

“I Have Put My Words in Your Mouth”

In the name of him who came to preach the good news of the kingdom, dear friends in Christ: It was almost exactly one month ago when multitudes of our fellow citizens – and perhaps you too – made their New Year’s resolutions for the year 2022. And what with obesity rapidly becoming the next national pandemic and more than half of us overweight, many of these resolutions had to do with diet. “In 2022 I will be more careful when it comes to watching what I eat. I’m going to eat healthier foods, take smaller portions, and cut back on all that candy, cookies, chips, and other fatty junk food.” Ah, a wise and noble goal. No doubt many people making such resolutions signed up for one of those programs like *Nutrisystem* or *Jenny Craig* in which they send you very specific prepackaged meals for each day a week’s worth at a time. They proudly advertise that you can eat all your favorite foods and still lose weight. And they show you mouthwatering pictures of their juicy cheeseburgers and chocolate sundaes and other stuff that you would not normally associate with a healthy diet plan. Of course, when the package arrives you discover that the cheeseburger for your lunch this day is the size of a fifty cent piece and the chocolate sundae would easily fit inside of a shot glass.

But like I said, these resolutions were made a whole month ago. The question is: how many people who made them are sticking to it? If you made such a resolution, are you? It’s hard isn’t it? With St. Valentine’s Day fast approaching, store shelves sag with chocolate hearts and other romance inspired sweet treats. As soon as it passes, they’ll be replaced by Easter candies like those decadent Cadbury eggs: thick milk chocolate shells filled with sugar-cream goo – which for the sake of public health probably should be outlawed (but I’m thankful they’re not). I think you understand: it’s not easy keeping the stuff we should permanently swear off of from going into our mouths. And if it’s hard to do in a physical sense with respect to the food that we eat, it can be even harder when it comes to what we consume in a spiritual sense.

That brings me to Jeremiah and today’s Old Testament lesson in which we hear the Lord calling him and appointing him to be his prophet not just to his people Israel, but to all the nations on earth. Jeremiah was only a youth, something between 12 and 16 when he heard the Lord say to him, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.” Like so many others whom the Lord called, Jeremiah shows reluctance. “I’m just a kid”, he protests, “I don’t know what to say or how to say it.” The Lord tells him, “Don’t you worry and don’t be afraid. You’ll say exactly what I tell you to say, and you’ll say it to whomever I tell you to say it.” And then the Lord extends his hand and touches Jeremiah’s on the lips saying, “Behold, I have put my words in your mouth.” They are words of power that will break down, destroy, and overthrow people and nations, and that also build up, plant, grow, and recreate them.

Well, you can’t go wrong if your spiritual diet is God’s own Word. It’s perfectly wholesome, nutritious, and delicious. Of this Word Jeremiah later says to the Lord, “When your Words came, I ate them; they were the joy and delight of my heart.” So also the Psalmist declares that God’s Word is sweeter than honey and more valuable than refined gold. And having consumed God’s Words of power, Jeremiah spoke them, usually to people who didn’t share his enthusiasm for what God had to say. No, they much preferred the unhealthy spiritual junk food of idolatry, sexual immorality, the oppression of the poor and fatherless, slander, greed, corruption, and excess of every form. They were savoring the pleasures of sin and turning up their noses at the Words by which God feeds his people with the true Bread of Life.

In response to this, the Lord placed in Jeremiah's mouth sharp Words of warning, prophesying the overthrow of the nation of Judah and the captivity and exile of large portions of its people. If you won't receive my Word, the Lord told his people through the mouth of the prophet, then I'll serve you up something you really can't stomach: the words of foreigners speaking a language you don't understand who will carry you off into slavery and put you to hard work for them. Yes, but if turn from your wicked ways and return to me, the Lord your God, I will spare my hand.

