

+ First Sunday of End Times – Reformation: November 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020 +  
St Paul Lutheran, Tomah, Wisconsin  
Pastor Korey Van Kampen  
***“Hold to Jesus with Realistic Confidence”***

So what does it mean to be realistic? Imagine it's March and you're a Brewers fan looking ahead to the baseball season. Someone asks you, "What's a realistic expectation for the team this year?" What are you going to say? No matter how optimistic you might be about the team's chances, it probably isn't realistic in March to say that the Brewers are going to win the World Series. And no matter how pessimistic you might be about the team's chances, it probably isn't realistic in March to say that they're going to lose 90% of their games. A realistic expectation in that instance might be something like, "They'll compete for the division title or a playoff spot." or, "I think they can make the playoffs and do some damage." Or maybe, "They're going to struggle to win games." Looking at things realistically -- if not to be overly obvious, means trying to see them as they really are -- not as we HOPE them to be and also not as we FEAR them to be. It means avoiding pie-in-the-sky optimism and also sky-is-falling pessimism. This Reformation Festival day, the words of Jesus that we're looking at call us to examine our hopes and dreams and expectations of our walk as his followers -- and to look at our life realistically.

**Matthew 10:16-23** **“Look, I am sending you out as sheep among wolves. So be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves. <sup>17</sup> Be on guard against people. They will hand you over to councils, and they will whip you in their synagogues. <sup>18</sup> You will be brought into the presence of governors and kings for my sake, as a testimony to them and to the Gentiles. <sup>19</sup> Whenever they hand you over, do not be worried about how you will respond or what you will say, because what you say will be given to you in that hour. <sup>20</sup> In fact you will not be the ones speaking, but the Spirit of your Father will be speaking through you. <sup>21</sup> “Brother will hand over his brother to death, and a father will do the same with his child. Children will rise up against parents and have them put to death. <sup>22</sup> You will be hated by all people because of my name, but whoever endures to the end will be saved. <sup>23</sup> And when they persecute you in one town, flee to the next. Amen I tell you: You will not finish going through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes.**

So we said that a realistic look at things aims to see things as they really are. And the first thing that Jesus wants to do is correct an often-held, though inaccurate assumption that people have about life and their relationship to God. And he does that with his very first sentence, **“I am sending you out like sheep among wolves.”** Sheep are basically defenseless grass eaters. Wolves are ruthless predators. I don't know about you, but that doesn't exactly sound like a dream vacation or the best life that I've always dreamed of. Instead it sounds like a life when you're constantly under threat of attack. And that's exactly what Jesus wants us to know. Life as his follower will not be easy. Jesus makes this clear because it is a natural human assumption that if I believe in the right God and do the right things -- whatever those might be -- that my life will be smooth and easy. My Christian faith will be a gateway of sorts to health, wealth, happiness, popularity, or all of the above. But when you read this section it becomes abundantly clear that that is not at all what Jesus promises you.

Instead Jesus promises this: **“All people will hate you because of me.”** The opposition that will come to us because of Jesus will be pervasive. All people here isn't literally everyone -- but it is from all sides. Jesus talks first about being handed over to councils and whipped in the synagogues -- The councils here are religious ones, like the Sanhedrin. So Jesus is telling first-century Jews that their fellow Jews will hate them. More than that, they will be **brought before governors and kings.** They will be put on trial not just before religious authorities, but also before secular and civil authorities. We might make a connection for our day that we will be opposed by people who claim to be Christians -- even by people within our own churches and also by people in our government. And it doesn't stop there. Jesus goes on to say that that opposition and hatred can even come from within our own families -- from our parents, from our children, and even from one sibling to another. We should expect to find opposition in every sphere of our lives -- in churches, in government, and in our families.

When we hear that, we might naturally wonder why? The early Christians were hated by the Jews because they held to Jesus more than to all of their special traditions and customs. They were hated and regarded as treasonous by the Romans because they would not say “Caesar is Lord” but only “Jesus is Lord.” In other words, they were hated because their greater allegiance to Jesus was seen as a threat. And the same holds true today. Allegiance to Jesus is still seen as a threat -- a threat to what many today value most of all -- Individual Freedom -- our ability to do whatever we want, whenever we want, with whomever we want and to only be accountable to ourselves. Jesus and those who hold to his Word are a constant, unwelcome reminder that our lives are not our own to do with as we please and that we are accountable to him. That's why many are not tolerant of the Christian faith and some are even violently opposed to it.

