

Snakes in Florida don't always get a good rap. When someone says, they found a snake in their yard, the usual question is, "Did you kill him?" The usual response is, "Yes, I got him cornered and then chopped him up with a shovel. Or I had my buddy pin him down with a garden rake, and then I killed him with a shovel". But we shouldn't just have total negative vibes about snakes. Snakes are very clever and wise. The other day we had a black snake lying quietly in the foliage next to our church front door. He was waiting for a little anole to pass by so he could pounce and have a meal. Snakes seem to know when to flee, and when to take a stand. Most of the time when we run into them, they flee from us. But if we corner them in some foliage, they will take a stand, and strike out at us.

Jesus tells us today as Christians, we are to be as shrewd as snakes and as gentle as doves in our Christian lives. What he means by that, is that there will be times, when we will need to flee those who are out to hurt us. The Christians who were living in Northern Iraq were ones who were fleeing for their lives as Isis attempted to attack them and kill them. The smart thing to do there, was to flee from the area, like a snake would flee someone chasing them with a shovel. On the otherhand, when the Mayor of Houston, Annise Parker, demands that pastors submit their sermons to her, so she can see if there is something that is not politically correct in their sermons, like a snake, we sit tight and defend ourselves. Recently, Annise Parker has received 1000 Bibles from churches across the country, along with a ton of sermons. She clearly was in violation of our United States constitution. To be shrewd as snakes, means to know when to flee, and know when to stay and defend yourselves. At the same time, we Christians are to be like doves. We are a peace loving bunch. We don't start trouble or attack people with violence. Even though we consider abortion murder, we do not bomb abortion clinics. We are as Jesus says, to be as doves.

As we draw closer to the Second Coming of Christ, we are reminded today that our trust in Jesus doesn't guarantee and absence of persecution. There will be family strife when someone becomes a Christian. If you are a Muslim and convert to Christianity while in the United States, your family overseas will no longer have anything to do with you. You are ostracized from your own family. If you ever return to your home country, it means either convert back or die. Oneday, soon, you and I may be standing before the Florida legislature about the teachings that we follow at Open Bible. But don't be afraid says Jesus, "When they arrest you, 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 are going to be alright. Jesus is with us and for us! So on this reformation Sunday, "Stand Firm To the End!"

A man who fits the bill of being as shrewd as a snake and as gentle as a dove, was a man named Martin Luther. He grew up in a Roman Catholic home in the late 1400's. He wholeheartedly believed what the church was teaching at the time, that a person had to earn and work his or her way to heaven. He was so troubled about his sins that he entered a monastery. He slept on cold floors, he said his hail Mary's, he beat himself, trying to make himself more righteous before God. He once said, "If anyone could have gained heaven as a monk, then I

would indeed have been among them. "But as Luther began to study Scripture more and more, God opened his heart and mind to understand that we are saved by God's grace alone through our faith, and not by our own works. So on October 31, 497 years ago, Martin Luther very boldly nailed 95 Theses on the door of the church in Wittenberg. These 95 Theses boldly spoke about the wrongs in the church at the time. This was the beginning of one of the greatest changes in history.

Of course, like Peter and John with the Jews, the church rejected these teachings and commanded Martin Luther to stop. They were so serious about it that they called Luther to a meeting (they called it a "diet") in the German city of Worms. On April 18, 1521 Jesus' words in Matthew 10 were once more fulfilled. Martin Luther stood before the most powerful leaders of the church and the world. Most notably, Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, the most powerful man in the world, officiated at this meeting. They stacked up Martin Luther's teachings and writings on a table and asked him two questions: "Martin Luther, are these your teachings? If they are, will you recant them?" They gave him the night to think about his answer.

Martin Luther knew that if he stood by his teachings and the truth of Scripture that he would be branded a heretic and an outlaw and might be killed. So he prayed. He read Scripture, including Psalm 46 which we sang earlier. The next day, staring down the most powerful people in the world and knowing the imminent threat of death, Martin Luther said, "Hier stehe ich. Ich kanne nicht anders. Gott helfe mir. Amen." "Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen." Martin Luther would not budge from the truth of Scripture. He refused to stop preaching salvation through Jesus Christ alone.

