Lesson XVI (1798-1979)

SAVONAROLA (1452-1498)

Prayer
Scripture: Malachi 3:1-5
Hymn: "Before Jehovah's Awful Throne"

Girolamo Savonarola was the third of the forerunners of the Reformation. In the last decade of the fifteenth century he attempted to turn Florence into the model Christian city, the pattern of Christian morals, and a theocracy in which Christ was sovereign. He was one of the greatest preachers of righteousness to appear in the Middle Ages. In the end he was tortured, hanged, burned and his ashes thrown into the River Arno.

BIRTH AND EARLY LIFE:

Girolamo (Jerome) Savonarola was born in Ferrara on September 21, 1452, the third of seven children of Michele Savonarola and Elena Bonaccossi of Mantua. He and his parents chose for him his grandfather's profession, the study of medicine. In his youth he read Aquinas and Arab commentaries on Aristotle, developed considerable skill in the subtleties of the schools, studied music and design and wrote poetry. He developed something of a mystical tendency, a strong distaste for court life and festivities.

At nineteen he fell passionately in love with the daughter of a neighbor, a Strozzi exiled from Florence, but the young lady and her family repulsed his suit with disdain. Crushed with disappointment he went through a period of doubt and self-distrust. With a growing sense of the corruption of society he turned from medicine to the church.

At the age of twenty-three at Faenza he heard a sermon that moved him to leave home secretly to enter the Dominican monastery of Saint Domenico at Bologna.

THE MONK:

In his novitiate he manifested great fervor and humility. He spent six quiet years studying Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, the Scriptures and studying Hebrew and Greek. His poetry was filled with burning indignation against the corruption in the church.

In 1481 he was sent to Florence to the convent of St. Mark which had been rebuilt by Cosimo de Medici and decorated by Fra Angelico. Florence was at the height of its fame as the center of the Renaissance, distinguished by light-hearted dissipation under the patronage of Lorenzo the Magnificent.

Savonarola's first efforts in the pulpit were a miserable failure. His mission to Ferrara in 1482 had little success. In 1483 the congregation at San Lorenzo in Florence dwindled to twenty-five persons during his Lenten series. His plain, earnest sermons attacking the corruption in state and church did not suit the taste of Florence. His first success as a preacher came at San Gimignano in 1484. He fascinated the worldly Italians with his fiery denunciation of sin. His power as an orator developed rapidly and in 1486 at Brescia a sermon on the Apocalypse shook men with threats of wrath to come and moved the people to tears with his tender assurances of divine mercy to the penitent. At a Dominican council at Reggio, Pico della Mirandola was so impressed with the learning of Savonarola that he urged Lorenzo de Medici to recall Savonarola to Florence. On April 1, 1490 he preached his first sermon in St. Mark's.
PRIOR OF ST. MARK'S:

Savonarola's reputation had preceded him to Florence and crowds flocked to hear him. In 1491 he was made prior of St. Mark's. He urged the monks to learn Hebrew and Greek and to steep themselves in Scripture as the authority for the church. He powerfully denounced corruption in both state and church. Lorenzo de Medici sent leading citizens to urge him to be more respectful to the head of the state. It was customary for the prior to do homage to Lorenzo as head of the state. Savonarola refused declaring that his election came from God and not from Lorenzo. He foretold the impending death of Lorenzo, of the pope, and of the king of Naples. By April 1492 Lorenzo was on his deathbed. Oppressed by his sins he summoned the prior to shrive his soul. Savonarola came and offered him absolution on three conditions:
1) "You must repent and feel true faith in God's mercy";
2) "You must give up your ill-gotten wealth";
3) "You must restore the liberties of Florence.
Lorenzo granted the first two but to the third he turned his face to the wall. Savonarola after waiting a few minutes for his reply, went away, and Lorenzo died unsaved. Savonarola's fame increased.

Pope Innocent VIII died the same year (July 1492), and Cardinal Borgia became Pope Alexander VI.

