Matthew 10:16-23

16 "Look, I am sending you out as sheep among wolves. So be as shrewd as snakes and as
innocent as doves. 17 Be on guard against people. They will hand you over to councils, and
they will whip you in their synagogues. 18 You will be brought into the presence of governors
and kings for my sake, as a testimony to them and to the Gentiles. 19 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. 20 In fact you will not be the ones speaking, but the
Spirit of your Father will be speaking through you.
21 "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. 22 You will be hated
by all people because of my name, but whoever endures to the end will be saved. 23 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.

Held

I.

Winter is coming. Some of you might not be as excited about that as I am. You know this is a scenario that is going to happen. Someone will be standing in the middle of a frozen lake. It might be the first real cold snap of the winter, and he—you know it's a man who can't wait for ice fishing to start—he walks out onto the frozen water to see. He stands there, feet planted, shoulders back, absolutely sure of himself.

Here's a question for you. What keeps him from falling through? Is it how firmly he stands? Is it how confident he feels? Or is it the ice? All the confidence in the world never made an inch of ice any thicker. All the determination in the world, standing on thin ice, ends in the same cold water. It's the ice under your feet.

Keep that scenario in mind. Today's readings are all about standing firm. At first they sound like they're asking an awful lot of us.

Today's First Reading began with Daniel learning that a document had been signed. The verses before the reading explain that document. A large group of King Darius' officials gave some advice. They said that he should: "…establish and enforce a decree that prohibits anyone to pray a prayer to any god or person for thirty days except to you, Your Majesty" (Daniel 6:7, EHV).

Daniel knew all about the document. His actions didn't change one little bit from what he had done in the past. He opened his window that faced Jerusalem and prayed. No adjusting his previous behavior or hiding his actions for his own safety. Just steadfastness, straight into the teeth of the lions.

Jesus didn't use the metaphor of lions when he spoke to his disciples. He said: "Look, I am sending you out as sheep among wolves" (Matthew 10:16, EHV). He told them they would be handed over to councils where they would be whipped; they would be brought before governors and kings—and not to receive praise. Even families would turn on each other. Finally, he told them: "You will be hated by all people because of my name" (Matthew 10:22, EHV).

All that Jesus told them happened, throughout history. Peter and Paul and Stephen stood in the name of Jesus and lost their lives for it. Centuries later there were all kinds of reformers who lost their lives to kings and emperors because they stood up for the truth. By the grace of God, Martin Luther didn't lose his life but he, too, was summoned before the emperor and the princes of the church and told to take back everything he had written.

What he had written is that sinners are saved by grace, through faith, because of Christ Jesus. He taught that this was exactly what Scripture taught. He finally said: "Unless I am convicted of error by the Scriptures to which I have appealed, and my conscience is taken captive by God's Word, I cannot and will not recant of anything."

After Jesus said his faithful followers could expect to be hated because of his name, he said: "Whoever endures to the end will be saved" (Matthew 10:22, EHV).

We're not facing lions, but Jesus called his followers "sheep among wolves." What do our wolves look like? Maybe like the joke at work we laugh along with, even though it mocks the Savior we confess. Perhaps the family gathering, when we're asked what we believe and we change the subject. Maybe the social media post we start to write, but then delete. Or the worship service we skip "just this once," and then again and again.

Did you know that Luther asked for a whole day to come up with his answer before he said those now-famous words? Luther spent lots of sleepless nights terrified that he would be lost to hell. Peter was another of those mentioned as a bold proclaimer of Jesus. Before that, Peter swore he would *never* fall away, only to swear he had never seen Jesus before just a few hours later.

"Whoever endures to the end will be saved." If that's the deal, if your salvation depends on how firmly you hold on, all of us are standing on thin ice. Are you holding on? Really?

II.

In today's Second Reading Paul says: "Now we know that whatever the law says is addressed to those who are under the law, so that every mouth will be silenced" (Romans 3:19, EHV). *Every* mouth will be silenced. Not just the mouths of those who later denied the faith. Before God, no one has a thing to say about how steadfast they were. Not Daniel. Not Peter. Not Luther. Not you or me. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23, EHV). No one can say to God: "Look how steadfast I was!"

