

Victory Lutheran Church- Jacksonville, FL
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Worship Series: *Hard Truth*
Service Theme: *We Want Peace, but the Word Divides*

Sermon Theme: *What the World Needs* (August 14, 2022)
Jeremiah 23:23-29

Many consider the song *Imagine* by John Lennon to be one of the top 5 greatest songs ever written. It's among the Top 100 most performed songs of the 20th century, and for almost 2 decades, it's been the official song used to ring in the New Year at Times Square.

But beyond the memorable melody, and the name recognition of the former Beatles star, I think *Imagine* has been an enduring part of pop culture for the past half-century because of its lyrics. By inviting his listeners to imagine a world completely at peace, Lennon taps into the cultural zeitgeist, and a universal desire. Who doesn't want world peace?

But what's interesting is what Lennon suggests will produce world peace. *"Imagine there's no heaven. It's easy if you try. No hell below us, above us only sky. Imagine there's no countries. It isn't hard to do. Nothing to kill or die for, and no religion too. Imagine all the people living life in peace. Imagine no possessions, I wonder if you can. No need for greed or hunger, a brotherhood of man. You may say I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one. I hope someday you'll join us, and the world will live as one."*

Do you see what he's saying? If we simply remove everything that causes division, then we'll have peace. Materialism and possessions that divide people into classes. Nationalism and borders that divide people by race or flag. Religion, which divides people into different faith communities with different creeds.

John Lennon isn't the originator of that ideology, nor the last to ascribe to it. Still today, most people would agree with his premise that

what the world needs is relativism-- to let everyone think, believe, or do whatever seems right to them, to remove everything that causes divisions, and we'll achieve peace. That's why we might cringe, or even be offended when Jesus says in today's Gospel, *"Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division."*

According to Jesus, the contention isn't that the teachings of Christianity divides people. Rather, it's the idea that the removal of division is what the world really needs. As we'll see today, God's Word teaches us that **What the World Needs** is the division that Christianity produces. As our sermon series suggests, that's a **Hard Truth**. But if you're thinking about walking out, please stick around and let God's Word explain!

The prophet Jeremiah is a fitting example of that hard truth. 2,500 years before John Lennon wrote *Imagine*, God called Jeremiah to proclaim his message to the people of Judah. And it wasn't a message of affirmation! We even have an English literary term, "Jeremiad," meaning a long, woeful lament, because of the nature of the message God called Jeremiah to proclaim. God instructed Jeremiah to warn the people of Judah that if they refused to repent of their idolatry, social injustices, and continued rejection of Him, he would send the Babylonians to destroy Jerusalem and carry them into exile.

And as he preached, Jeremiah saw firsthand that God's Word divides. His ministry was lonely and difficult. He was widely rejected and hated. People even plotted to kill him. And to widen the divide, other prophets began proclaiming conflicting messages they claimed God gave them in dreams. Messages that affirmed the sinful actions and lifestyles of Judah, and comforted them, "Don't worry! Ignore Jeremiah! Nothing bad will happen!"

Which of those messages do you think the people wanted to believe? A call for repentance? Or affirmation of their desires? When the people unsurprisingly received the false prophets and their false messages like they'd just walked into an episode of Cheers, it must have been tempting for Jeremiah to just tell everyone what they wanted to hear. When no one plotted to kill the false prophets for their

message, it must have been tempting for Jeremiah to keep his mouth shut to avoid division. Maybe then they'd have peace, like John Lennon imagined.

But because Jeremiah knew where those false prophets' messages came from, he knew there had to be division. As God proclaimed, ***"I have heard what the prophets say who prophesy lies in my name...How long will this continue in the hearts of these lying prophets, who prophesy the delusions of their minds?"***

They were prophesying the lies and delusions of their minds. Whether they were deceiving the people intentionally or unintentionally didn't really matter. By encouraging the people to continue down destructive paths that led away from God, their message wasn't from God, but from Satan. A teacher who never marks any of her students' answers wrong will probably be their favorite teacher. But she's setting them up for failure!

Likewise, if Jeremiah just told the people what they wanted to hear to avoid division, he was setting them up for spiritual failure. So out of loving care and concern for their souls, Jeremiah continued proclaiming God's truth—even if it caused division. As God told him, ***"Let the one who has my word speak it faithfully."***

Things are much the same today. As the Apostle John warns, ***"Do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world."*** Just like in Jeremiah's day, there are plenty of "false prophets" today who do their work in different sectors.

There are still false prophets in the church who prophesy lies in God's name which fit their own agendas and scratches people's itching ears, rather than proclaiming what God really says in Scripture. There are false prophets in society, who prophesy lies-- not in God's name, but in the name of tolerance, relativism, or "progress." Lies that affirm and approve of people's spiritually destructive habits and lifestyles that are separating them from God. There are false prophets in families and among friends, who would never tell someone their thoughts or actions

are evil, because that might cause division or hurt their relationships. Satan even sends false prophets in us! Our selfish, sinful nature that tells us to follow our hearts, even when they oppose God's Word.

And that's why what the world needs is...division. Because in a world where Satan is constantly speaking lies through his false prophets, "peace and unity" on earth instead of division is a death knell for Christianity. God tells us, ***"Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind."*** God calls Christians to be different, set apart from the world. The Greek word for church literally means, ***"Called out of."*** So if God's people live in unity with this sinful, unbelieving world, which eats up the messages of false prophets, it means God's people have been assimilated and swallowed up by the world! And if we aren't standing firm on God's Word, then this dark world will never have its darkness challenged by Christ's light!