Yes, the reality is that we will be opposed, even hated because of Jesus. We consider this reality and we might think that the appropriate response is to shrink in despair. But, remember, looking at things realistically means looking at everything, not just one side. There's more to what Jesus has to say about our lives as his people. He says, **“Whenever they hand you over, do not be worried about how you will respond or what you will say, because what you say will be given to you in that hour. In fact you will not be the ones speaking, but the Spirit of your Father will be speaking through you.** Jesus' presence and power will remain with you, even and especially when arrested and put on trial. In those moments, probably the scariest thing is knowing what to say and how to say it -- you want to be faithful to God and give a good confession, but at the same time, you're all alone and you know that your life hangs in the balance. It's incredibly hard. So Jesus gives a promise. If you ever find yourself in that situation, God's won't leave you. He's going to give you the words to say. And then there's more. Even if those trials don't go your way -- if you find yourself facing death for the sake of Jesus, he says, **“Whoever endures to the end will be saved.”** Even if you lose everything in this life, Jesus won't lose you. The end of your life here is the beginning of your life with him forever in eternity.

So on one hand, we're going to be opposed, but on the other God will never leave us. So we can be realistic about opposition. That's why Jesus says, **“Be shrewd as snakes and innocent as doves.** To be shrewd is to be smart, to pay attention to our surroundings and situations and to react accordingly. Jesus gives an example of that in our second to last

verse: **And when they persecute you in one town, flee to the next.** With this direction to be shrewd, Jesus is calling us to use our brains, telling us that as we are aware of our surroundings, it is OK, even good, at times, to avoid persecution and escape it using whatever means we can -- provided that we are not compromising our confession of faith. Then to be innocent is to conduct yourself in a way that you're not open to any accusation. It is to always do what is good and what is right. Peter said it this way in his first letter **"Live such good lives among the pagans, that though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God."** And Paul said it this way in Romans 12: **"Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone."** In other words, Jesus instructs us to conduct ourselves in such a way that if we face persecution, the cause of that persecution has everything to do with Jesus and nothing to do with us. AT the same time, we can be realistic of God's presence with us, so we can be confident and bold -- even in the face of persecution. We can continue to serve Jesus and speak in his name because he will give us the words to say and will ultimately deliver us to eternal life with him. Taking all this in, we can say that Jesus calls us to hold to him with realistic confidence.

Now we ask, is that how we would describe ourselves? Do we conduct ourselves with shrewdness and innocence? Do we use our brains to escape persecution if possible? Or do we perhaps invite it by being less than loving in our words and attitudes toward others? Do we face opposition with confidence? Or do we shrink back and hide at the thought of being opposed? The reality is that we fall short - we sin - in all of these areas -- all of us in different ways. Some of us are more likely to be bold and maybe not so shrewd or innocent. Others of us are more likely to be shrewd and innocent and less than bold. And some of us probably swing between the two. How do we overcome our sin and grow in realistic confidence?

We look to Jesus. Look to Jesus and see that all the opposition that he says we should expect as his followers, he already went through it and went through it perfectly. He was sent out as a sheep among wolves -- when he came down from heaven and became a human being. Just think about how quickly his life was in danger even as a young child. He was handed over to councils and flogged in synagogues. He was put on trial before governors and kings. But when he was facing death at their hands, God didn't stand by him. No, he was abandoned by God -- on the cross he cried out, "my God my God why have you forsaken me!" Jesus faced suffering alone and he died alone.

And now because he has done this, your sins are forgiven. The times and ways that we've shrunk from persecution because we doubted God's promises are wiped away. The times and ways that we've failed to be both shrewd and innocent are deleted from our record forever. Because Jesus was abandoned for our sins, God will never abandon you or me. Because Jesus faced opposition and trial and death alone, you and I never face them alone. And even if we don't go through them perfectly, we have a savior who did -- for us and by faith in him, God sees his record every time he looks at you and me. You see, a God who does all of this for you, who sends his son for you, and that son willingly goes on trial and goes through all of this for you so that you can be welcomed home -- that's a God whose word you can trust when he says he won't abandon you. That's a God who cares about you enough to stand by you and stand with you when your life gets hard for his sake.

Then, once you've looked at Jesus, look at the pages of history and see countless examples of how God keeping his word. The timely encouragement from God's Word in our bulletins today points us to Daniel. We see similar accounts as we look at the lives of the Apostles as covered in the book of Acts -- people like Peter, Paul, and Stephen. And, given that it is Reformation festival, also consider Martin Luther. It probably hard not to picture him in light of these verses at the Diet of Worms -- that great meeting in the city of Worms in Germany where he was called before both civil and religious authorities and called to take back what he had taught or face the threat of death. That's when he said, "Unless I am convinced from Scripture... I cannot and will not take back anything. Here I stand, I can do no other." What is that other than these words of Jesus being fulfilled? What is that other than holding to Jesus with realistic confidence?

The fact that we'll face opposition and even persecution means that we won't expect Christian life and ministry to be easy. At the same time the promises of Jesus to always be with us, to give us the words to say, and to ultimately save us forever enable and empower us to not shrink from the task, but to carry it out with confidence. And his perfect life, death, and resurrection assure us of our eternal victory. Until then, we hold to Jesus with realistic confidence. AMEN!