

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times...” This quote from *A Tale of Two Cities* shows how the French Revolution was a time of highs and lows. It was a time where people would find love and an increase in the importance of family. On the other hand, there was war and hatred. From one page to another, there are many contrasting highs and lows. During the time of the Reformation, Martin Luther lived during the best of times and the worst of times. It WAS the worst of times. The church of that day persecuted anyone who would keep the truth, anyone who held to the fact that faith comes only through Scripture alone. Yet, God granted Martin Luther the strength to stand on the words of Scripture. Today, we experience the best of times despite it seeming like the worst of times. Jesus tells us to have this great expectation that despite how it seems to be the worst of times, it is the best of times. Despite how it seems to be the worst of times, it is the best of times.

Today’s gospel falls in the middle of Jesus giving his disciples instructions as he sent them out. He instructed them to go out, heal the sick, drive away impure spirits, and share this message, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is here.” This then leads into Jesus telling his disciples to have this great expectation, even though it is the best of times, being able to drive out spirits and healing the sick, it will be the worst of times. I am sending you out as sheep among wolves. Therefore, you must be as shrewd as snakes and innocent as doves.

It seems odd that Jesus is talking about all these animals. Why is he walking his disciples through the zoo? But instead of looking at the animals, we quickly see that the disciples are the animals, and only one of those animals sounds somewhat like a compliment. Sheep are fine, except they smell and are depicted as being surrounded by wolves. Snakes terrify me. And doves are depicted typically for peace or innocence, but they make a big mess.

The “sheep among wolves” portrays how helpless the disciples were. Sheep aren’t trained in karate or self-defense. It is inevitable that the sheep will be eaten in a group of wolves. In the same way, it was inevitable that the disciples would be attacked for their faith. They would be dragged before local councils and flogged in the synagogue. There was no way around it.

So, Jesus instructed them to be as shrewd as snakes and innocent as doves. “Shrewd as snakes.” A snake knows to flee or defend itself when being attacked. Jesus even gives the disciples the command to flee somewhere else when they are persecuted. “Innocent as doves.” Being brought before a court, this is a time to serve as a witness. The disciples were to say the words given to them by the Holy Spirit. If a court is able to say anything against them, that could get in the way of the witness because your actions act as a witness as well. Look at the example of Jesus. Those accusing him couldn’t make any accusation stick.

How bad would the times be? Sheep among wolves. Trials, persecution, floggings. Jesus even says that family members would be killing each other. Brother would kill brother. Parents their children. Mothers-in-law their daughters-in-law. Sharp divisions would be drawn because of Jesus. It sounds like the worst of times.

We don’t want it to be the worst of times. Right now, we aren’t being dragged into court to be flogged or put on trial. But yet we try to avoid it when family tells us that they will quit talking to us if we continue speaking about that Jesus guy. Or in the science world, they tell us

that we can't be a real scientist if we trust that the world was created in six days. Unbelievers call us judgmental when we tell them their particular life-style is sinful and harmful. We don't want to offend people with our faith or scare them off, so we hide it. When the wolves attack, we hide that we are sheep. We become ashamed that we are Christian.

But for the times when we aren't willing to stand trial in the public eye, Jesus was willing to stand trial before the masses. He was mocked and flogged, and even put to death. Talk about wolves!! they tore Jesus apart! But Jesus willingly went through it for us. There was no complaint on his lips. He was the perfect witness. He was the uncomplaining lamb which went forth into a den of wolves. Talk about an innocent dove. There was nothing wrong that they could point out against him. Their accusations didn't even match up with one another. The claim they went with, is that he called himself the Son of God. They killed him for a true statement. Jesus endured the worst of times for us so that we could endure the best of times in heaven with him forever. His enduring strength on the cross gives us the strength to live for him each and every day.

