

Lent in the Upper Room (Part 7):
What if the World is Against Us?
Exodus 13:17–13:22, John 15:18–15:27

Have you heard about this new coronavirus? It's kind of a big deal.

Actually, that's what Laura said to me one Tuesday morning in the office in January. I was in the middle of a screen detox with my family, so I didn't really hear any news. So I said, "nope—what's that?"

Two months later, here we are. I think we're all surprised by what's happened.

Know who isn't surprised? Bill Gates, the founder of Microsoft. Last night I watched a TED talk he gave in 2015. He said that the next big threat to the world won't be nuclear weapons, but a virus. And he said that the world isn't ready for it.

I don't know much, but it seems like the world didn't take Bill Gates seriously. I don't think we were ready for this.

Jesus gathers with his disciples in the Upper Room. And in our passage, he tells us that there will be trouble ahead. That they, that we, shouldn't be surprised. We should be ready. As his followers, Jesus says, we've got to do 3 things.

1. Resist our sore temptations
2. Relish our sweet truths
3. Remember our simple testimony

We're worshipping in our little Upper Rooms with Jesus today. Let's listen closely to what he's teaching us, so we can be ready.

1. Resist our sore temptations

Why does Jesus tell his friends about the way the world is going to hate them? About the violence and disrespect they will experience because they are following him?

The answer is not explicit in what he says. But you can hear it in every sentence. Jesus knows our sore temptations. Jesus knows that we have two main temptations when it comes to being his followers.

Temptation number one: When everything is going great, we are sorely tempted to think that the world is our best friend.

Temptation number two: When the world seems to be our enemy, we are sorely tempted to think that God has abandoned us.

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The first temptation—to try to be friends with the world—is a problem for us, because, Jesus says, opposition and frustration and even attack *will* come. And if you are not expecting it, the world will surprise you with its cruelty. And it will feel like your world is collapsing. The world, Jesus says, is a fair-weather friend.

The second temptation—to think that the world is capable of ultimately destroying you, to think that trouble means God has abandoned you—is a problem for us, because then, what happens to us? We start to *hate* the world. We forget what we read earlier in John's gospel, the most famous Bible verse ever: God *loved* the world so much that he sent his only Son, not to condemn the world in hatred, but to save it in love.

Right now, we are experiencing the world as an unstable, volatile, even scary and dangerous place. It *feels* like the world is trying to kill us! As followers of Jesus, it's not people threatening us; it's nature threatening us.

But friends, if we don't listen to what Jesus is saying here in the Upper Room (chapter 16)—that we will have plenty of trouble here in this world—then all of our animal instincts will take over. We'll fight. We'll flee. We'll freeze.

But Jesus did not call his disciples to fight, flee, or freeze.

You see, whether it's persecution or a virus, it's not ultimately *people* or *nature* that are against us. Our conflict is not with flesh and blood. What's our conflict with? The spiritual forces out there who want to infect people with hatred, and use them to intimidate us. The spiritual forces out there who want to infect people with a virus, and silence our Christian witness.

Jesus says in verse 26: the Spirit comes to tell the world about the grace and glory of the Lord Jesus. And, verse 27, we must also testify.

This testimony—that Jesus is Lord, that God loves the world, that though our sins are many, his mercy is more, that we can turn from sin and have abundant life—this message scares the spiritual forces of evil so much. And so they try as hard as they can to shut this good news down before it spreads all over the face of the earth like the waters cover the seas.

The evil spiritual world has a Center for Disease Control, too. And the virus *they're* desperately trying to keep from spreading is the good, contagious, life-altering news of Jesus Christ. They'll do anything to slow the spread of the good news.

So Jesus says: don't give in to these sore temptations: to be a friend or an enemy of the world; to be infatuated with the world or to hate the world. Don't assume that the

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world is your friend, cause you're going to have trouble. And don't let the world intimidate you when the trouble comes.

2. Relish our sweet truths

So the *reason* Jesus has to say these things in the Upper Room is because of our sore temptations. But the *things* he says in the Upper Room are our sweet truths.

Jesus says, whether it seems like the world is friendly, or it seems like the world is against you, what really matters is that we learn and live our sweet truths.

