Moses. He himself was not an idolater and led the people in the example of worshipping the LORD God in truth, according to God’s word. One thing he failed to do, however, was to stop the people from offering sacrifices and burning incense on the high places (1 Kings 22:43). Offering sacrifices and burning incense was supposed to be done at the temple in Jerusalem where God had put His name so as to be found.

Now there was a town called Ramoth-gilead that belonged to the people of Israel. It was

being ruled and dominated by the king of Syria. So Jehoshaphat went to Ahab and said: “Are you with me in going to battle at Ramoth-gilead to free it from the domination of the king of Syria?” Ahab said, I am with you: “I am as you are, my people as your people, my horses as your horses” (1 King 22:4 ESV).

Now Jehoshaphat being a man of faith in the LORD God wanted first to inquire of the LORD whether he and Ahab should lead the armies of Judah and Israel to battle against the king of Syria at Ramoth-gilead. So Ahab gathered a whole bunch of prophets together, about four hundred of them. They all said to Ahab and Jehoshaphat: “Go up to Ramoth-gilead with your armies because “the LORD will give it into your hands” (1 Kings 22:5). Maybe the truth is known by numbers, by the majority, because of what everyone else believes. I mean 400 hundred prophets. Who could doubt that?

Jehoshaphat seemed to be skeptical about this. So he asked Ahab if there was any other prophet there who could inquire of the LORD for them (1 Kings 22:7). There was. His name was Micaiah. Ahab didn’t like Micaiah, however, because he never told Ahab what Ahab wanted to hear. But this was because Ahab worshipped and served Baal and despised the word of the LORD. Jehoshaphat sent for Micaiah. He was brought into the presence of these two kings.

Imagine the scene. There are Ahab and Jehoshaphat, the kings of Israel and Judah. They were sitting on their thrones in all their kingly pomp and demonstration of royal power. They had their kingly robes on. They were sitting on magnificent royal thrones. They had their retinue of soldiers around them, armed. There were also the 400 hundred prophets gathered there before them, telling them that they will be successful in their military campaign; telling them this in the name of the LORD; telling Ahab what he wanted to hear.

Micaiah is one man standing there in the midst of all that.

Micaiah said this: “I saw all Israel scattered on the mountains as sheep that have no shepherd” (1 Kings 22:17 ESV). He was saying in the name of the LORD that the campaign against the king of Syria was not going to be successful. Micaiah then told the men of Israel and Judah to return to their homes in peace and not go to war against Syria (1 Kings 22:17).

Then Micaiah told Ahab that he saw the LORD sitting on His throne with all the host of heaven standing at his right and his left. Then the LORD said: “Who will entice Ahab that he may go and fall in battle at Ramoth-gilead? Then a spirit came forward and stood before the LORD and said: “I will go out and be a lying spirit in the mouth of the prophets.” The LORD gave that spirit permission to cause the prophets to speak falsely. Then Micaiah said, speaking to King Ahab: “Now therefore behold, the LORD has put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these prophets; the LORD has declared disaster for you” (1 Kings 22:23 ESV). But this was because Ahab served Baal and not the LORD God.

King Ahab ordered that Micaiah should be put in prison and be fed meager rations until Ahab returned from battle at Ramoth-gilead in peace. Ahab did not return from the battle in peace. He died there. Then the army of the people of Israel was scattered and fled from the battle and returned to their own homes (1 Kings 22:35-36).

So there were prophets inspired by a lying a spirit. They were sure they were prophesying the word of the LORD. They could feel it. What a great feeling it is to be able to prophecy victory for the nation Israel, their own nation. Of course God wouldn’t want them to lose to the Syrians. But then there was the one prophet Micaiah inspired by Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ. How could one tell the difference? Who was telling the truth?

Moses gave the answer to this question. He said this: “If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or wonder that he tells you

comes to pass, and if he says, ‘Let us go after other gods,’ which you have not known, ‘and let us serve them,’ you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer of dreams. For the LORD your God is testing you, to know whether you love the LORD your God will all your heart and with all your soul” (Deuteronomy 13:3). Moses also told Israel not to go after other gods so that the LORD’s anger would not be aroused against them and so that they would be able to remain in the land and be saved from their enemies (Deuteronomy 5:33; 6:14).

Ahab was an idolator. It should have been known according to God’s word given through Moses that it would not go well with him.

In other words, the test is whether what the so-called prophet says is consistent with God’s written word and the teaching derived from it. This is true even when the false prophet performs a miracle. God’s word says you shall have no other gods. He warned Israel through Moses that they would lose the promised land if they turned to idols and despised God’s word. Even if the false prophet performs a miracle, but then leads away from God, leads into false doctrine, then that prophet is false.

Being able to discern between the true and false prophet starts here: that God has given His truth in the written word. It is the source, standard, and inspiration of true preaching and teaching. It teaches God’s will in the law. It reveals the salvation God has provided and His grace, mercy, and love in the Gospel. False teaching can go wrong on the law and the Gospel by teaching lawlessness. False teaching can go wrong on the Gospel by suggesting that you can save yourself by your own works, rather than by the merits of Jesus Christ given to us by God’s grace and love.

So to discern between the true and false prophet, we must be diligent students of God’s word, throughout our lives, not only in 7th and 8th grades for purposes of confirmation. It is as Isaiah the prophet said: “To the torah and to the testimony. If they will not teach according to this word, it is because they have no dawn” (Isaiah 8:20). It is as what was said of the people of Berea, where the Apostle Paul preached the gospel of Jesus Christ: “They searched the Scriptures diligently to see if the things Paul was preaching were true” (Acts 17:11).

Essentially, the false prophet “stubbornly follows their own heart” (Jeremiah 23:17). They persist in their false teaching and their lawlessness. We can discern the false prophet by knowing the teaching of God’s word, and by following Jesus through the apostles and prophets, Jesus Himself being the cornerstone. For Jesus Himself is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6), and what He taught and what He did for our salvation are made known to us. He leads us in the grace of God to our eternal home in His death for our trespasses and resurrection for our life and hope. He leads us in the way of humility and truth, as He embraces us in His self-giving love in the forgiveness of sins and gift of eternal life. Amen.