

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

From 1527 to 1530, Martin Luther was lecturing at the university in Wittenberg, Germany, on the book of Isaiah. This extended series of lectures should be expected, since Luther was, after all, a doctor of the church, and in the Old Testament in particular. He had a couple of breaks during that time—one when he and many others left Wittenberg during an outbreak of the plague and once to deal with matters of the church in Marburg. His lectures were academic in nature, as one might expect, and exegetical—that is, designed to explore not just the words of the Scriptures, but the meaning and significance of those words. In short, Luther’s lectures were designed to provide a scholarly answer to the question, “So, what’s this all supposed to mean to me?”

Let’s consider, for example, Luther’s lecture on the first three words of the chapter, “For Zion’s sake.” Luther said:

“This is a new address. The prophets spoke in a great variety of ways. Since the prophets were very sure, they said the same thing very fully and with a number of words. By saying *for Zion’s sake*, the prophet seems to refer to his own *vexation*, that he was ridiculed by the ungodly, who jugged out their mouths and derided him with their tongues, as described above in chapter 30 (30:9 ff.). So that he might have said, “I was not a bit interested in them, I am not going to preach anymore.”

Luther continues, saying:

So Jeremiah said (Jer. 20:8), “The Word of the Lord has become for me a reproach.” So Jeremiah complains, since these many reproaches offend us. So it was with me, Martin Luther, that I would often determine not to preach anymore. Every magistrate and every nobleman does nothing; in fact, they despise the words. No village can support one minister, or pastor. No school can support one co-worker, so that the ministers of the church die of starvation, while at the same time the people with extreme greed amass everything for themselves. *This excessive contempt for the Gospel and this blasphemy among the people causes our preachers to become altogether weary.* So the prophet was mocked by excessive contempt and derision and felt like

saying, “I would just as soon keep silent altogether and let them sweat it out themselves. Yet it is not for their sakes that I have assumed this office. There are others who will receive my words, and for their sakes I will preach.”<sup>1</sup>

My friends, what in the world has gotten into dear Martin, of blessed memory, that he would even say, “Meanwhile our people cry, “I have enough to eat and drink, I do not need a pastor.”<sup>2</sup>

So, then, what is the big deal about this for Luther? Why would he take so many words to talk about these three simple words that, by themselves, seem pretty innocuous?

Because Luther sees these words of the prophet as fundamental to the work of all prophets and preachers. For Luther, it would have been a lot easier and less painful for him personally to simply say to the unruly laity *and* the ecclesiastical authorities, “Never mind. You won’t listen to a word I have to say about the Gospel of Jesus Christ, so I’ll just shut up and let you all walk off into the abyss. I’ve tried, and that’s the best I can do.”

But Luther was a rather intense individual, and took his call to pastoral ministry very seriously. Luther understood that his calling as a parish pastor and teacher of the church was to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ, preceded with a fair dose of the Law normally. Luther’s task, if you will, was to save souls, ensuring all who heard the Word of God would understand that Word and receive it, and having heard and received it, lived according to that Word.

Like the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah, Luther couldn’t be quiet because the fire of the Holy spirit burned in him, and he understood what his calling was—to preach, teach, and lead his people to the best of his God-given abilities.

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<sup>1</sup>Martin Luther, vol. 17, *Luther's Works, Vol. 17: Lectures on Isaiah: Chapters 40-66*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald and Helmut T. Lehmann, *Luther's Works*, 17:343 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999, c1972).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

In short, Luther continued to preach and teach, even after being rebuffed, because that is what God, by the power of the Holy Spirit, had called Luther to do.

Indeed, this is the call of all who are pastors or priests or prophets of the church. Those called to serve as shepherds of congregations have been set apart by the power of the Holy Spirit and given the responsibility to preach and teach faithfully, regardless of where the chips may fall—even when no one wants to listen to the message or the messenger.

Why? Because there is too much at stake, that's why. It's not a matter of simply saying a few words and passing out some bread, or making a sign of the cross and saying "Forgiven" that makes a pastor a pastor. Our first grade students can be taught—and indeed, are learning—how to read the liturgy and perform the manual acts. But simply to be able to read the words and do the acts are not what makes a pastor a pastor. It is the task of the pastor to use the gifts given by the Holy Spirit to fulfill his or her call to serve as God's messenger to God's people, even when they don't seem to listen, and even when it is necessary to say hard things.

It is for Beltsville's sake that I stand here to proclaim God's Word among. It's for your sake that I bring you the Word of God, even when it would be a lot easier to throw in the towel and let someone else do it.

I say to you, my dear friends, that *you* shall be called by a new name. Indeed, you are not the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—although in truth you are—nor are you God's children because you have Moses and the Law. No, you are God's children because you have a new name—Christian—and are called to be one with Christ Jesus as your brother and as your savior. You live in Christ's love and redemption, his salvation and righteousness. You are no longer forsaken or forgotten or left to wander the wilderness alone. No, you are the brides of Christ, and he is the bridegroom and finds delight and pleasure in you, and God is your Father. Period, end of discussion.

The prophet talked of this promise of God in the terms of marriage because it helped to lift him up, and to see the good work which God had set before him to perform. For the prophet, proclaiming the marriage of the people to

their God was enough to recharge his batteries and make up for all the abuse and opposition he faced within the community. Even in the face of adversity, the prophet—and even our blessed Martin—placed the needs of the people before his own needs.

All of us have callings from the Holy Spirit, and are expected to make use of our gifts as they have been granted to us for the uplifting of the body of Christ and our several callings. God did not send His only begotten Son into the world to die on the Cross so that we might take the gift of righteousness and salvation for granted, or so that we might keep that Good News to ourselves.

In short, we proclaim the Good News not because we want to, but because we are called and must do so. This is what is the calling of all those called Christians, and it is for the world's sake that we proclaim Christ crucified and resurrected. Amen.