

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost – June 28, 2020

Introduction

These are unsettling times. We are dealing with the coronavirus pandemic that has put us at risk and forced unwelcome changes in the way we live. We are also at one of those ‘hinge-point of history’ moments as we are beginning to confront our nation’s uncomfortable history of racism. Both the pandemic and the social unrest we are experiencing will shape our society for the generations that will follow us.

The bitter political divisions in our nation have made thoughtful reflection difficult. We hear the voices of many people who profoundly disagree with each other. The lectionary readings for the Fourth Sunday after Pentecost [the oracle of Jeremiah and Jesus’ words in the Gospel of Matthew] raise a number of questions: *Who exactly is a prophet? What is the message of a prophet? What if there are competing prophets [Jeremiah and Hananiah], who do you believe?*

Difficult questions. I believe that some of the prophetic voices we are hearing today are not helpful. Our national divisions provide fertile ground for false prophets who speak with little authority beyond their own political, social, and religious agendas. Please understand that I use the word ‘prophet’ to include those who claim to speak from a religious/biblical perspective **as well as** those who are secular and see themselves as guardians of common sense and the free expression of political rights.

Two of the difficult discussions that are going on in our nation now are the pandemic and our historical remembrance of the Civil War. As a response to the coronavirus, the CDC recommended protections to deter infection. **Secular false prophets** have argued against social distancing and use of face masks as suggested by the medical and public health communities as a safeguard against infection. Their argument against recommended practices is based on a perceived limitation of their individual rights. In the discussion of the place of Civil War monuments and statuary commemorating Confederate leaders, **secular false prophets** argue for their preservation as part of our national heritage even though these leaders were insurrectionists whose desire was to fracture our nation over the issue of slavery.

In today’s homily, we will explore the prophetic dimension of discipleship. It is difficult to have a discerning ear as we listen and try to live our faith. At the risk of

tipping my hand about the trajectory of the homily, I will conclude with one key paragraph I think is help as we frame our thoughts.

Those who speak for the Lord are those who live their faith. They are guided by the *Presence of the Resurrected Christ* among us . . . The Holy Spirit who empowers our sanctification. We can love others, because he first loved us; we can forgive others, because he has forgiven us; and we can minister to others because he ministers to us. To have faith in Jesus is to be a servant of Christ. And to be a servant of Christ is to take up his ministry.

Hopefully this will help as we listen to today's prophets and discern the truth of their words.

***In Christ ✝,
Pastor Steve***

Scripture Lesson: Jeremiah 28.5-9

⁵Then 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 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. 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.'

Gospel – Matthew 10.40-42

Jesus said to his disciples, ⁴⁰'Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. ⁴¹Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; ⁴²and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple — truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.'

'Probability, Predictions, and Prophets'

Let us pray. Almighty God, we thank you for your redemptive love made flesh in your Son Jesus who is our Lord. It is our prayer this morning that you would send your Holy Spirit upon our church so that we might be living reminders of your presence in the world. Help us to forgive rather than condemn; to build up rather than tear down; and to love rather than hate. Open our eyes and our ears, as well as our hearts, to our brothers and sisters around us; and bind us together with your love so that we might be effective tools for work in the Kingdom. And in the fullness of time, grant that we may live in your presence forever. We pray in Jesus' name, amen.

Brothers and sisters, grace to you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Predicting the future is risky business. Many who claim to be 'experts' as see themselves as prophets who can speak with certainty about the future. We all know that very few people get it right . . . Especially when it comes to technology. Let me give you a few examples that are quite humorous in light of what really happened.

- In 1927, H> L. Warner, the president of Warner Brothers studio said, "*Who the [expletive deleted] wants to hear actors talk?*" He was an advocate for silent films.
- In 1977, Ken Olson, the president of Digital Equipment Corporation said, "*There is no reason anyone would want a computer in their home.*" Today, most homes have multiple computers for family use. Many people also use cellphones that are, in fact, mini computers.
- In 1899, Charles Duell, the Commissioner of the United States Patent Office said, '*Everything that can be invented has been invented.*' Today, the patent office is at least 12-18 month behind in processing patent applications for new ideas.
- And of course, the automobile has been the subject of countless predictions. In 1951, *Motor Trend* magazine advanced the idea that cars will be powered by small atomic reactors. In its July 1959 issue, *Popular Science* magazine predicted with certainty that cars would soon be riding on a cushions of air that would allow them to travel 150 mph over water and 500 mph on land.

Well, you get the point. Science and technology often take unexpected turns; and only rarely are predictions of the future accurate. Most of the time, they prove to be silly statements that come back to haunt the one foolish enough to make them. Prophets of doom wear many disguises: politicians who predict a disastrous future if their opponents are elected; sociologists who identify alarming trends that will eventually tear apart our families or communities; and economists who predict economic chaos if some particular international scheme is not followed. Fortunately, most of us take such ‘*future talk*’ with a grain of salt. But there seems to be one group that always gets a hearing; one group whose pronouncements always get more than their fair share of publicity. Of course, I am referring to those who claim to speak for God.

Today, many people claim to speak for the Lord . . . Some stand in pulpits, **others** on street corners, **and still others** in front of television cameras that give them national exposure. They claim a special insight — a special message — from the Lord that must be spoken to the multitudes. Their topics vary from the end times to the moral decay of America. They make promises. They guarantee judgment. They promote moral codes that often seem contrary to Scripture. And they are quick to identify those who are sinners among us. They all have something to say and they always tell us that our failure to listen will bring only death and destruction to all that we hold dear.

So, dare we listen to any of this? Who do we believe? How can God send so many conflicting messages? Who truly speaks for the Lord? How can we know for certain?