Back to the lions' den. Daniel is lowered in. A stone was rolled over the opening. The king couldn't eat or sleep. At daybreak he hurried to the den to see whether Daniel had been saved. The answer came out of the darkness of the pit: "My God sent his angel and shut the mouth of the lions. They have not hurt me because he found me innocent in his presence" (Daniel 6:22, EHV). *Daniel* didn't hold the lions' mouths shut. *God* did. Daniel trusted the One whose hand was stronger than the lions' mouths.

That's what Jesus urges his followers to do: "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. [20]In fact you will not be the ones speaking, but the Spirit of your Father will be speaking through you" (Matthew 10:19-20, EHV). Even your confession isn't something *you* produce—it's given.

We are not made right with God because of our steadfastness. "For we conclude that a person is justified by faith without the works of the law" (Romans 3:28, EHV). *Justified* means "declared righteous." God declares us righteous, it isn't something we have earned. This verse mattered so much to Luther that when he translated it into German he added a word. He said: "by faith *alone*." People attacked him for that for years, but that is the essence of what Paul said. Faith, without any additives. Faith is the empty hand that receives what God gives. Faith is the exact opposite of holding on to something on your own.

The question isn't "Are you holding on?" It's: "Who is holding whom?"

III.

Jesus gave a list of things that would happen to his disciples. Handed over to councils.

Whipped. Brought before governors and kings. Hated because of Jesus' Name.

Everything Jesus warned his followers about *he* suffered first. He was handed over to the council. He was beaten. He was brought before a governor, Pilot, and a king, Herod. He was hated for the sake of the Name he carried; the crowd shouted "Crucify him!"

The One who is God from all eternity took on our flesh and was born under the law in our place. Every moment of every day Jesus did what we could never hope to do: he stood perfectly before the Heavenly Father. The price has been paid. The Father abandoned the Son on the cross to make the payment God's justice required.

When Jesus stood accused, what Isaiah prophesied came true: "Like a lamb he was led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that is silent in front of its shearers, he did not open his mouth" (Isaiah 53:7, EHV). At the accusation of God's law, our mouths are silenced because we have nothing to say for ourselves. Jesus took that silence on himself, so that one day our mouths might be opened in praise.

"It is finished," he said. He endured to the end, so that all he endured could be counted as yours by faith alone.

They took his body and laid it in a tomb, rolled a stone in front of it, and posted a guard. Jesus walked out of the grave. Every one of our lions—sin, death, the devil— had their mouths shut by the One who is both God and Man. Christ is risen. Your sins are paid for. God has declared you righteous.

Who is holding whom? Jesus said: "No one will snatch them out of my hand" (John 10:28, EHV). *His* hand, not yours. Luther knew this and put it into the hymn inspired by Psalm 46. Luther was not a man who stood on his own willpower. He was a frightened sinner who trembled and doubted and woke up in the night wondering whether God was really gracious. What steadied him, what made him steadfast, was the Mighty Fortress.

IV.

Are you holding on? Or are you being held?

Held. That is Jesus' promise. What does that look like?

Stay where Jesus holds you. The Mighty Fortress is found in his Word, where the Holy Spirit works. It's in the water of baptism, where he put his Name on you. It's at the Lord's Table, where he gives you his own body and blood, in, with, and under the bread and wine, given and poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins. Steadfastness isn't something you produce, but something God does *for* you in the places he has promised to be.

Speak; and trust that the words will be given to you. You don't need a perfect script. Even when you stumble, it's God's Word that does the work.

Be wise, not reckless. Jesus says: "When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next" (Matthew 10:23, EHV). Steadfast isn't stubborn and looking for a fight. We're not trying to be heros, we are sheep.

When it costs you something, remember where your treasure is, even if the closest people in your life turn away.

Finally, pray. We don't ask for ice thick enough to hold our own weight. We ask to be kept by the One whose hands never let go.

Are you holding on? Too often you have to admit you aren't. But the question never really was whether *you* were holding on; it's whether you are *held*. In Christ, you are. He was crucified for you, risen for you.

May the Lord of Armies keep you steadfast in his Word and hold you in the faith until the day he returns to take you home. Amen.