In an advent sermon Savonarola told of a vision of a flaming sword inscribed with the words: "Gladius Domini supra terram cito velociet" (Behold the sword of the Lord will descend suddenly and quickly upon the earth). Heavenly voices proclaimed mercy to the faithful and vengeance on the guilty and proclaimed that the wrath of God was at hand. Suddenly the sword turned toward the earth, the sky darkened, thunder pealed and lightning flashed, and fire rained upon the earth and the whole earth was wasted by famine, war and pestilence. Savonarola prophesied that King Charles VIII of France would be God's agent to punish wicked Italy.

In 1494 King Charles invaded Italy on the invitation of the duke of Milan. The incompetent response of Piero de Medici drove Florence to revolt. Under Savonarola's preaching and leadership it was a bloodless revolution. Savonarola declared that Charles's coming was divinely ordained. The Medici were banished from the city. Savonarola was one of Florence's envoys to the king who was welcomed to the city. Charles entered Florence on Nov. 17, 1494. Exorbitant demands alienated the city. Charles threatened to sound the trumpets unless his demands were met. The signory of the city tore up the treaty in the presence of the king and threatened to ring the bells of the city. Charles yielded to the entreaties of Savonarola and left Florence on Nov. 24.

The people turned to Savonarola as deliverer and he became the lawgiver of the city. He labored to relieve the starving people, to give work to the unemployed, to reduce taxes, to see that justice was strictly enforced, and he urged men to put their trust in the Lord. He guided the drawing up of a constitution for the new republic. His program was: 1) fear of God and the purification of manners; 2) promotion of public welfare in preference to private interests; 3) general amnesty to political offenders; 4) a council with no doge (chief administrator).

DICTATOR OF FLORENCE:

Although Savonarola had no official office in the new government he was virtual dictator of the city. He showed considerable wisdom in working out a fair and just tax system to replace tyrannical exactions. His power as a preacher was at its height. His sermons were filled with love for Florence but he denounced iniquity and
called for Florence to become a model Christian city for Rome and all the world. Pleasure loving Florence became a city of saints. Hymns rang in the streets in the place of Lorenzo's dissolute songs. People of both sexes dressed in Puritanical plainness. Many of all ranks renounced the world and joined the Dominican order. The pope was persuaded to grant the Dominican order in Florence independence from outside superiors. Savonarola's goodness and purity had a special power over children and young people--they became a kind of spiritual militia.

In the carnival of 1496 the children and young people collected alms for the poor--citizens gave costly possessions. The carnival was filled with hymns and dances to the Lord. In the carnival of 1497 the doctrine of renunciation of worldly enjoyments was strengthened and pictures that were regarded indecent and indecent books were collected by the young and piled in the square. People responded to the call to "burn the vanities." The "vanities" made a pyramid 60 feet high and 240 feet in circumference at the base. Savonarola said mass before the pile, the people sang hymns and the young danced around the pile. The bells and trumpets sounded and the young set fire to the vanities.

The burning of the vanities was repeated in Savonarola's last year--1498. This time there was greater fanaticism in the burning and many art works perished. One artist vowed never to paint again, saying that hands that prayed could not paint.

Savonarola was not a foe to art and learning as such. He was concerned that both show a Christian spirit and further Christian morality. When the Medici library was to be sold to pay family debts Savonarola saved the collection with funds from the convent.

CONFLICT WITH THE POPE:

Savonarola's fame filled the whole country. His cathedral could not hold the throngs that came--sometimes 10,000 to 12,000 people gathered to hear him. His uncompromising denunciation of sin in high places provoked Pope Alexander VI tho resolved to silence the preacher.

Alexander VI first tried to bribe him with a cardinal's hat, but Savonarola refused the offer and in a sermon declared that the only hat he wanted was the one red with blood that God confers on his saints.

The pope sent him a polite summons to Rome in July 1495. Savonarola sent an equally courteous refusal. In September the pope sent a less softly worded summons to Rome. When Savonarola ignored this demand, the Pope threatened Florence with an interdict if Savonarola did not come to Rome.

