

Lectionary 13 (A)  
July 2, 2023  
Texts: Jeremiah 28:1-9  
Matthew 10:40-42

Pastor Aaron J. Couch  
First Immanuel Lutheran Church  
Portland, Oregon

Our first reading this morning gives us part of one of my favorite stories from the Bible. It's the story of the clash between Hananiah, one of the official temple prophets, and the prophet Jeremiah. I love this story because it gives a hint of how the life of faith was complicated for the people of Israel, sort of like how it is for us. So I want to tell you the rest of the story.

At the beginning of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, the little kingdom of Judah faced an immense existential threat. The Babylonian empire was a seemingly unstoppable power. It had already forced Judah to submit to Babylonian domination. The Babylonians had stripped the temple in Jerusalem of all its beautiful golden vessels, and forcibly removed the king from his throne, taking him and other leading citizens away into exile and leaving a puppet king in his place. It was a national humiliation. And it was not a situation that the new king and the other leading lights of the kingdom were willing to simply accept. So they began to conspire with the other little kingdoms around them about how to revolt against Babylon, how to regain their freedom and dignity.

This was why Jeremiah came before the king with a message from the Lord: you must submit to the rule of Babylon. Anyone who does not faces destruction. Jeremiah even brought a visual aid with him—a yoke, the sort of thing oxen would wear to pull their burden. Jeremiah told the king: God says you must submit to the yoke of Babylon. It's the only way God's people can avoid disaster. As you can probably imagine, it was a tremendously unpopular message. Nobody wanted to hear that! Especially when Hananiah, an official prophet representing the king and the temple, had a much more optimistic "word from the Lord." Hananiah said God will come to the defense of God's people. God will break the yoke of Babylon. In two years, God will bring back the golden vessels taken from the temple. God will bring back the previous king and all the exiles. And then Hananiah took Jeremiah's wooden yoke and broke it to pieces. That's what God is going to do to Babylon!

One of the things I love about this story is how it shows how difficult and complicated it was for our ancestors in faith to know who or what to believe. In that moment, who should they believe? Hananiah, the official court prophet who had the backing of the king and the temple? Or Jeremiah, who was viewed as a malcontent who never had anything good to say? Looking back, we know that Jeremiah, with his deeply unpopular message, was right, and no matter how many people cheered Hananiah on, he did not speak for God. In fact, Hananiah's end is sad. After he had broken Jeremiah's wooden yoke, Jeremiah warned him that the word he had spoken did not come from God. Hananiah had presumed to speak his own words and call them the word of the Lord, and for that reason, within a year he would be dead. And it happened just like that. Even worse, Judah's leaders rejected Jeremiah's message. Trusting promises of support from Egypt, they revolted against Babylon, which led to the destruction of Jerusalem, with thousands upon thousands of deaths and another wave of exiles being forcibly relocated to Babylon. It was so profoundly tragic.

For me, one take-away from this story is that it matters very much which prophet we listen to. Just imagine—if the king and the leaders of Jerusalem had listened to Jeremiah, they would have endured a generation of submitting to Babylonian rule, but Jerusalem would have still been standing when the Persians swept the Babylonian empire from the stage of world history. If the leaders had listened to Jeremiah, if they had recognized him as a true prophet, how different might history have turned out?

That makes me wonder about our own history—because I do believe God has sent us prophets, but we haven't welcomed them. For example, how different do you imagine our life as a nation might be if people had widely recognized Martin Luther King Jr as a prophet, and received his message as a word from God, instead of labeling him as a communist and a subversive? Can you imagine how different everything would be if, starting in the 1960s, we began to deal seriously with racism, if we began to address not only the racial terrorism that enforced a kind of apartheid system in the American South, but also the economic marginalization of people of color that was common across the country? Can you imagine how the Vietnam War might have ended differently if our leaders had recognized Martin Luther King Jr as a prophet when he spoke against the war? Imagine the lives that could have been saved (on both sides), and the huge amount of money that could have been used to address poverty and hunger instead of building bombs.

I wonder if that is an example of the reward that Jesus promises for anyone who welcomes a prophet because they are a prophet—that is, because they bring a true word from God. Jesus says that whoever welcomes a prophet will receive the reward of a prophet. I wonder whether Jesus wants us to trust that, in addition to any future reward we might imagine, there is also a reward now, in the present, for welcoming a prophet—the sort of reward the people of Jerusalem could have enjoyed if their leaders had listened to Jeremiah, for example. Or the sort of reward our whole nation might be enjoying if we had listened to Martin Luther King Jr. It makes me wonder about the prophets we should be listening to, and what sort of reward we might enjoy (along with our children and grandchildren).

For Jesus, the reason it's so important to welcome a prophet, or a righteous person, or even one of these little ones who represents Jesus, is because they are messengers for the reign of God. They embody Jesus' way of healing for the human family. The need is so clear. We are so divided and fractured, so suspicious of each other and set against each other. There is so much greed and violence that so visibly separates people and communities. And this is not what God desires. God wants us instead to be a neighborly community, where we love our neighbor as ourselves, where we are not driven by greed or pride or fear, but instead directed by forgiveness and compassion and humility and generosity—by Jesus' way of creating connection and a sense of belonging to each other.

People of God, I wonder if you have ever thought of yourselves, together as a community, as carrying on a prophetic work by the way you embody Jesus' way of love. I truly do think that when you embody compassion for neighbors in need, you are a prophetic sign of Jesus' way of love. And when you care for one another and support each other in challenging times, you are a

prophetic sign of Jesus' way of love. When you forgive each other and live with humility and generosity, you are a prophetic sign of Jesus' way of love. And when you share Christ in any way in word or deed, you are a prophetic sign of Jesus' way of love. And I am certain that whoever receives you will be blessed with a reward. Thanks be to God. Amen