

## ***The Test of a True Prophet***

*a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on October 24, 2021  
based on Jeremiah 28:5-9*

Okay, we're in our 5<sup>th</sup> week of this 9 part sermon series and I just want to say how great I think it is that our Adult Education Committee wanted to start the fall off with a class about reading the Bible on its own terms. It wasn't my idea but I am all about that.

There are still people who think the Bible speaks with one voice, God's voice, I guess, but it's a lot more complicated than that. The Bible speaks with dozens of different voices, from so many different viewpoints and agendas. And out of that amazing mix I confess that I have several favorite books in the Bible.

I love *Ecclesiastes* because it is so counter-intuitive; because it's so *not*-religious. It's not a bit sentimental. It opens, remember, with the words, "All is vanity." It says, the best life has to offer is good food, good drink and the comfort of companionship with someone you choose as a special partner. It's hard to quibble with something so bare bones. It also makes it impossible to write the Bible off as simplistic or pious.

I love the gospel of Mark for some of the same reasons. It, too, is bare bones. It has no Christmas story and none of the famous parables; it doesn't even have a full-on resurrection account. But the person of Jesus, as his story is told there, is so compelling.

I love the books of 1st of 2 Samuel because the best story-telling in the Bible is there. I don't know how historical it is but the person of David portrayed there is so human, totally believable, warts and all.

I love the no-nonsense gritty integrity of the prophet Micah ...

"With what shall I come before the LORD,  
and bow myself before God on high?  
Shall I come before God with burnt offerings,  
with calves a year old?

<sup>7</sup> Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,  
with ten thousand rivers of oil?

Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,  
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"

<sup>8</sup> God has told you, O mortal, what is good;  
and what does the LORD require of you  
but to do justice, and to love kindness,  
and to walk humbly with your God?

And I put the book of Jeremiah in that high category. I think Jeremiah may be the most honest book in the Bible. Growing up, I heard Jeremiah's story in pieces ...

My introduction began with the story of his calling where God speaks to Jeremiah for the first time saying, “Before I formed you in your mother’s womb, I knew you” and Jeremiah responds, “But I’m only a boy.”

The next passage that came to my attention was given to me written in stain glass by a good friend: it was the 11<sup>th</sup> verse in the 29th chapter where God speaks to Jeremiah saying, “Surely I know the plans I have for you, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future and a hope.” I was quite young when I was given that and I held onto it like it was a life raft.

It was in seminary that I first heard about the price Jeremiah had to pay for speaking up on behalf of the poor. How he was thrown into the bottom of a cistern; how he was humiliated, forced to walk around with a yoke around his neck and then put into stocks.

It was in seminary that I learned, as well, the context behind those words of hope I’d been given in stained glass -- how the people of Judah were going to be exiled from their land and subsumed into Babylonian culture; how they could have lost their very identity. As I said in the first sermon in this 9 part series, those people survived by the skin of their teeth. That made those words about having a future live for me in a new way.

Seminary taught me that without context, the text hardly exists.

So, here is the background of this morning’s reading. There are genuine prophets who are called by God, like Jeremiah. Then there are odd ducks who *think* they are called of God, but they are not. And then there are court prophets, men like Hananiah who serves his king first and God second.

Hananiah who shows up in the text this morning, has spoken his own prophetic word and says that the people of Judah who have been sent into bondage in Babylon will shortly be released. “Everything is going to be wonderful,” he insists, “The coronavirus will be gone by Easter.” Remember that one coming from the White House back in 2020? Hear again Jeremiah’s answer. Listen for the edge behind what is otherwise a very diplomatic response ....

*Then the prophet Jeremiah responded to Hananiah in the presence of the priests and all the people who were standing in the LORD’s temple. <sup>6</sup> The prophet Jeremiah said: “Indeed. May the LORD do just as you have said! May the LORD fulfill the words that you have prophesied and bring back from Babylon the equipment of the LORD’s temple and all the exiles to this place. <sup>7</sup> However, listen closely to what I have to say to you and all the people: <sup>8</sup> The prophets who came before you and me long ago prophesied war, disaster, and disease against many lands and great kingdoms. <sup>9</sup> So the prophet who prophesies peace is recognized as one who is actually sent by the LORD **only** when that prophet’s message is fulfilled.”*

Did you hear that?

Jeremiah says that genuine prophets historically have predicted war, disaster and disease -- the big three categories of catastrophe. Yes, he says, the genuine prophets whose words are remembered are those who are like the ones who prophesied war with Nazi Germany, not "peace in our time." They are prophets who said, "if we don't address systemic racism in this country soon, there is going to be war in our streets."

They are the prophets who said, "One of these days we will have a pandemic on our hands the like of which we haven't seen in 100 years."

Jeremiah is speaking of prophets like, Winston Churchill on war, Dr, Martin Luther King Jr. on civic disaster, and Bill Gates who warned us in 2015 in specific terms about the coming pandemic.

On the other hand, there have been those who said, "Hitler is a reasonable man. There will be no war if we capitulate to his demand for Czechoslovakia." There have been some who said, "The problems of racism are over; we elected a black man to be president." And there have been others who said, "We don't need a White House Office for Global Pandemics – that was Obama's silly idea. Let's abolish it."

Those false prophets will long be remembered, but only because their words and policies led to disaster. When they insisted everything would be fine, they were whistling in the dark.

