



2nd Sunday after Pentecost
“The Connection between a Prophet and Hospitality”
June 26, 2011

Texts: Jeremiah 28:5-9; Psalm 89:1-4, 15-18; Romans 6:12-23; Matthew 10:40-42

*Prayer: Bless this word proclaimed, and we who hear it O Lord,
that we may hear your words of truth within our lives. Amen.*

In preparing for this week’s sermon, I found myself intrigued with Jeremiah and wondering what it had to do with our other lessons for today. Our first lesson from Jeremiah is one that seems to come from nowhere. Yet, it is also a passage where we need to see more of. Or, as Paul Harvey used to say, “we need the rest of the story”.

The Israelites have been taken into captivity by the Babylonians. They have been taken away from all that is familiar and comfortable to them. While they are in Babylon, their captives torment them. Several of the psalms, and the book of Lamentations speak to the sorrow the Israelites felt while in Babylon. Their captives would taunt them, “Where is your god if he is so powerful”, they would say, “why hasn’t your god come to save you?”

Things weren’t all that bad for the captive Israelites. As they began to settle into Babylon, they began to build lives for themselves. In building new lives, they began to adapt some of the practices and customs of the Babylonians. Not all the adaptations from the Babylonians were good. Jeremiah needed to remind the Israelites of this – and the reality that the Lord would judge. The Lord would also one day return them to Jerusalem. Not in their time – but in the Lord’s time. Jeremiah preached a continual message about repentance, turning back to the Lord, and the anger of the Lord if they did not repent.

Hananiah was another prophet at the same time of Jeremiah. He had a different perspective on things than what Jeremiah did. In the temple, in the presence of those who had gathered for worship, and the priests, Hananiah proclaims prior to our verses today, “within two years, I will bring back to this place all the vessels of the Lord’s house,. . . I will also bring back all the exiles from Judah who went to Babylon, for I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon.” (v. 3)

This statement of Hananiah is a pretty bold statement to make. It counters everything Jeremiah has previously said. The reality of Hananiah’s words, is that it was heard as a word of hope rather than the gloom Jeremiah had been prophesying about. To make matters worse, Hananiah declares this in front of the priests and those who had gathered for worship. It is one thing to disagree with another person in private, but to openly disagree in public, is never a good way to win friends or influence others!

Jeremiah recognizes this. Rather than creating any sort of tension or conflict, Jeremiah responds with an affirmation of his own to Hananiah's words: "Amen! May the Lord do so." (v.6)

Jeremiah does not stop there. He continues by reminding Hananiah of previous prophets who have prophesied about war, famine, and pestilence against kingdoms. He ends with a comment about the prophet who prophesies peace, when the word of that prophet comes true, then it will be known that the Lord sent a prophet.

While our lectionary reading ends at this point, this chapter in Jeremiah does not. Prior to and throughout the chapter, Jeremiah has been walking around with a wooden yoke around his neck. The yoke, used in plowing with a team of oxen is to remind the Israelites of the yoke of captivity the Israelites were under.

Hananiah has had enough of Jeremiah's doom and gloom. He proceeds to break the yoke from Jeremiah's neck, boldly proclaiming that in the same way, the Lord will break the yoke of King Nebuchadnezzar. Within two years, according to Hananiah, the reign of Nebuchadnezzar will end.

At this, Jeremiah walks away – no argument, no defense, no explanation. Jeremiah may have remembered the words of the Proverb: "that a soft answer turns away wrath". The chapter continues that after this exchange between Hananiah and Jeremiah, that Hananiah dies. His words do not come true. Jeremiah's yoke is replaced with a yoke made out of iron rather than wood.

Now hearing – and reading – of a prophetic showdown between two "real" prophets of the Lord may not seem to have an impact upon our lives, yet it does. For one, we live in a world that competes for our attention. In this competition, there are many voices proclaiming a truth that may often run counter to what we know or what we believe. When these messages run parallel or contradict each other, it can be difficult to discern which voice to listen to. One may tell us of a promised reality that seems a long ways off. Another may tell us something we do not want to hear.

In our reading from Matthew today, Jesus reminds his disciples and us that those who welcome a prophet will receive a prophet's reward. Jesus also continues with more words about welcoming, how in providing a cup of cold water to a little one would be a way of welcoming Jesus. This "little one" that Matthew refers to is a foreshadow of a later passage where Matthew refers to "the least of these" – those whom society has turned their backs against; those whom society does not deem as important or valuable.

Yet Matthew's words for today remind us also of the Genesis story we heard last week on Holy Trinity Sunday. In our reading from Genesis, we heard how all of creation was made and how we, as humans, are made in the image of God. "God saw all that he had made, and it was good."

Made in the image of God – meaning, that when I look at you, dear brothers, and sisters, I see God in each and every one of you.

Yet, the reality is also that in spite of how good this is that we are made in the image of God, we fail to live this out. Where there is to be love for one another, there is often disrespect. We fail to listen. Like Hananiah, we may insist on our own way, rather than what the Lord intends for us. When we do, we usually find ourselves in trouble!

On this day, as we recognize our high school and college graduates, as we celebrate with our Vacation Bible School students the recipe God has for our lives, and as we welcome our newest member into the family of God, we are reminded that the art of hospitality and graciousness is not a matter of placing our needs, wants, and desires upon our guests. Instead, it is taking the needs, desires, and wants of our guests upon ourselves. In taking these needs upon ourselves, we enter into mission, to ministry, and service into the world. This is not of our own choosing, but rather under the Lord's leadership.

Last week, Jesus invited the disciples to go into the world, to make disciples, to baptize, and to teach. In the same way, through the waters of our baptism, we are invited – both to become children of God AND to go into the world. This invitation is not a matter of waiting for others to come to us. It is an invitation to GO into the world – as prophets, messengers, as witnesses of how we have seen God working in our lives, how much God loves us, and God's incredible grace in our lives.

A wise colleague and supervisor once shared with me the Danish proverb, “beware of entertaining angels unawares.” That is a lot of what hospitality is – being open to the unexpected stranger that comes across our path – in ways we least expect, and usually when we are least expecting the stranger. At the same time, being welcoming and gracious enough to offer a cup of cold water, knowing that by doing so, we are recognizing Jesus in our midst.

May God, who is rich in mercy, continue to grant us the grace to be hospitable to the stranger in our midst now and always. Amen.