

**“Dueling Prophets”**

July 2, 2017

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Jeremiah 28:5-9

Then the prophet Jeremiah spoke to the prophet Hananiah in the presence of the priests and all the people who were standing in the house of the LORD; <sup>6</sup> and the prophet Jeremiah said,

“Amen! May the LORD do so; may the LORD fulfill the words that you have prophesied, and bring back to this place from Babylon the vessels of the house of the LORD, and all the exiles.

<sup>7</sup> But listen now to this word that I speak in your hearing and in the hearing of all the people. <sup>8</sup> The prophets who preceded you and me from ancient times prophesied war, famine, and pestilence against many countries and great kingdoms.

<sup>9</sup> As for the prophet who prophesies peace, when the word of that prophet comes true, then it will be known that the LORD has truly sent the prophet.”

**ZEDEKIAH**

When the Babylonian army defeated Judah in 597 BC, they took her king, Jehoiachin to Babylon as their captive. They also took other officials, warriors and artisans into captivity. In addition to this, they desecrated the Temple by taking the more expensive vessels as booty.

In Johoiachin’s place they installed his nephew Zedekiah as “king”. It was Zedekiah’s job to maintain order and collect tribute for his Babylonian overlords.

Zedekiah was only 21 years old when he ascended to the throne.

No one in Judah actually thought that Zedekiah was king. Their real king, Jehoiachin was in exile.

The people believed that one day their real king would return, along with the exiles and the vessels that had been stolen from the Temple.

It was a matter of faith.

God would deliver them because they were God's chosen people. They had no intention of submitting to the yoke of their Babylonian overlords.

Poor Zedekiah.

He was between a rock and a hard place.

Young and inexperienced, he had no idea what to do.

If he cooperated with the Babylonians, his own people would hate him.

On the other hand, if he stoked the fires of rebellion, it might prove deadly.

### JEREMIAH'S SYMBOLIC MESSAGE

Into this volatile situation, comes the prophet Jeremiah to deliver a disturbing Word from the Lord.

And to make the Word more memorable he comes with props.

Following the Word of the Lord, Jeremiah fashions a yoke, a yoke like oxen might wear. He puts it around his neck and tells King Zedekiah,

"This is the Word of the Lord. Submit to the yoke, the rule of the Babylonians if you and your people want to live."

This is not the message that the king or the people want to hear.

But, Jeremiah preaches it to them anyway.

He gives the same message to the priests and all the people after he leaves the king.

He says,

"Why let this city be totally destroyed?

Submit to the rule of the Babylonians.

Don't listen to those false prophets who tell you that you will prevail because God is on our side. They're not telling the truth.

Challenging the Babylonians will lead to disaster."

## HANANIAH'S REBUTTAL

Well, those false prophets were not going to ignore this challenge. Their leader, Hananiah goes to the Temple and says before the priests and all the people,

“Don't listen to that crazy Jeremiah.  
I have a word from the Lord.

The Lord is going to break the yoke of the King of Babylon.  
In two years we're going to have total victory.

The exiles will all come home.  
The vessels that have been stolen from the Temple will all be returned.  
And best of all, our king, our real king, Jehoiachin will come back from exile.”

Now, Jeremiah was in the room when Hananiah made this prophecy.  
And his response is our Scripture lesson for today.  
In essence Jeremiah said,

“Amen brother Hananiah. I hope you're right.  
But, I want you to hear this.

The real test of a prophet is this: the word of the prophet comes true.  
I hope you're up to that test.”

We shouldn't be too tough on Hananiah.  
His prophecy mirrors in many ways what Isaiah had said earlier about the restoration of God's people.

Some think that Jeremiah's response to Hananiah is sarcastic. Maybe.

But, I wonder if maybe even Jeremiah was open to what Hananiah had to say.

The Lord had in the past restored the fortunes of his people.

Maybe now God would do the same for his people.

We have the advantage of 20/20 hindsight.

We know that God's people should have listened to Jeremiah.  
We know that it was not wise to challenge the rule of the mighty Babylonians.

But, at the time the choice was not so clear.  
Other nations were presenting a challenge to Babylon.  
I could see how the king and the people might have thought,

"You know, Hananiah might be right.  
This might be a good opportunity.  
Maybe God is leading us to take a stand against the Babylonians."

## HARD CHOICES

Every day we are given hard choices.  
In some cases it's apparent what God wants us to do.

But, more often the choices are not so clear.

People ask me why Christians disagree on so many issues. I think the answer is seen in this dramatic confrontation between dueling prophets.

