

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Saint Paul's Episcopal Church

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Proper 8A

Deacon Dennis Taylor, RN

Can you think of a time you have welcomed a prophet as a prophet? Did you invite them in? Did you go listen to them and discern what it was they were prophesying? Would you have invited them to church? Would you sit with them? Would you rather invite Hananiah or Jeremiah home for dinner and conversation? Well maybe not until Phase four and a half. Hospitality is sacred in the scripture and has become a major program throughout many churches and denominations. Still, take a deep breath and think about welcoming a prophet and receiving a prophet's reward.

The readings from Jeremiah and Matthew are short and carved out of the middle of interesting stories and times for those around these two writers. Matthew has Jesus and his movement, Rome and the restlessness of a subjugated people nostalgic for past glories. Jeremiah lives in the place between two superpowers and the restlessness of subjugated peoples nostalgic for past glories. The smackdown between these two prophets take place during a time of false hope and decline of the Kingdom of Judah. Babylon and Nebuchadnezzar have destroyed Assyria in 605 BCE and then moved against Judah and the kingdoms around it who have formed an alliance with Egypt, the other superpower. Nebuchadnezzar takes Jerusalem for the first time and strips the Temple and palace of their finery and "vessels". This is the first exile and involves the ruling class, educators and artisans of Judea.

It is now 593 BCE and Nebuchadnezzar is distracted and Judah and the small nations around it make another pact with Egypt. While Nebuchadnezzar is putting

down rebellion elsewhere maybe they can reclaim their freedom and rebuild their kingdom. It is at this time that Jeremiah receives another vision from God

The prophet Jeremiah had been around for about 33 years having become a prophet at the age of 12 during the reign of Josiah in 626 BCE. According to Mordecai Schreiber, Jeremiah's life and writings is the one who set the eradication of paganism among the Jewish people and laid the groundwork and faith for not only the Jewish people to return from exile, not once but twice. The religion, kingdom and people of Israel were ready to leave the stage of history as so many of its neighbors had done. It was his writings and preaching that underpinned the return to Jerusalem after the exile and after the Holocaust. Jeremiah speaks of a 'New

“The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ³²It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. ³³But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, ‘Know the Lord’, for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.”
(31:31-34)

Covenant” or “Testament”

Jeremiah truly loved the people of Judah but he also castigated them harshly. Rabbi Schreiber claims that the ‘suffering servant described in “Second Isaiah” (Isa 53:1-7) not only could foreshadow Jesus, but could be a coded biography of Jeremiah. The servant who suffers for the sins of his generation and thus bring redemption to his people. He is known for forecasting doom and gloom, to have cried and cursed the day of his birth and the person who took the news of his birth to his father. His very name has become a noun for one who complains continually or foretells disaster. He survived many calls for his life and attempts on his life because of his prophecies. It is posited that Judaism may not have survived without his influence and therefore the other monotheistic religions might not have come

¹⁵ Thus says the Lord:

A voice is heard in Ramah,
lamentation and bitter weeping.
Rachel is weeping for her children;
she refuses to be comforted for her children,
because they are no more.

¹⁶ Thus says the Lord:

Keep your voice from weeping,
and your eyes from tears;
for there is a reward for your work,
says the Lord:
they shall come back from the land of the enemy;

¹⁷ there is hope for your future,

says the Lord:

your children shall come back to their own country (31:15-

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into being.

He also may well be the first recorded performance artist.

God directed Jeremiah to build and was wear a yoke, while preaching that the King and people of Judah and the other kingdoms need to accept the yoke of service to

Nebuchadnezzar as a punishment for dishonoring the covenant. Exile is the proper punishment for Judah's evil deeds and ignoring the commitment they had made to God. In his confrontation with Hananiah he is wearing this wooden yoke.

Hananiah from Gibeon, was also a prophet who came to Jeremiah in the presence of the priests and people and preached exactly what God had warned Jeremiah against 'Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: I have broken the yoke of the king of Babylon. Within two years I will bring back to this place all the vessels of the Lord's house, which King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon took away from this place and carried to Babylon. I will also bring back to this place King Jeconiah, son of Jehoiakim of Judah, and all the exiles from Judah who went to Babylon, says the Lord, for I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon.' (Jeremiah 28:2-4).

Jeremiah's reply to this prophesy is 'Amen!' may it be so... but "The prophets who preceded you and me from ancient times prophesied war, famine, and pestilence against many countries and great kingdoms." When a prophet preaches peace and it actually happens then it will be believable. Hananiah then angrily took the yoke from Jeremiah and broke it saying this is how God will break the yoke of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. Then the scripture says "At this, the prophet Jeremiah went his way." Maybe Jeremiah was an introvert and needed time to think about a response.

God gives him his response which involves a new yoke made of iron bars, not wood, in place of the lighter yoke "and they shall indeed serve him." As for Hananiah, Jeremiah's message was, 'Listen, Hananiah, the Lord has not sent you, and you made this people trust in a lie. Therefore, thus says the Lord: I am going to send you off the face of the earth. Within this year you will be dead, because you have spoken rebellion against the Lord.' (28:15-16)

Again, I ask would you invite Jeremiah with his yoke, his broken pot, his cup of wine of wrath, baskets of figs, both bad and good, all to illustrate to Judah where they have fallen short and what will happen to them if they do not repent. Far from a passive messenger conveying God's dire prophecies Jeremiah is an audacious social activist who holds his people to account for their injustice, greed and chasing after false idols. Knowing that the paganism it is all based on is doomed to fail. It would quite a dinner party as he held forth.

Or Hananiah as he speaks the words that he knows people want to hear. Denies and sweet talks and condemn those who would disagree with him, breaking their yoke or trolling their inbox.

The prophets of the Bible were not fortune tellers. They are people who listened to God and read the signs and paid attention to what happened around them. Whether it is Jeremiah and the straying of Judah and exile, Amos and the Northern Kingdom or Jesus and the coming wrath of Rome, they all called Israel to pay attention and return to the values and roots based in a belief in the one God and that God's call of love, justice and mercy that had held them together in the past. Each prophet had to strive against the Hananiah's of the world and the willingness of humans to choose the same old path, the path they know so well and are comfortable on. I believe that dinner would be much more pleasant with Hananiah, but not as exciting.

So how to discern whether a prophet should be listened to? That is the question. One of the things I believe is that any discernment of prophecy must take place in community. There needs to be more than one person who hears it and feels that it is the right. It would seem that it is the prophet that make one squirm. Those that

Speak words that really make us uncomfortable and tempted to turn and take an easier way. They are the people we know we should listen to but as has been said many times in history, what you say is hard.

The last verse of Jeremiah 28 is “In that same year, in the seventh month, the prophet Hananiah died.”

In 585 BCE Jeremiah is carried off to Egypt by Judean exiles and after chastising the local Jews for paganism disappears from history

Who are the Jeremiahs and Hananiahs of today and who should we be listening to?

THE MAN WHO KNEW GOD; Decoding Jeremiah

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