

Old Testament lesson – Jeremiah 23:23-40

New Testament lesson – Luke 12:49-56

How Can You Tell?

There is a saying that is often called a Chinese curse: May you live in interesting times. It's probably not actually Chinese, but there is a Chinese proverb that comes pretty close: "Better to be a dog in times of tranquility than a human in times of chaos." I think if people could volunteer to be a dog right now, the line would be very long, indeed, as long as it meant living in a time of tranquility rather than the chaotic times we are in.

It doesn't make any difference which direction you look or what topic you consider; it seems there is controversy and competition for our attention, for our agreement, for our commitment.

Some things decided on an individual level are probably inconsequential to the big picture: Ford trucks versus Chevies, Cubs versus Cardinals. No matter which one you pick, you are simply one person among many people making the same choice. Your choice matters to you and to the local truck dealership, but the company will notice only if large numbers change.

But other things contend for our attention or our agreement, and some of those do matter at the individual level. Some things are right, and some things are wrong. But even on something we would think should be clear, like right versus wrong, there is competition for our agreement. We encounter conflicting versions of what is right and what is wrong. So how can you tell?

It becomes especially confusing when those who should be the moral authorities do not agree. Our OT lesson depicts a situation where that seems to be the case.

Jeremiah was a prophet during times of chaos in Judah. He began his ministry about 100 years after Israel was conquered, and he was around for the last 40 years or so before Judah was conquered. There were four kings during that time, two of them lasting only about a year. He also prophesied to the people in exile in Babylon,

where he also competed against false prophets for the attention of the people.

It had to be somewhat difficult for the people to know who was really speaking on God's behalf. Consider, for example, verse 31: "Behold, I am against the prophets," says the LORD, who use their tongues and say, 'Says the LORD.'" If you consider this logically, it sounds as if God is against Jeremiah. God is against the prophets who say, "says the LORD." But Jeremiah has just used that same phrase. Is God therefore against Jeremiah?

Clearly, that is not what Jeremiah intends to say. In the Hebrew, the second "says the LORD" does not actually include "the LORD." It is simply, "he says." Along with verse 30, we can guess that God is referring to false prophets who are stealing the phrase from legitimate prophets like Jeremiah.

But even with this understanding, how were the people of the time supposed to tell the difference?

A couple of possibilities come to mind. First, the false prophets seemed to be in it for themselves. They were a professional class of religious leader. They could sort of keep their positions secure if they presented favorable prophecies. By the time a calamity befell the nation or the king, it would be too late to point out the fact that they were false prophets.

That brings us to the second way one might have identified a false prophet. They always prophesied good times ahead; everything was going to be fine, enemies would be defeated, and so on. False prophets told the king and others what they wanted to hear. The genuine prophet did not hold back bad news. God's people deserved to hear the truth, they *needed* to hear the truth. Perhaps if they were warned, the people would repent. And if not, perhaps they could at least prepare themselves.

But were the people aware of these clues about which prophets were false? Add to this the

fact that most people would rather hear that everything is OK. We would rather hear that things *are* OK than to hear that they are *going to be* OK. The false prophets probably found it easy to fool the kings and the leaders and the people, and they might even have fooled themselves. But they did not fool God, nor did they fool his real prophet, Jeremiah.

We are not told here, and I am not aware of any other parts of Scripture that tell us, whether there were very many people who believed or followed Jeremiah. I think there were a few, but it was a very small number compared to those who believed the professional prophets who lied for a living. So there was a division within the people of Judah between those who eagerly accepted the lies of the false prophets and those few who recognized Jeremiah as the real prophet of the LORD.

Jesus spoke of division in our NT lesson. Lots of people are surprised to find words like these proceeding from the mouth of “gentle Jesus, meek and mild.” It seems so out of character, until you start looking honestly at the gospels in their entirety. Jesus was no wimp, nor did he shy away from controversy or confrontation, even on topics of religion or politics. Yes, Jesus addressed political topics. If you are looking for a religious leader who never addresses anything political, Jesus is not the one you want to follow. Of course, he directly addressed political issues of his time, not ours, but many of his teachings are relevant for the politics of our time.

So it is not surprising to hear him say that he is going to cause division, even within a family. We normally think of Jesus as being 100% pro-family. I think you can make a good case that Jesus supported marriage between a man and a woman, and that he affirmed the importance of parents for raising their children.

But even more important for each and every person is to live out their commitment to the life of a disciple, a student of Jesus, a follower of the Messiah. And Jesus knew that this would cause problems, even within families. It makes sense

that he would realize that, since his own family sometimes thought he was out of his mind.

After pointing out the fact that his ministry would cause division, Jesus chastised those people who did not recognize what was going on. They could recognize the signs of approaching weather, but they were oblivious to what God was doing in and through Jesus. They were hypocrites who pretended to be wise and understanding, even in the ways of God, but they were instead foolish people who could not see the obvious hand of God at work in Jesus.

There are still false prophets and false teachers in our time. A friend of mine recently posted an image of a painting called “Truth Coming Out of the Well,” by Jean-Léon Gérôme, along with this story:

The Lie said to the Truth, “Let’s take a bath together, the well water is very nice.”

The Truth, still suspicious, tested the water and found out it really was nice. Truth and Lies got naked and bathed together in the warm water of the well. Suddenly, the Lie leapt out of the water and fled, wearing the clothes belonging to Truth.