The world needs Christian division. That's not to say that Jesus wants division. Scripture teaches that God wants ***"all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth."*** But in this world where Satan's lies have made the way of God counter-cultural, there will, and must be division between God's people and the people of the world. Otherwise, God's people, and the people of the world will both be lost.

But like Jeremiah, the temptation is strong for us too. Because standing on God's truth produces division, rejection, ridicule, and opposition, even from those closest to us. As Jesus warns, God's trust divides even parents, children, and siblings. Some of you know from experience the excruciating pain of such division. Some of you know the pain of being mocked or excluded for faithfully living and speaking according to God's Word, instead of the voices of the false prophets of culture and society. And at times, that fear of division makes us believe the lies, and refuse to proclaim God's Word with our words or our lifestyles; or to assimilate our words and lifestyles with the unbelieving world while attempting to belong.

But if we avoid such division, what's the alternative? To be eternally divided from family or friends, because we refused to proclaim God's

truth and warn against the eternally destructive path they're walking that leads away from Christ? To ourselves be lost eternally, because our aversion to division led us to walk away from God too?

Because there are so many conflicting prophets, all trying to convince us that their message is truth, we can't listen to our emotions or preferences to divide truth from deception. Those sinful, flawed arbiters will always follow what best pleases our sinful nature. The only way to divide truth from deception is through God's Word.

God compares the false prophets' dreams and Jeremiah's message by asking, ***"What has straw to do with grain?"*** Grain is nourishing, filling food. But straw has no nutritional value. It's like eating the packaging instead of the food it contains! Likewise, God's Word feeds and nourishes your soul, while the lies of false prophets add no value. Even worse, they're detrimental!

God says, ***"Is not my word like fire?"*** If you've ever seen the charred wreckage after a forest fire, or house fire, you know the power of fire to consume and destroy whatever isn't completely solid. Likewise, through the fire of God's Word, the feeble, flimsy deceptions of false prophets are easily consumed by God's truth.

God says, ***"Is not my word...like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?"*** Like what a sledgehammer does to stone, God's powerful truth pulverizes the false teaching and weak ideologies of this sinful world.

So, when we stand on the truth of God's Word, and proclaim it to those duped by the lies of Satan, the unbelieving world, and our sinful flesh, we can trust that God's Word is powerful to reveal the inadequacy and the fallacy of false prophets.

But as Christians, we need to be careful. With the imagery of division, consuming fire, and hammers pulverizing stone, we might assume our task is to repeatedly smash people over the head with God's Word. To view those who are caught up in such lies as our enemies that must be destroyed. But we need to remember who our enemy is. Not those lost souls, dearly loved by God, who have been duped by delusions and

dreams that sound so good to sinful hearts and minds. Our enemy is Satan! So, out of loving care and concern for those people's souls and our own, we need to make our stand on God's truth, even if it causes division. But in doing so, we follow God's lead and ***"speak the truth in love."*** Without God's truth, we can't show love. But if we don't show love, people will never be willing to hear the truth!

You see, God called Jeremiah not just to be a prophet of doom, but also a prophet of restoration. God instructed Jeremiah, ***"I appoint you to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow...to build, and to plant."***

That's the beauty of God describing his Word as fire and a hammer. Fire can certainly destroy. But it can also be used to purify—burning away the dross and leaving behind pure metal. And hammers can certainly smash and destroy. But the Hebrew word here denotes a forge hammer—the kind used by metalsmiths to shape an object out of the heated metal! So, while God's Word is powerful to destroy and crush the lies and delusions of false prophets, God's Word is also powerful to refine, purify, and shape people's hearts.

That's the comfort we have in sharing God's powerful Word with this unbelieving world and with our friends and family we're divided from because of God's Word. God's Word is powerful enough to purify and shape their hearts too, so that we won't be divided eternally!

It's the powerful good news of the Gospel that changes such hearts. As Jesus told his disciples in today's Gospel, he came to ***"undergo a baptism."*** Not a baptism with water, but a baptism by fire. At the cross, Jesus willingly had God's full wrath for sin poured out on himself. There, Jesus was divided from his Father, abandoned and forsaken by God when he cried out, ***"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*** Why didn't he avoid such division? He faced that division so we wouldn't be eternally divided from the Father. So that we might be perfectly, eternally united with God. So that he could bring peace between God and mankind. Not to bring peace on earth right now. No, the consequences of sin still require division from the

world...for a time. But eventually, because Jesus was divided from his Father, we will enjoy an eternity where division will be no more.

Imagine that. The heaven that John Lennon invites us to imagine doesn't exist—really does exist. And because Jesus promises that all those who stand firm in their faith to the end will spend eternity there, it's worth it to stand on God's truth, even if it brings division. What the world needs is division—so that believers can stand firm on the truth of God. And so that all those who have fallen for the lies of this world's prophets can see through our division that there's something better. Something that is theirs through Christ too!

Imagine all the people—living life in peace! You can say I'm a dreamer. But it's our reality, through Christ. An eternity where finally, the world will live as one-- in Him.