Jeremiah says that False prophets are full of magical thinking. Facts are foreign to them They will not be handicapped by reality. And, like the prophet Hananiah, they say what they say because they like the lifestyle that being a court prophet affords them – the best food and drink; a fancy apartment in the king's compound. They are well rewarded for telling the king what he wants to hear about God and the future.

It's just not that way for the true prophets in the Bible – prophets like Amos, and Ezekiel, and Isaiah, and yes, Jeremiah, as well. They have no reward except maybe their own self-respect.

You see, it costs the true prophets dearly to deal in hard facts; to speak the truth. Who wants to hear our pandemic may plague us into 2022? Nobody. But this is the only word Jeremiah has to offer. He is like Anthony Fauci. He cannot lie about such things to save his life. Yes, and the pushback for telling the people what they don't want to hear is killing him.

In fact, in chapter 20, Jeremiah launches into a monologue where he puts God on notice. Essentially, he tells God that this is the end of their contract and that he isn't going to continue to be Yahweh's prophet anymore.

Jeremiah had decided that the costs were just too high. He even curses the day he was born. He doesn't know why the word God has given him about the future has to call down violence and

destruction upon his own people. He makes up his mind he's not going to utter the Lord's name anymore.

But as soon as he decides to keep quiet he says it's like "a fire shut up in his bones," Immediately he grows weary with holding it in. He can't keep quiet—he has to do God's will. This is Jeremiah's fate.

A couple of brave souls in my last congregation told me in person how they didn't like me speaking up about certain issues that troubled **them**. I mention them because I admired their pluck.

Let me say that it didn't give me any particular joy to say those things. I like it when the lectionary gives me a passage I can preach that offers comfort and guidance on subjects like everyday life; how we can cope. But, you know, I didn't just start speaking up about wars and moral disasters and gross governmental incompetence that costs innumerable lives in the last couple of years. No, I've been doing it now since 1980.

Again, it's not easy, knowing it makes some people unhappy – these are people I love. But I take some comfort in knowing there were people who lived 2500 years ago like Jeremiah who felt the same way I do, and spoke up anyway. I'm no Jeremiah, but I can't say anything short of what I believe is the honest truth when it comes to unnecessary suffering and national disasters, and disease.

Now, let me hasten to add that the business of prophetic preaching is even more complicated than this. Jeremiah does more than tell the people left in Jerusalem that there are hard days ahead -- he also tells his friends in the upper classes who've been carted off to Babylon to plan to unpack everything and get comfortable there; they are under a long sentence. He tells them to build houses and plant gardens there – start businesses and have their mail rerouted to a Babylonian post office.

That's a painful admonition. Now, as a preacher, it's my job to consider how such a word will sound in the ears of all the various people alive today who will hear it. Our context here in American in the fall of 2021 reminds me that Jeremiah's troubling message to get comfortable in captivity will sound on the ear of Black Americans, the grandchildren of slaves, differently than it will to the ears of white Americans.

The message of getting comfortable in captivity may sound abhorrent to someone who is hoping this country might one day live up to the creed it was founded upon – equal justice for all. The message to get comfortable in captivity may sound just as abhorrent to someone who is currently in an abusive relationship or marriage, or even to a child who is being abused by his or her parents, or guardians.

The admonition to get comfortable in captivity can sound like a curse to someone who suddenly has been immobilized physically for any number of reasons and now is confined to a

wheelchair or is bed-ridden, or is mostly stuck at home because they know they are likely to die if they contract the delta variant. To them it just sounds mean.

Now Dr. Martin Luther King has something to say to us about the first group of Americans I mentioned. He often has something to say.

In his letter from the Birmingham Jail in June of 1963, Dr. King speaks of the need to stop our foot dragging on civil rights: He was speaking directly to white clergymen who were saying to him, “be prudent – wait – the time isn’t ripe yet.” To them, to ministers like myself, Dr. King said the following . . .

*For years now I have heard the word "Wait!" It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This "Wait" has almost always meant "Never" . . . "justice too long delayed is justice denied ... There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into the abyss of despair.*

I think we are living in such a time right now and we’ve all heard similar voices these last months in congress; voices that lack the conviction to pass legislation that will fund really meaningful, decent paying jobs, fixing so much that is wrong in this country’s infrastructure, doing what needs to be done to help young families, legislation that will benefit us all, not to speak of what we can do to turn around the energy problems in this country in ways that will address the climate crisis which without a doubt will be the most important issue in our lifetime.

In one place in the gospel Jesus speaks to Peter who has done a lot to try and slow Jesus down out of fear. To him, Jesus says, “Peter, Satan is sifting you.” Satan is the one who, as he did with Jesus in the wilderness, whispers in our ears a message that sounds very reasonable, very prudent: “Just wait.” But as Dr. King said, justice delayed is too often justice denied.

You know, I believe the present moment is actually rich with possibility. Will we let it slip past us? There are those in congress today, you know, who are counting on that – who are counting on us to take our eye off the ball. We will know soon enough.

Well, it’s time I wound this sermon up. But I’m glad to say that even though Jeremiah has come to be known as “the weeping prophet,” and for good reason, he also offers us that word of hope I grabbed on to as a young man. The prophet who never backed down from telling us hard truths is also remembered to have said ...

*Surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future and a hope.*

He also adds this as a word from the Lord ...

*When you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with your whole heart, I will let you find me, says the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.*

God still cares for the likes of us as we wonder how careful we still need to be as we hope this pandemic is winding down. God is still here and God is still speaking.

Amen