

Jeremiah 28:5–9

5 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; 6and the prophet Jeremiah said, 'Amen! May the Lord do so; may the Lord fulfil 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. 7But listen now to this word that I speak in your hearing and in the hearing of all the people. 8The prophets who preceded you and me from ancient times prophesied war, famine, and pestilence against many countries and great kingdoms. 9As 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.'

Holy, Holy, Holy One, guide us by the Spirit of truth to hear the Word of life you speak, and to give all glory, honor, and praise to your threefold name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

I'd like to talk a bit about prophesy today. Our Old Testament lesson is all about prophesy. In the lesson we have two prophets Hananiah, and Jeremiah; both are making a prophesy. The problem is that their prophesies are in direct opposition to each other, so who should the people believe? Once again, our lectionary takes a few verses for us to talk about, but we need to hear more of the story for us to truly understand what is going on.

This story is set after the Babylonians have attacked Judah and conquered Jerusalem. This was prophesied by Jeremiah for the sins of Judah. The people had refused to follow God's laws and had broken the covenant (again). The Babylonians had deposed the king Jehoiachin and taken him and many others into exile, along with the vessels of the Temple. The Babylonians then put Jehoiachin's, Uncle Zedekiah onto the throne. His job was to keep the peace and make sure that the annual tribute was made to Babylon and King Nebuchadnezzar. Jehoiachin was still a very popular king and many in the country hoped that he would come back from exile.

To make things interesting Zedekiah had heard that there was a rebellion in the Babylonian army stationed in the east. Envoys from other western kingdoms Edom, Moab, Ammon, Tyre, and Sidon, all also under Babylon's rule, came to Judah to talk about working together to revolt and cast off the chains of Babylon.

Jeremiah comes into the Temple where these envoys, the king, and the priests are all gathered, and he is wearing a wooden yoke over his head as a visual cue. He declares the Lord has commanded that their kingdoms have been given into the service of King Nebuchadnezzar to be his servants for three generations. The people should accept their punishment and not make things worse.

Later Hananiah enters the Temple and makes the prophesy that the Lord is saying that the exile will only last two years, and that their favored king in exile Jehoiachin and all the others would be returned along with the Temple vessels.

Jeremiah says, "Amen! May the Lord do so; may the Lord fulfil 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. But listen now to this word that I speak in your hearing and in the hearing of all the people. The prophets who preceded you and me from ancient times prophesied war, famine, and pestilence against many countries and great kingdoms. 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."

In other words, a prophet is known to be a true prophet if what they say becomes true, and the only way to know that is to see it happen and then it's hindsight.

Hananiah didn't like that Jeremiah was opposing him so he broke the yoke around Jeremiah's neck and declared that Babylon's yoke on Israel would be broken the same way. Jeremiah communes with the Lord and comes back to tell Hananiah that, "You have broken wooden bars only to forge iron bars in place of them! For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: I have put an iron yoke on the neck of all these nations so that they may serve King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, and they shall indeed serve him; I have even given him the wild animals. And the prophet Jeremiah said to the prophet Hananiah, 'Listen, Hananiah, the Lord has not sent you, and you made this people trust in a lie. Therefore, thus says the Lord: I am going to send you off the face of the earth. Within this year you will be dead, because you have spoken rebellion against the Lord.'" The next verse says that Hananiah died within two months.

This is quite the story. There's a lot of drama, and as we know in the end King Zedekiah chooses to believe Hananiah, or at least Hananiah was prophesying to the choir, and King Zedekiah rebelled against Babylon. The Babylonians came in and destroyed Jerusalem, the Temple, and took many more people into exile.

So why was Hananiah making prophesies that were false? Did he realize they were false? Did he assume that the Lord was speaking through him or was he just trying to curry favor? The text doesn't say, but there are a couple of things for us to think about.