Some of the citizens of Florence were growing weary of monastic austerities. The Medici were plotting their return to Florence. Political critics and enemies began to increase. Fra Mariano fanned the pope's hatred of Savonarola. A hostile signory requested that he cease preaching in the interest of the peace of the city. The friends of Savonarola again gained the upper hand in the city. When they uncovered a plot to restore the Medici some of the principals in the plot were executed and Savonarola did noting to save them. Savonarola resumed preaching. In 1496 the pope ordered him to cease preaching and to undergo trial for heresy. Savonarola ceased preaching for a time but when Franciscans began attacking him as a false prophet he began to preach again. In 1497 he was excommunicated and Florence threatened with interdict if the city harbored him.

Savonarola declared that Alexander had secured the papacy by bribery and was a false pope and that the excommunication had no force. He called for a general council to depose Pope Alexander. When the signory again implored him to cease preaching for the peace of the city
he delivered a touching farewell. The fickle people fearing the pope's interdict were deserting him.

The Franciscans challenged Savonarola to prove he was a prophet by the ordeal of fire. Savonarola treated their demand with contempt, but an ardent disciple, Fra Domenico, accepted the challenge, and challenged the Franciscans to put forth a champion to undergo the ordeal also. April 7, 1498 was set as the day for the ordeal and a great crowd assembled for the spectacle. The Franciscans raised a storm of disputes to delay the ordeal. They suggested that Fra Domenico's clothes might be bewitched and demanded that he be stripped and clothed in garments they furnished. They demanded that he not be allowed to carry the Host (bread and wine). They then demanded that he not carry a crucifix with him because it might be bewitched. A rain came and the ordeal had to be postponed and the Franciscans slipped away. The crowd was angry over being denied the expected spectacle. They charged Savonarola with cowardice.

ARREST AND TRIAL:

The next morning the government resolved to arrest Savonarola. A mob broke into the convent finding Savonarola praying and Fra Domenica guarding him with a large candelstick. A monk shouted that the shepherd should lay down his life for his sheep. Savonarola bade the brethren farewell and meekly submitted to arrest.

The pope demanded that Florence send Savonarola to Rome for trial. Florence refused the pope's demands but began a terrible ordeal of daily torture. He was tortured until in a state of delirium he confessed he was a false prophet. The pope sent orders that he should be put to death even if his trial should prove that he were a second John the Baptist. Fra Domenico and another disciple, Silvestro, were arrested and tortured. Fra Domenico remained steadfast in his loyalty. Silvestro broke and confessed all the charges put forth by the enemy. On May 22 Savonarola and his two disciples were condemned to be hanged and burned. Savonarola requested a short interview with the two disciples. All had been given false reports of recantations by the others. Face to face Silvestro's loyalty revealed. Savonarola blessed the two and urged them to remember the crucifixion of their Lord. He predicted that dire calamities would strike Florence.

Two Dominicans, the bishop of Vasa, and the prior of San Maria Novella, were put in charge of defrocking the victims. They were rudely stripped of priestly robes with the declaration, "I separate thee from the church militant and from the church triumphant." Savonarola replied, "That is beyond thy powers.

To the end the faithful expected a miracle but none came. The two disciples were hanged from the arms of a high cross mounted on a great platform while Savonarola and aooting crowd that shouted insults watched. Savonarola was hanged from the body of the cross. The bodies were burned and the ashes scattered on the River Arno to prevent the faithful from gathering any relics.

THE PLACE OF SAVONAROLA:

Each year since his death the faithful have placed flowers on the spot of his martyrdom. Savonarola left a great corpus of sermons, an immense number of devotional and moral essays and some theological works (The Triumph of the Cross, The Will of God, The Legate of God, Manual of Revelations), and a number of poems. Also he left a treatise on the government of Florence. His faith in the doctrine of Rome did not waver but he strongly protested papal corruption. Savonarola believed the Bible was his surest guide. He was one of the greatest of the preachers of righteousness. Luther declared that Christ canonizes Savonarola through us even though popes and papists burst to pieces over it. St. Catherine de Riccardi declared that Savonarola was truly a saint.