Quite frankly, when we are in the heat of a great theological or political confrontation, sometimes we're not sure what God might call us to do.

Yes, we can turn to the Bible, but I have learned that the Bible can be quoted with great skill by people on both sides of any argument.

And so we wonder,  
"Who is really speaking for the Lord?"

Quite often we don't know if we're listening to Jeremiah or Hananiah.  
But, what we do know is this:  
If we listen to the wrong person, the results can be catastrophic.

When people think that they are speaking for the Lord, their actions can be quite dramatic and provoke conflict. We see that in the confrontation that occurs after Hananiah makes his dramatic rebuttal of Jeremiah's prophecy.

Hananiah takes the yoke that Jeremiah has fashioned off of his neck, and he breaks it.

And then he says,

“This is God’s Word. This is how I am going to break the yoke of the Babylonians in the next two years. All the captives are going to be freed.”

This is another one of those times when I wished that I had audio-visual aids.

Or maybe we could have some of the actors in our congregation to give us a dramatic presentation. This confrontation between dueling prophets would probably make a good movie or at least a good mini-series.

Portraying the strong emotions of the young king and the crowd and the dueling prophets as well as the high stakes politics involved would make quite an intriguing show.

## A DOUBLE EDGED SWORD

But, this story is more than just a drama from another time and place. I think it give us a much needed word for our day and time.

We are often tempted to hear only the prophet who tells us what we want to hear.

But, often the person who tells us what we want to hear is not the real prophet.

The false prophets of Jeremiah’s day prophesied by Baal, the god of sex and success.

(Sounds almost modern doesn’t it?) They kept saying, “Don’t worry. Everything’s going to be fine. God’s on our side.” (Jeremiah 23:13)

They were the “prosperity preachers” of their day.

But, none of them had really heard a word from the Lord.

The Bible tells us that their words were smooth, sweet and comforting.

But, Jeremiah’s words from God were like “fire, like a hammer that breaks rocks into pieces!”

(Jeremiah 23:29)

I sometimes hear people say that the Lord told them to do this or that. And often what the Lord tells them to do aligns quite nicely with what they already wanted.

Politicians and preachers are often adamant that their word is a Word from the Lord.

But, I'm suspicious of politicians and preachers ... including myself!

I remember one famous preacher saying,  
 "The prophets spoke when they heard from God.  
 The parish minister speaks each week whether he hears from God or not!"

That's true.

Sometimes we preachers speak too much and listen too little. And church history teaches us that when we speak too much and listen too little, we can do terrible things in the name of religion.

The great theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wrote in an essay entitled The Test of True Prophecy,

"All of us have something of the false prophet in us ..." and so we should speak humbly.

"The church can disturb the secularity of sinners only if it is not itself too secure in its belief that it has the word of God. The prophet himself stands under the judgment which he preaches. If he does not know that, he is a false prophet."

False prophets are still with us today.  
 But, who are they?

That's hard to say.

Jeremiah said that we will only know if a prophet's words are truly from the Lord after the fact ...

"... when the word of that prophet comes true, then it will be known that the LORD has truly sent the prophet."

But, if I had to make a guess about who is speaking a prophetic Word, I would guess that it is the person who saying something that makes us un-

comfortable. It is the person who says something that is true, but it is a truth that we don't want to acknowledge.

The Bible tells us that the Word of God is like a double edged sword. God's word is able to "judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart". (Hebrews 4:12)

In other words, when the prophet truly proclaims God's Word, it reveals things about us that we have hidden deep inside. Things that we would rather not acknowledge.

When we read the Bible correctly, it will not only give us hope; it will also challenge us. God's Word lifts up things about us and our society that we would rather not bring out into the open.

That was certainly true of God's people before the second deportation to Babylon.

They persecuted and killed the prophets because they told the people things they didn't want to hear.

According to the prophets, their precarious political situation was due to the fact that God's people had been unfaithful.

They had exploited the poor. They had trusted in the force of arms instead of trusting in God. They had gone after "other gods" instead of worshipping the one true God.

And now those chickens had come home to roost in the form of the Babylonian Exile.

God was using the pagan ruler, Nebuchadnezzar for His own purposes. He was using this national tragedy as a way to turn His people from their sins and point them in a new direction.

## FROM EXILE TO HOPE

And, to a certain extent, it worked.

Some of the most important writings in the Old Testament are based upon the experience of the Exile. It was the Exile that led God's people to reflect upon the meaning of their history and the mighty acts of God.