Because of Luther's refusal the emperor declared him and outlaw, whom anyone could kill after 20 days. Fortunately, Elector Frederick, saved Luther by having him kidnapped and taken to a secluded castle called the Wartburg. Luther stayed in hiding for about a year, before venturing out again into Wittenberg.

That became the turning point of what is called the Reformation. From that point on millions of people protested against the teachings of the Catholic church and then became known as "Protestants." During the remaining 25 years of his life Luther translated the Bible into German so the people could read it, he wrote hundreds of theological works and over 200 hymns to be sung in church. Martin Luther stood fast on three tenants of Christianity—that we are saved by grace alone, by faith alone, by Scripture alone. There he stood. He could do no other.

On days like today we stand in awe of great men like Peter and Paul and Martin Luther who dared to face danger and death as they stood before leaders of the world and boldly testified to the truth of Scripture. We thank God for what they did. But it all seems so far-fetched and implausible, doesn't it? How could this ever happen in our world today? I think you know as well as I that it might not be as unlikely as some think. Things are certainly headed in that direction. They ban prayers in public school. How long before they interfere with what Christian schools teach, saying its wrong to only teach what the Bible says or to pray when students might not want to? How long before they command our school to teach evolution and not creation? This country triumphs homosexuality. Anyone who speaks against it is narrow-

mindful and stupid. How long before churches that do, will be labeled as promoting hate crimes amongst their membership? How long before the government brings charges against any minister who preaches against a government policy that clearly contradicts Scripture. Or if a church preaches that we are sinners, lost and condemned without Jesus, will it face being too judgmental by other churches, or narrow minded to say, Jesus is the only Way.

Is it impossible to think that the government would go on a witch hunt against those who teach creation, who teach abortion is murder, or believe homosexuality is wrong, or who preach abstinence and purity outside of marriage? Is it impossible to think that you or I might stand on trial or even go before the Supreme Court because we stand fast on the truth of Scripture? Is it impossible to think that reverse-discrimination will take place and we will be victims of beatings and lynchings and mob violence? I don't know if we even want to answer those questions. But we all know the direction in which our country is headed.

Friends, this is very real for us—today! Listen to Jesus' words again, "Be on your guard against men; they will hand you over to the local councils and flog you in their synagogues. On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles." Jesus knew what would happen to Peter and John and Paul and Martin Luther and to many people living in the world today, and what might soon happen to you and to me. So where are we going to find the strength and the courage to deal with all of this? Where are our children going to find the strength and the courage to deal with this as it gets worse? In the same place that Peter and Paul and Luther did—in our Savior Jesus Christ.

Interestingly, Jesus himself did the same things that he predicted would happen to his followers. He was handed over to the local councils and rulers. He was flogged. He stood before the governor Pontius Pilate. Not once did he waver from his path and his mission though. He resolutely and lovingly followed the path that led to his death. He would not change his course for he knew what he came to do. He knew that he had to suffer and he had to die to take away the suffering and death that belongs to us. Jesus went forth in suffering and death to bare the agony of hell and the sins of the world. Jesus did not alter his path once as he died to save us, and then rose triumphant over Satan and this world.

He is our comfort and our strength. Without him, we would be like Martin Luther when he thought he had to earn his way to heaven—lost, afraid, terrified of the punishment our sins deserve. But all that guilt and grief is gone. All that fear and terror is erased. He has freely given us forgiveness and salvation. Life in heaven is his gift—no strings attached. Without him, all are lost. Now he will be our comfort and our strength.

So come what may. People can laugh at us. They can mock us. They can sue us and take us to court. They can beat us. They can torture us. They can lock us up and throw away the key. They can bring us before the Supreme Court. They can take us to President Obama or the United Nations. They can line us up in front of the firing squad. Come what may. Jesus is our Savior. His Word is truth. Heaven is our gift. "Hier stehen wir. Wir können nicht anders. Gott helfe uns. Amen." "Here we stand. We cannot do otherwise. God help us."