

Reflection on the Scripture: Jeremiah 28:5-9

[\[The video of the reflection.\]](#)

The people of Israel could really use a word from God because everything's a hot mess. When life just goes along, you don't really need God's input.¹ But when everything, and I mean everything, is turned upside down and inside out, a word from God would be really helpful. If we in the sanctuary together, I'd probably ask for an "Amen" here, but then, if we were in the sanctuary, everything wouldn't be upside down and inside out.

At this point in history, Israel is controlled by Babylon. They're on their third king in a few years because the first one rebelled against Babylon and was killed when Babylon reasserted power over Israel and demanded more taxes. The second one was so unpopular, even Babylon could see he wasn't going to work, plus he was corrupt, which never helps. So they're working with King Number 3, and he is also deciding whether to rebel against Babylon. Yeah, that worked so well when his now dead uncle tried it.

Everything is in a uproar, and it would be nice to have the true word from God. So they begin to look around for a prophet. And look, there's not one, but two, Jeremiah and Hananiah. Now it would be awesome if they were saying the same thing, but they aren't. They're saying opposite things.

Jeremiah is saying that resistance is futile (yep, *Next Generation* Star Trek right here). Jeremiah is saying that the Israelites have sinned against God and God is using Babylon to teach them the lesson they need to get right with God. There's nothing for it but endurance. Hananiah is saying that God will not abandon Israel, so rise up, throw off the oppressor. God will bring God's great power to the battle and Israel will win. Because the cause of Israel is just.

Jeremiah replied that he sure hoped Hananiah was right. But then he reminded the people and the leadership, *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.* (Jeremiah 28:28-29). Basically, he's saying that you don't know the true prophet until you see what comes to pass. Only in hindsight can you know for sure.

¹ Mark W. Bartusch, "From Honor Challenge to False Prophecy: Rereading Jeremiah 28's story of Prophetic Conflict in Light of Social-science Models." *Currents in Theology and Mission* 36, no. 6 (2009): 457.

But in their case, it will be another two years before they know that they were standing on a cliff.² And they had to follow one of the two prophets in front of them, either they were going to resist Babylon or they were going to endure and learn their lesson.

Our time and our nation is at one of these moment in history, where time itself changes pace.³ Our standing in the world is changing, our leadership on issues which are key to our national identity is being perceived very differently around the world. Our commitment to justice and equality is at an inflection point, where it will go in a different direction after this point. How we address economic injustice will change in the history that is yet to be written because of choices we make right now. How we respond to the global pandemic will teach us important lessons we'll need to know in order to respond to climate change. In this moment where the decisions we make are so important, it would be nice to have a true word from God. Do we endure or do we resist?

Or is that even the right question? Because, more than anything, while Jeremiah is pointing out that we need to act. It's just that the action he is urging is that we need to learn the lesson that God is offering us. Maybe the right way to look at these two prophets is that one is asking us to discern God's will as a community and the other is saying, "follow me!".

Hananiah is arguing that the people of Israel need to rebel against Babylon, that if they resist that oppression, God will be with them. And that's a popular position. It's what the people and King Number 3 want to hear.

Jeremiah is saying, "There's something more here. Of course, God will always be with the people of Israel. But that's on God's terms, not yours. So don't assume that just because God is with you, God cannot be with you while you are in exile in Babylon, your Temple destroyed, with your country gone, your prestige lost, your economy in ruins." Jeremiah is arguing that our destiny is not a fixed or unalterable future determined by God in advance of how reality played out. Human discernment and action play a role in determining how God engages with history as it is being written.⁴

Empirically, a true prophet is the one whose prophecy is proven to be correct once history has played out. But when you cannot wait for history to unfurl, when you have to make the call, the true prophet is the one that calls a community to

² Rachel Sophia Baard, "Proper 8, Theological Perspective, Jeremiah 28:5-9" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 3*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 170.

³ Baard, 170.

⁴ R. E. Clements, *Jeremiah*, in *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1988): 167.

work together to figure out the deeply faithful path forward. A true prophet is the one that is calling for the hard work of loving God and loving neighbor. A true prophet is the one that is calling for the hard work of caring for the widow and the orphan and the stranger among you, because you were once a stranger in the land of Egypt (Deuteronomy 10:17-19).

So at this moment, when everything is upside down and inside out, when the flow of history is quivering and will clearly flow in a different direction after this moment, where are the prophets who are speaking the true word of God? Not necessarily the ones we want to hear. Not necessarily the ones telling us to do what we already know how to do. But the ones which are calling people into community, into recognizing how much we rely on each other, and the ones who are calling us, and recalling us, to our faith. To love God and love our neighbors. Because when we follow them and history unfurls, we will know *that the LORD has truly sent the prophet* (Jeremiah 28:9).