

The Reverend Pr. George Murphy
“Forthtellers and Foretellers”
Jeremiah 28:5-9 & Matthew 10:40-42, WPC, Akron OH,

Jesus said, “Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward.” Well, what is a prophet? There are real prophets and false prophets. What kind of message do the real ones proclaim?

Years ago I was at an event about some social issue at which there was a discussion between an Old Testament scholar and an engineering professor. Their conversation got nowhere because they understood the word “prophet” differently. The biblical scholar used it to talk about critics of society, while the engineer thought it meant someone who tries to foretell the future.

The Old Testament scholar was closer to an understanding of biblical prophets. They were men and women concerned with speaking the truth to the societies they lived in about the way things were. They were “forthtellers” who, as we say, were “Telling it like it is.” That sometimes meant harsh criticism which took the form of “Change your thinking and your actions, or bad things will happen.” So forthtelling could lead to foretelling of disaster.

Our reading from Jeremiah features two prophets. It’s set in Jerusalem, the capital of Judah, about 600 B.C.. The Babylonian empire is the 800 pound gorilla in the room. A few years ago Judah rebelled against Babylon, and Jerusalem was occupied by their army. Three thousand people were taken into exile, including the king, who was replaced by a Babylonian vassal. Treasures of the Jerusalem temple were carried away as well.

The popular prophet Hananiah calls for rebellion against Babylon. “We’re the LORD’s chosen people,” he says. “God gave us our law through Moses and established David’s royal line and Solomon’s temple. God won’t let those things be destroyed or allow anything really bad to happen to us. “Within two years,” Hananiah announced, “All the exiles with their king will return from Babylon and the temple treasures will be brought back. The people in the Temple courts probably cheered.

The prophet Jeremiah isn’t popular. Most people think he’s a false prophet. He barely escaped a death sentence for saying that the Temple would be destroyed if people didn’t change their ways. He tells them, “Your problems and your weakness are due to your sins of unfaithfulness and injustice. Stick to your treaty with Babylon, and try to have the kind of society God wants. Give up your ‘Make Judah great again’ dreams. This temple doesn’t guarantee security.

God will be faithful to the promises he made long ago, but maybe not in the way you expect.”

So when Hananiah proclaims that the king and other exiles and temple vessels will be returned, Jeremiah tells him, “That would be great, but it’s not the sort of message prophets before us spoke. They announced ‘**war, famine and pestilence.**’ When a would-be prophet promises peace, we wait to see if it happens before we believe that the message came from God.” That’s a rule in Deuteronomy - the proof of the pudding is in the eating. The Israelites knew about false prophets, even though they didn’t have television.

Jeremiah had been carrying a wooden yoke on his shoulders as a sign that Judah should accept Babylonian authority, a kind of acted out prophecy. When he finishes speaking, Hananiah breaks that yoke and says God has told him he’ll break the yoke of Babylon. We’re told that then Jeremiah simply “**went his way**” — he wanted to be sure that he had a word from the LORD. When he was, he tells Hananiah that it’s easy to break wood, but God has imposed an iron yoke on Judah. Jeremiah says, “You’ve lied in God’s name. You’re a false prophet. Within a year you’ll be dead.” And he was.

Judah did try to throw off the Babylonian yoke. You can read about it in later chapters of Jeremiah, who was thrown in prison but survived Jerusalem’s siege and destruction. Thousands were killed or taken into exile. The city and temple were burned to the ground. The king and his sons, the high priest and other leaders were put to death. Only the poor were left in Judah. All the political and religious structures people depended on were wiped out. Israel was dead.

But even as that was happening, Jeremiah was saying that God’s exiled people would return to their land, and Israel would live again. Around fifty years after the destruction, Babylon fell to the new Persian world power, and the exiles were allowed to go home and rebuild. We remember Jeremiah as one of the major prophets of our scriptures who really spoke God’s word, and the book that bears his name is a big chunk of our the Bible. Hananiah is hardly remembered at all.

We began by asking, “What is a prophet?” In the biblical tradition, a prophet is someone who understands God to be active in human history. In the Hebrew Bible, what we call the historical books like Samuel and Kings are grouped with the prophetic writings.

Some would-be prophets see God as the supreme upholder of the *status quo*. God blessed our ancestors, so God will continue to bless us if we keep

doing the same things. Hananiah and his fellow establishment prophets were like that. God had given them their institutions. The Babylonian problem was a little glitch, but God would fix that if people just kept up the temple rituals and obeyed the government.

It's easy for us to see Hananiah and others who opposed Jeremiah as false prophets. Their message differed radically from that of Jeremiah and others like Ezekiel whom we now believe really to have spoken for God. The true prophetic vision is radical. To show that I can't do better than to quote the words of biblical scholar James Sanders. His statement is somewhat ironical.

"Israel's real hope," Sanders wrote, "according these prophets lay in the God who had given them their existence in the first place, in [God] giving it to them again. Normal folk, in their right minds know that hope is in having things turn out the way they think they should. ... And normal folk believe in a god who will simply make things turn out that way. ... Nobody in his right mind could possibly believe that God wants us to die in order to give us life again, or to take away the old institutions he first gave us in order to give us new ones."

"God wants us to die in order to give us life again." You've heard things like that before. Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

Death and resurrection is the pattern of the Christian life. Few of us in this country will be threatened with death because we're Christians. But there's that other dying that Sanders refers to. "Nobody in his right mind could possibly believe that God wants us to die in order to give us life again, or to take away the old institutions he first gave us in order to give us new ones."

The dispute between Jeremiah and Hananiah about Israel's institutions seems more political than religious. Should we rebel against Babylon, or be content as a client state and strive for a just society? But that has a religious dimension. Do we think that God will take us back to the good old days, or will we trust God to guide us into God's future?

For much of American history, Christian prophets like Sojourner Truth and Martin Luther King have criticized racial injustice and called for change. Things have certainly improved, but many citizens still question the reality of that phrase about "liberty and justice for all" in the Pledge of Allegiance. God can use the United States like any other nation, but if we think that God needs us to accomplish the divine purpose, we're in for a rude surprise.

Today we're in the middle of a major health crisis that demanded radical changes in the way we live —masks, social distancing, avoiding large gatherings, and other things. But from the start we heard the cry "We have to reopen the economy." We have to go back to the way things used to be — to go to the beach, or to a crowded bar, or a political rally.

We continue to hear claims from our leaders, supported by some religious voices, that things are going well — even as the number of coronavirus cases and of deaths surges again. Leaders tell us that we need to pray, and perhaps we do, but we haven't learned anything, and too many of us think that singing "God Bless America" makes us special, even though most other countries are handling the pandemic better than we are.

I won't propose solutions to either of those problems here. I will encourage you to distinguish between today's genuine prophets and the fake ones, and listen to those who are more Jeremiah rather than Hananiah.