What are these sweet truths?

Jesus says (19) "Don't forget, you don't *belong* to the world anyway. I have chosen you *out* of the world, and now you belong to *me*."

All the hostility you might experience— people intimidating you because you belong to Jesus; a natural disaster or global pandemic that threatens to stop Jesus' followers— you experience this because *you belong to Jesus*. Because he has hand-picked *you, us*, to be his own! It's your *status* as the treasured possession of Jesus, known and loved, that intimidates the forces of darkness. It's the love that Jesus lavished on us while we were still sinners, and the blood by which he bought us, that sends evil scrambling in fear, looking for any way possible to stop us!

Sweet truth number one is that he has chosen us for himself!

And that leads us to sweet truth number 2: Jesus chose us to be in sweet fellowship and in business with himself, but also with (21) the one who sent Jesus— verse 23: the Father. And who else is in sweet fellowship and in business with us and Jesus? (26) God's Holy Spirit.

Do you know what allowed Jesus to resist the temptation to fight, flee, or freeze when the world became hostile to him? It was the presence of his Father through the Holy Spirit. The Spirit stayed so close to Jesus' heart during his ministry and mission, that *nothing* could ultimately cause him to back down from bearing witness in word and deed. And Jesus is saying that this same Holy Spirit stays so close to *our* hearts, that *nothing* should keep us from testifying in words and deeds that Jesus is Lord, and God loves the world despite its brokenness and hostility.

Tom Petty has that famous song "I won't back down. You can stand me up at the gates of hell but I won't back down." Actually Jesus is the one, by the Spirit's power— what a sweet truth!-- who stood up straight and tall at the gates of hell and didn't back down. And by his Spirit, his people can stand there, too.

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What if the World is Against Us?
Exodus 13:17–13:22, John 15:18–15:27

Friends, the sweet truth Jesus teaches us, which can help us overcome our sore temptation to back down, is that we get to know our Master like a friend, and *his* Master like a father, and his Spirit like a confident Helper. We're never alone, no matter what the world throws at us!

3. Remember our simple testimony

So if our sore temptations are to fight, flight, or flee because we've been surprised by the trouble we experience in the world,

And if our sweet truths are that we are servants of and friends with the Father, Son, and Spirit, and chosen by Jesus to belong to him,

Then what is all this *for*? Jesus warns us of these sore temptations and comforts us with these sweet truths so that we can give our simple testimony.

I've chosen you (19) from the world, to bear witness (27) *to* the world.

When the Father so loved the world that he sent his Son Jesus, he sent Jesus, John tells us over and over, as the Word in human flesh. To speak, and to act, with love and mercy, grace and truth.

And friends, even in these days, when it would be easy to become intimidated by this virus, to care only for ourselves, to listen to the news all day, to read our Facebook feeds constantly, Jesus has another plan for us: our simple testimony.

Our actions and our words matter right now. The way we speak to one another, care for one another, love one another in the church *speaks* to the world about the character of Jesus. The way we love our neighbors, especially the vulnerable, matters right now. Our prayers, as well as our hand washing and social-distancing, matter right now. And yes, the opportunities we have to actually tell others about why we have hope, why we're calm, why we're looking out for others, matter right now.

Nobody is asking you to be a hero. Jesus is simply asking you to be a simple witness. "You also must testify," he says (27). Because you've been with Jesus.

You've experienced his tenderness. You've had his sweet truths wash over you. You've grown in your ability, with the Spirit's help, to resist sore temptations. And now you're prepared to bear simple witness.

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There's so much more we can say about these verses. And we will, Lord-willing, some other time. But for now, friends:

Resist our sore temptations: you're going to have trouble in this world. Don't be surprised and don't shut down.

Relish our sweet truths: you don't belong to the world, but to Jesus, who bought you with his own love and life. Enjoy his closeness in your heart.

Remember our simple testimony: My God and Father loved the world so much that he sent Jesus not to condemn, but to save. We have nothing to fear, and we have everything in Jesus.

May the Lord bless you as you stand firm in these bizarre times. Take heart, because Jesus has overcome the world.