

Bad Times for Christians

**St. Mark Lutheran
Ken Welsh
Two services
2017**

**Pastor
June 18,**

These twelve Jesus sent out, instructing them,

"Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles. When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given you in that hour. For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. Brother will deliver brother to death, and the Father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death, and you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved...So have no fear of them, for nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be made known...And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father... Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows. So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I will also deny before my Father who is in heaven. Parts of: Matthew 10:5a, 16-33

What do you know of the sign of the fish? The fish symbol is one of the earliest symbols of the Christian faith.

In the early days of the Christian faith, there was much persecution against Christians. Before long, they were forced to worship secretly. They used the fish symbol as a secret form of communication. The idea was, when talking to someone, you could scratch the symbol of the fish in the ground or some place. If the other party recognized it, then it was safe to talk about matters of the Christian faith.

There were ten great persecutions against the people who were Christians in the first, second, and third centuries. The Roman Empire was intolerant of the new faith. Many Christians were tortured and killed. Stephen was stoned to death for being a Christian. It was reported, although not in the Bible, that Peter was crucified upside down. The Apostle Paul was beheaded. There were so many persecutions in the second and third centuries AD, that reportedly, Christians would hold prayer meetings and sing songs in their holding pens before being led out to the arena to be fed to lions or to fights gladiators. Crucifixions were common. The only reason it was stopped was when it was no longer enjoyable for the population and a wave of protests arose against it.

In 313 AD, Christianity was allowed in the Roman Empire. But that did not stop persecution in other lands. As the years have gone by, many have died for the Christian faith.

Now this may surprise you. In the last one hundred years, we have had more people die for their faith in Christ than all the known martyrs in the other centuries. Men such as Joseph Stalin, a dictator in the former Soviet Union, not only forbade the practice of Christianity but hunted Christians down. In schools, children were encouraged to report on their parents about any religious activity and were rewarded for doing so. It was forbidden to have a Bible in your home.

Persecution is continuing today. Radical Moslems, who have been taught that they can obtain all sorts of pleasures in heaven by killing Christians, are doing just that. The Christian population in countries like Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, the Sudan, and other places has been greatly reduced.

We have not seen much of that here so far, but we have seen some terrorist attacks and a great influx of non-Christian people who follow a religion that historically has been at war with the Christian faith. What will be the outcome of all of this only God knows, but there are plenty of signs that show that we should be on the alert.

Jesus Christ predicted that his people would be persecuted. He gave glimpses of things to come in Matthew 10 along with other statements recorded in the Holy Scriptures. Our church's theologians see the early verses in Matthew 10 as being addressed to his disciples and close followers. What he said happened by 70 AD. The disciples were delivered to courts where they were flogged and punished. They were hated by many. There was betrayal. Eleven of the twelve disciples plus the apostle Paul were killed for speaking to others about salvation through Jesus Christ.

But many theologians see verses 25-33 as being generally addressed to all believers. Jesus often did this. He would give a specific teaching or direction for that time, but then he would expand on it and give directives to include those Christians who would face the same kind of challenges in the future. Then also, in verses 25-33, our Lord directly addresses the problem of fear.

Fear is a powerful motivating factor. But the downside is it can keep us from living out our Christian faith, life, and responsibilities. People wonder why Elizabeth Smart's sister did not alert her parents when Elizabeth was abducted. But they later learned that she tried to warn them. She got up to tell her parents, but when she saw the kidnapper still in the house, she ran back to bed. She was actually frozen in terror and frightened into inaction. Fear can also control our thoughts and actions as we try to live out our life of faith.

Our Lord addresses this problem three different times in verses 25-33, often referred to as the Second Missionary Discourse. In verse 26 he says, "So have no fear of them, for nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be made known." In verse 28 he says, "And do not fear those who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul." In verse 31 he tells us that God even notices it when a sparrow falls to the ground, and Jesus says to us, "Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows."

Actually, if we are honest with ourselves, we tend to fear or worry about many things. These days many fear for their lives because a terrorist can show up in the wrong place and our life may be over. But we also fear people when we bow to public pressure and don't speak up for the truth. We fear for our relationships with our children, so we don't put our foot down at times when we need to be their parents and stop worrying about being their best friend. We

fear we'll lose their love, but we end up losing their respect and the opportunity to teach them values that are important in our Christian walk. We fear we may not have enough money; we fear rising health costs; we fear we may lose our job or having lost one, that we will not get another one.

We tend to be fearful, but our Lord assures us here today we should not be afraid. In fact, Jesus asks us to not be afraid, because nothing happens to us apart from our God knowing about it. Jesus would have us admit our fears and talk to God about them. He would have us acknowledge how they control our lives at times and imprison us. The Lord does not want his people sick with grief and worry; he can free us. Just as he has freed us from the consequences of our sins by his death on the cross, he can free us from worry and unhappiness because He is our Father and he sees us as His children.

I am not saying that for a Christian everything is going to turn out all right in this world. You will notice today that Jesus said, "A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master." Jesus is being up front. Life as a follower of Jesus Christ may not be easy. It wasn't easy for Jesus, and it may not be easy for us. We don't know what the future holds, but we know who has the final say about the future.

We may ask at times "Why does God allow such things?" The amazing thing is God often brings good out of terrible events. The persecution of the church in the early centuries made things difficult in many ways, but the way many Christians and their leaders handled it impressed many and people turned to follow Jesus Christ as their Savior in huge numbers. Today, many of the hundreds of thousands of refugees who lost their homes in the Middle East have made it to Germany, and you know what? The Lutheran churches there have been flooded with Moslems who are seeking to find out about God. Our Lutheran Witness magazine states there have been great numbers of baptisms and conversions.

God will have his way. We know who wins in the end. The victory has been secured for us on the cross and guaranteed with an empty grave. We know we have a future with the Lord that no one can steal away.

The Rev. Martin Niemoller was one of Adolf Hitler's least favorite people. He was put in prison and eventually summoned to court. He was suddenly afraid. As he went along the long corridor to the courtroom he heard something. It was the voice of his jailer, speaking in Latin, which was known to the priest but not to his captors. "*Nomen Domini Turris fortissimo*" the jailer said in a low voice. It meant: "The name of the Lord is a strong tower." It comes from Proverbs 18:10 which says, "The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous run to it and are safe." Those words that day chased away the Rev. Niemoller's fears, and the Word of the Lord can do that for us also. Amen.