Sadly, as was often the history of God's people, this generous serving of his Words of warning did not have the desired result. Instead the people in general and in particular the king of Judah, a fellow named Jehoiakim, insulted the Divine Chef who prepared them and persecuted the waiter who faithfully served them. Jeremiah was at various times imprisoned. At one point they held him captive in a waterless pit. Banned from the king's presence, Jeremiah dictated to his secretary a letter to the king in the form of a scroll; more words of warning. The king was furious when it was read to him. He ordered the scroll burned in his presence. Jeremiah was despondent when he heard about it. How could a king of God's people be so disrespectful of his Word? The Lord told him (in essence) what? Do you think a little fire can destroy my Word? Write it down again. The Word of the Lord endures forever. Jeremiah did.

And not surprisingly, the powerful Word of the Lord accomplished what it was sent to do. When, contrary to the Lord's specific command, King Jehoiakim rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon who was acting as the Lord's scourge to discipline his wayward people, he was thoroughly humiliated. And the first wave of exiles was taken into captivity as Jeremiah had foretold. Less than a decade later, the king foolishly rebelled again. This time the consequences were more severe. Tens of thousands were marched off in chains to Babylon, there to labor in what were essentially concentration camps. Because they had rejected God's life-giving Word, there they were made to eat the bread of tears. The king himself was taken. And there he died and his sons died in wretched poverty – again, exactly as the Words the Lord placed in Jeremiah's mouth had foretold.

Jeremiah continued to serve his unpopular menu items to those who as yet remained in Jerusalem and Judah, warning the new king, Zedekiah, that things would turn out even worse if he ever got it into his head to rebel against his Babylonian masters like his predecessor did. It's not the bread of tears you'll eat; you'll bite the dust. I'll bet you already know where this is going. He did rebel. The Babylonians came back in force and laid siege to Jerusalem. Months later, seeing his people starving, a third of them already dead, and the walls about to be breached, Zedekiah tried to get away. He fled with his family; but they were captured. The last thing he saw with his eyes before they gouged them out was his sons being slaughtered.

Meanwhile, Jeremiah, hearing of his countrymen's suffering in exile, wrote a letter of God's Word of hope and comfort to them. Babylon, the empire that holds you captive, will by God's powerful Word, itself be destroyed and replaced by an empire even stronger that God will raise up. And you who languish in exile will be set free to return to Judah and rebuild Jerusalem. Instead of the bread of tears your mouths will be filled with laughter and shouts of praise to Almighty God. In due time, this too came to pass – even as God had spoken.

And the Words that God placed in the mouth of Jeremiah promised a yet greater deliverance for his people – indeed, for the people of all nations. He spoke of the Savior to come, whom the prophet calls “the Lord our Righteousness”. He is the Word of God made flesh, Son of the virgin mother, and laid in a manger of all things. The Good Shepherd placed in

a feed trough for the sheep. There's got to be a message there. He too would feed multitudes with the Bread of Life. And for us he would taste the most bitter death, swallowing it up forever.

Today he continues to feed those who heed his call to repent, who despise their sins, and who hunger and thirst for his righteousness. He places in our mouths his delightful Word of forgiveness, and in short order he will nourish our hungry souls again with his own body and blood.

Doing so he is saying to us, "Behold, I've placed my Word in your mouth. Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you. I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper and not to harm you; plans to give you hope and a future." We can't go wrong if our steady spiritual diet is God's own Word. The question you need to ask, then, is do you find it as appetizing and sufficient as Jeremiah did? Or, as so many of his contemporaries did, do you want to supplement it or replace it altogether with spiritual junk food?

Like those decadent Cadbury eggs, Satan knows how to present them to us in tempting ways: a morsel of gossip, a crumb of coveting, a lecherous peek at pornography, a serving of anger, a thick slice of slander ... before you know it, you've blown the diet completely. You're a slave to your evil appetites. In the end, it will literally make you glutton for punishment.

Let's not go there. Let's make a new resolution. Let's determine to stick to a wholesome diet that the Words we ingest be God's own, that they become part of us, that they guide our thoughts and direct our ways. Let's have the Word of forgiveness we so freely receive be those that we speak to others. Let's eat the Bread of Life and be satisfied. Let's taste and see that the Lord is good. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!