*A Tale of Two Cities* takes place during the French Revolution. The war was the worst of times. Mothers lost their sons. Wives lost their husbands. It was so painful for them. Sometimes, soldiers came back maimed or severely injured, even by their own countrymen. All could feel the loss of the war. The worst of times. Yet, Charles Dickens began that phrase by saying it was the best of times. People grew closer together. Some found love. In the midst of these terrible times, some had the best of times.

Jesus pointed out to his disciples that even in these worst of times, it is the best of times. Even though his disciples were being sent as sheep among wolves, where they would be beaten up and put on trial, they didn't have to worry about what to say. The Holy Spirit would give them what to say. Jesus made sure to tell them, "Don't worry."

"Don't worry." This is usually a phrase we don't want to hear. Every time someone says that to us, it is usually a situation where we should have good reason to worry. Bobby McFerrin's song, "Don't Worry Be Happy," backs up this point. He says not to worry about late rent, no cash, and no girl. When someone starts off with the phrase, "Don't worry. I got this." That's when we start worrying as they try to jump from high up in a tree or out of a moving vehicle. But when Jesus says, "don't worry," the disciples don't need to worry. He even backs up the statement by saying, "At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you." And, we can be sure that when Jesus makes a promise, he keeps it.

This promise was fulfilled clearly on Pentecost. As the disciples were moved to speak in different languages, the people made fun of them saying that they had too much wine to drink. So, Peter, moved by the Spirit, addresses the people. He is given the exact words to say. Jesus makes a promise, and he keeps it. Certainly, the best of times.

If Jesus was able to make the worst of times into the best of times for his disciples, why doesn't he make it the best of times for us? Where is Jesus to say don't worry when I have so

much to worry about. We want the Holy Spirit to give us the perfect words to say in every circumstance. Where are those words when my unbelieving friend is dying of cancer? Where are those words when I am being made fun of at work? We feel cheated because the Holy Spirit doesn't seem to be working in the same way that he did for the disciples. We want to sound impressive and confident, so we try to come up with our own words to say. Our emphasis is in the wrong place. We look to ourselves to say something even though for us it is the best of times.

How did Jesus explain to his disciples that it was the best of times? He told them, "do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you." We don't need to worry either. The Holy Spirit speaks to us. How does he do that? Through the Bible. Everything that we need to know is in the Bible. We aren't in the same situation as the disciples. We aren't at this time being dragged into court because of our faith. Yet, we are under trial under the public eye. God gives us what we need. When we don't know what to say, we point them to Jesus. They ask us why we are so different, just as sheep are so different from wolves. We can tell them because Jesus lived, Jesus died, and Jesus rose. Even though it seems like the worst of times, it is the best of times because the Holy Spirit gives us the words to say in the Bible. Nothing can be better than that!

Equipped with the Word, Jesus sends us out as sheep among wolves. While that is surprising, Jesus tells us, "don't worry." He is with us as we go out. Why is he sending us out? To tell everyone about his love that he showed us. There are people everywhere that don't know Jesus as their Savior. When we think about people going out, it's easy to think about world missions. We give some money to the church to send people overseas. But, there are people in our own neighborhoods who don't know Jesus. It could be the person you buy coffee from everyday at Starbucks, the gentleman you pass by every day walking, or someone you work with. It begins with a hello, giving them your name. Building a relationship leads to opportunities to see that gap in people's lives where they need to hear about Jesus. It isn't easy. We are sheep among wolves. Some people don't want to hear God's Word. We are scoffed at and made fun of. When this happens, we keep sharing. That person who scoffs at us at one point may welcome that same Jesus we shared earlier with them with open arms later. It took them going through the worst of times to realize that only Jesus can make it the best of times. They might be more willing to stick around because you took the times to form that relationship.

It is the best of times! It's true that Jesus sends us as sheep among wolves. People will hate us because of Jesus. It will seem like the worst of times. But we know that it is the best of times. Don't worry because the Father's Spirit has given us the Words to say in Scripture. We know that Jesus lived, Jesus died, and Jesus rose. Take heart! We have Jesus! And since we have Jesus, we don't worry because it is the best of times! Amen.