It was during the Exile that they remembered why God had chosen them.

They had a task to do.

They were called to be holy.

They were called to be different from all the other nations of the world so that through their witness the world might be saved.

They were called by God to be a shining light to the nations.

And, most importantly, during the Exile the hope of a Messiah was born.

One day things were going to be different.

One day God's people would make their way through the wilderness and come back home.

One day Jerusalem really would be that shining city set on a hill.

One day the true King was going to sit on the throne.

And all the people of the world would be blessed through Him.

"O come O come Emmanuel and ransom captive Israel."

We sing that hymn at Advent as we await the birth of our Savior.

But, notice that the hymn begins in Exile.

That hymn begins with a people who long for good news.

That hymn begins with a people who are captive and about to lose all hope.

Salvation doesn't begin with the prophet who tells us what we want to hear.

Salvation begins with the prophet who tells us what we need to hear.

Salvation begins with the one who tells us the hard truth about our sins and the sins of our society.

Salvation begins with a people who accept the fact that they are captive to a foreign power.

## THE DEADLY SIN

Long ago two prophets confronted each other.

They had different visions of what God was doing and where God wanted his people to go.

With the advantage of 20/20 hindsight we know that one prophet was right and the other prophet was dead wrong.

As Jeremiah would tell his rival, Hananiah later in this chapter,

“The Lord said that the wooden yoke you broke is going to be replaced by a yoke of iron. And since you caused the people to trust in a lie, you’re not going to live much longer. You’ll be dead within the year.”

Hananiah’s sin was deadly because he used the Lord’s name to promote his own political purpose.

We don’t know.

Hananiah might have been sincere in his belief that the Exile would soon come to an end. Remember, at this time nations were rising up against Babylon, and these political events suggested that God’s people might be able to obtain their freedom.

But, Hananiah’s prediction about the future was not his deadly sin. His deadly sin was the fact that he claimed his views about the future were a word from the Lord.

And in doing this, he misled the people of God.

The consequences were tragic.

King Zedekiah eventually acted upon the false prophecy of Hananiah, and that led to the second deportation. Everyone in Israel was carried into captivity, save for the poorest of the poor.

The Temple was totally destroyed.

Jeremiah's prophecy came true.  
A yoke of iron kept God's people in captivity for many more years.

## EXILE AND SALVATION TODAY

But, even in captivity there was grace.

In some ways the promise of salvation burned brighter in those years of captivity than at any other time. In the long run the Exile enabled God's people to understand what was really important.

I wonder.

Could Exile serve the same purpose for us?  
Could our story of salvation begin not when we have it all but when we have lost it all?

Hananiah talked about a time of peace.

He was right about that.

That time of peace would come  
There would come a time when God's people would find their fortunes restored.

But, he was wrong about the path to peace.  
The path to peace would not come through the glory of military might and conquest.

The path to peace would go through the valley of Exile. The road to freedom would begin with captivity.

The only way to make it to the Promised Land is to spend some time in the Wilderness.

Jesus, the truest prophet of them put it this way.  
The road to salvation is the narrow road.

It begins when you put on his yoke.  
It begins when you deny yourself.

It begins when you take up your cross and follow Him.

## FALSE PROPHETS AND THE LORD'S SUPPER

We still live in a world filled with false prophets.  
They tell you that the road to salvation is easy.

Don't you dare believe them.  
Don't you dare let them remove the cross from our sanctuary or from our lives.

The cross tells the truth.  
The way of the cross leads home.

The yoke of Exile is the beginning of a new covenant defined by God's grace.

This is, at the same time, a message that challenges us and a message that comforts us.

And in order to keep our minds focused on this message, Jesus gave us the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

This was what He wanted us to do so that we could remember Him and remember this truth.

When we take the Lord's Supper, we hear the Word of the Lord.

And like the prophet we Jeremiah we use this symbol to dramatize the story.

We put on the yoke.  
We take up the cross.

We remember that salvation does not come easy.  
It comes with body broken.  
It comes with blood shed.

But, by the grace of God, one day Exile will be replaced with a new heaven and a new earth.

One day the peoples of the world will no longer be at each others' throats. Instead, they will be called from the East and the West, the North and the South to sit at table in God's Kingdom.

One day.

But, now, in this symbolic meal, we get a foretaste, a sneak preview of the kingdom that comes.

The wilderness, the exile, and the cross will not have the last word.

There's more to come.

Today, we catch but a dim vision.

But, one day we will see face to face.

Amen.