First, this disagreement is actually about a difference in theological world view. A clash between covenant theology and temple theology. Covenant theology is a theology of rewards for obedience and punishment for disobedience. Temple theology is a theology in which bad things could not or would not happen to Israel or its temple because of God's promise of protection. Both are attempts at defining a predictable life. For centuries, since the time of David as recorded in 2 Samuel 7, temple theology promised God's unswerving care to protect Jerusalem from each and every foe. Temple theology gave the false impression that Jerusalem was invincible. Covenant theology says you make your choices and then must accept the consequences of your actions. God is still with you but isn't going to protect you from your bad decisions.

As you can probably guess Jeremiah believes in covenant theology, while Hananiah believes in temple theology. We see versions of this today. The prosperity gospel that is preached by many big-time televangelists and book writers is very much related to temple theology. The idea that God blesses God's chosen people with wealth and power, while many mainline denominations like ours believe that God does not promise rewards on earth, but our reward is in heaven.

The second thing we must realize is that perhaps Hananiah was looking for the silver lining, the opportunity to make things better. Jeremiah had been making doom and gloom prophesies for over 40 years by this point and maybe Hananiah just wanted to make some good news happen. Sometimes people will ignore what the facts about what is happening because they can't believe things are that bad, or they want to have that rose colored glasses view.

As an example of this type of view we don't have to look very far. When this pandemic started to get rolling in March our president said that it would all go away by April; despite most epidemiologists, researchers, health officials, and doctors saying the opposite. As we saw, they were right, the virus did not just go away. Just last week our president said that we should slow down testing, because the more tests we do, the more cases we will find. I cannot refute that logic, If we test less, we will have fewer official cases, but that doesn't mean we will have less cases. It just means we won't have a good picture of how many people are actually sick.

Another way we as Christians tend to work with prophesy is in Biblical translation and interpretation. Pastors, congregation members, and other theological scholars, all are working

with prophesy when they work with scripture. Many people assume that the Bible and its rules for us are black and white, after all it's a book. The words are right there, so why are people saying that the Bible doesn't say what I was taught? The Bible hasn't changed. Who is the false prophet?

The texts of the Bible have been translated and copied thousands of times over the years. Each book of the Bible is its own stand-alone text. Scholars have found differences in many copies of these texts. Sometimes it's easy to see that a spelling mistake has been made or someone has added or redacted something from the text. Scholars always try to go with the earliest most complete text they can find. Sometimes they find copies that were buried or hidden that make translating things easier, like the dead sea scrolls.

You would think that after so many hundreds of years we would know how to translate every word in the Bible, but that is not the case. The best way to know what a word means is to see it in other works besides the Bible, or translated into other languages that we do know, but especially when we do the latter we are relying on that one person's ability to get the translation right. There are words in the Bible that people still do not know the meaning of. An example that you can easily find in your Bibles is the word *Selah*, which you can find in several Psalms, like Psalm 3, 4, 52, and 88, to name a few. Scholars have guesses to its meaning, it might be a musical notation, a sign that the psalter should pause, or something entirely different, nobody is sure.

Another issue with Bible translation and prophesy is the context it was written in. Who wrote it? Who did they write it to? What was the message they were trying to convey? The context can make a big difference in how we interpret the text. One of my favorites is where God tells the people to turn their plowshares into swords in one book and their swords into plow shares in another. Well which is it?

So how do we differentiate between bad and good prophesies? How do we know who to believe? First, we should pray about it. Take it to the Lord and see if any answers come to us. Second, look at what is being said and see if it fits into the context of what God would want. Third, we sometimes have to disassociate ourselves from our personal beliefs and preconceptions and look at the situation from a more neutral place. Sometimes the answer is not the one we want to hear.

There will always be prophets, and there will always be prophesies. Some will be good, and some bad. Some will be what we want to hear, and some will not. It is even possible that the person making the prophesies may slip and decide to proclaim their own will and not Gods. We as the listener need to be vigilant for God's call to us and try to follow it the best we can. Amen.