Truth, furious, climbed out of the well to get her clothes back. But the world, upon seeing the naked Truth, looked away, with anger and contempt. Poor Truth returned to the well and disappeared forever, hiding her shame. Since then, Lie runs around the world, dressed as the Truth, and society is very happy...Because the world has no desire to know the naked Truth.

That is sort of the dilemma we face now. Lies masquerade as truth, made-up stories pretend to be factual, and we don’t know whom to trust. And now artificial intelligence, AI, threatens to make things even worse. I recently saw a video of President Trump that was clearly a fake, but only because of the blatantly false content. But a more subtle fake would be hard to discern. How can you tell? How can we tell fact from fiction, truth from lies, right from wrong?

I will admit, it is going to become more and more difficult to discern fact and fiction. Some

things I am skeptical about because I have a fairly extensive knowledge of science. But even some of the things I strongly doubt turn out to be factual. On such things, we simply have to be willing to dig deeper until we find explanations from truly knowledgeable people that reveal the fact of a matter.

As for Truth with a capital “T” and Lie with a capital “L,” we may be a bit better equipped to deal with those, provided we take full advantage of what God has provided. Remember last year, when the Vacation Bible School theme was “the armor of God?” Ephesians chapter 6 describes that armor, including for girding our loins with the truth, using the shield of faith, wearing the gospel of peace on our feet and the breastplate of righteousness and the helmet of salvation, and wielding the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God.

Now, that last one, the Word of God, is probably our primary tool for telling right from wrong and capital-T Truth from Lies. If someone is promoting a behavior or lifestyle choice or a way to spend your money or your time, test it against the values and instructions of Scripture.

But even then, we have to apply some thought. For example, the OT teaches that hospitality is an important value to practice. It teaches that we are to be kind and gracious to the sojourner, and people point that out in support of anyone and everyone who wants to immigrate to the U. S. But in the OT, there was one law for the sojourner and for the Israelite, so a sojourner who broke the law was dealt with according to the law.

Another test for something is the law of love. Lots of people like to point out that Christians are supposed to love everyone, but what does that mean? Does it mean letting people have their own way, doing whatever they want? If you listen to the critics of Christianity, that is exactly what they mean. If you love someone, you don’t interfere with their life in any way.

So if you see their children playing with matches around a leaky can of gasoline, is it

unloving to take the matches away from the child? Common sense says no, that *does* show love, because you don’t want harm to come to the child. In fact, love always means wanting what is best for someone. And that sometimes means we just can not and should not condone the values and practices that are sometimes promoted in our society. Scripture gives us pretty clear notions about what is best for someone.

At the top of that list is a relationship with God through Jesus Christ, trusting in his death for the forgiveness of our sins and in his resurrection as the promise of our eternal life with God. Beyond that, God has prepared good works for everyone to do if they are truly saved by grace through faith. You can find that in Ephesians 2:10.

That is the oft-neglected follow-up to Ephesians 2:8 – “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God – not because of works, lest any man should boast.” People cite that verse and think it means there is no point in trying to do good works because they won’t save us. That is only half-true, because Paul follows up with verse 10: “For we are his workmanship, *created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.*”

So you see, false teachings sometimes appear to be Christian. We have to be alert all the time to discern the false prophet and the false teacher. We have to be wary of where the divisions are between following Jesus and following something else, maybe even something that *looks* like following Jesus, but really isn’t. Remember, the Lie is running about in the world wearing the clothes stolen from Truth.

There is no substitute for reading and studying your Bible. And you know how in places it talks about meditating on God’s Law? That means to think deeply about it. What does it mean for you, today, in your life? What is God saying to you? How does the Bible apply to the controversies and divisions around us today?

And if we think deeply and with our minds open to the Holy Spirit, he may surprise us from time to time. Some of our most cherished values may turn out to be quite contrary to Scripture.

One of the mistakes people can make is to trust anything a preacher says. I don't think we have that problem here, but just in case...

I am sure that sometimes I say something you disagree with, something you think is just plain wrong. That's OK. Correct me if I'm wrong. Don't just get mad or quit coming. Point out where I'm wrong WITH SCRIPTURE. It really doesn't bother me if something negative I say about a political party or a policy of the government or a moral value offends someone. When I do that, I have a biblical reason for doing so, because we have to know where the biblical dividing lines are in our nation and in our world, maybe even in our family.

If you disagree with something I have said, point out where I am wrong *according to Scripture*. If you can not do that, perhaps you

need to re-evaluate what you think on a topic. I guarantee you, if you *can* point out where Scripture disagrees with me and I can't defend my position based on Scripture, I need to re-evaluate *my* thinking. But our values of right and wrong, Truth and Lie, need to come from God's word. That authority is superior to all others, even the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, and the laws made by human beings.

I should point out that we are not going to enter heaven because we have every point of doctrine correct. Contrary to that one song in Godspell, I don't think there will be a quiz at the pearly gates. But you never know.

However, I do believe it is important in this life to avoid the false prophets. I believe we can hold one another accountable on the things we believe and practice as followers of Jesus Christ. And I am absolutely certain, that God's word as found in Scripture, is the way to tell the real prophet from the false prophet, right from wrong, and Truth from Lie. Amen.