These questions are nothing new. God’s people have always had to choose between the false prophets and the true prophets . . . And sometimes, it’s difficult to know which is which. If you don’t believe me, just ask the people of Jerusalem how hard it was to choose between Hananiah, the King’s prophet and the perennial bearer of good news, and Jeremiah, the incessant complainer. The people did not know where to turn and they were looking for answers. The little nation of Judah was caught between two dangerous enemies . . . Egypt to the west and Babylon to the east.

Hananiah, the king’s prophet, looked like a prophet and sounded like a prophet. When he said ‘**Thus says the Lord . . .**’ it was like God was speaking. And what’s more, he was saying what the king and the people wanted to hear. He assured his hearers

that mighty Babylon would fall within two years. He even promised that the ten-thousand hostages taken from leaders of the people would be returned to their homes along with the holy vessels taken from the Temple. If Hananiah were to be believed, Judah would again become a world power, and her king, Zedekiah, another David. Hananiah was a prophet the people liked because he told them what they wanted to hear.

Why did people listen? It was a time of apparent prosperity. Jerusalem was a center of trade and money came easy to the wealthy. Oh yes, armies were on the move and there were wars and rumors of war; but King Zedekiah and his counselors thought Judah was secure. **They played by the rules.** An alliance here, a treaty there – Security was a matter of planning and statecraft. And what’s more, the king was certain that he had God on his side. His priests assured him that as long as the Temple worship was carried out on the Sabbath, the nation would be safe. After all, they were God’s chosen people. So why worry? If they played the ‘*religion game*’ by the rules, everybody won: The king got the security he wanted; the clergy got the recognition they wanted; and the people got the assurance they wanted. But unfortunately, God didn’t get what God wanted: repentance and a change of heart.

As it turned out, Hananiah the prophet was wrong . . . And it fell to Jeremiah, a young prophet to tell both king and people the truth. He was called to be a prophet at a very difficult time. God called him to speak words of judgment to a self-assured king and people. Jeremiah’s words would not be well received. Many thought that he was a traitor to king and country . . . Some even accused him of selling out to the Judah’s enemies.

But Jeremiah had the counsel of the Lord. God saw their Temple worship for the sham that it was. Although the people, the priests, and the king thought they had ‘*done enough to satisfy God,*’ they had it all wrong. They worshiped with their mouths and not their hearts. What was said on the Sabbath was not lived during the rest of the week. The people all did what was right in their own eyes. Merchants cheated their customers with false scales . . . Personal morality was nonexistent . . . And the worship of other gods was encouraged ‘*just in case additional help might be needed.*’ The hearts of God’s people were corrupt . . . so darkened by sin that they could not repent.

So, Jeremiah the reluctant prophet, was told to speak words of judgment. The false prophet Hananiah would die . . . God's people would be taken into captivity . . . Holy Jerusalem would be burnt to the ground . . . And God's Temple would be desecrated. But no one believed his words. How dare he speak such heresy and treason? Jeremiah's family disowned him; his friends tried to kill him; and he was called a 'mouthpiece for the enemy' . . . a traitor to his people.

Dueling prophets . . . Who's right? Which one speaks for the Lord? What exactly is the word of the Lord for God's people? Who do we listen to? It isn't an easy decision to make — particularly today when there are so many pronouncements by those who claim to speak for the Lord. Nonetheless, I do think that a careful reading of the encounter between Hananiah and Jeremiah can provide us with some guidance.

First, false prophets are often accepted by society and their words are heard with gladness. Hananiah and his counterparts today are very prominent people who rub elbows with the powerful people in our world. They have access to people and to the media. Like Hananiah, they are often **chaplains of the status quo** who speak the words people want to hear.

In the last half century, the well-known religious leaders who could speak so eloquently sin were silent when it came to issues that were dividing our nation: segregation; a war in Southeast Asia that was, at best, misguided; and our increasing materialism. In a nation that takes pride in its '**pull yourself up by your bootstrap**' work ethic, it's no accident that prominent religious personalities rail against programs that provide tax relief, food, and medical care for low-income people. It's no wonder they preach the so called '**Gospel of Prosperity.**' True prophets are counter-cultural . . . They do not cultivate the favor of people who are leaders. Like Jeremiah, the true prophet dares to speak difficult words because as Jeremiah says, '**They are like fire in my bones . . . And I cannot hold them in.**' These words are spoken no matter the risk or the consequences.

Second, false prophets conclude that God's present and future actions are entirely predictable. They speak with authority about how God will deal with sin . . . Who will be punished for what sin and how. They readily identify the signs of the end as if God has given them the key to the secret code of Armageddon. True prophets are different . . . They bow to the mystery of God . . . Calling people to renewed faithfulness . . . Trusting that God will be faithful.

And third, false prophets envision a future that is inevitable. God will condemn – God will judge – God will destroy. But the true prophet challenges the people of God to change and become participants with God in creating a different state of affairs. Jeremiah, after delivering his message of death and destruction . . . after watching the Babylonian armies encircle his beloved Jerusalem, went out and bought a plot of land as a sign that God’s people did indeed have a future. Jeremiah challenged them to repent and turn to the Lord and to become a sign to all nations that the God of Israel was both faithful and forgiving.

So, who speaks for the Lord today? Be careful . . . There are a lot of people who are saying strange things these days . . . There are even some who say that the sky is falling and the end is coming. **But somehow, I don’t think that these are the people who speak for the Lord.**

Those who speak for the Lord are those who live their faith. They are guided by the Presence of the Resurrected Christ among us . . . The Holy Spirit who empowers our sanctification. We can love others, because he first loved us; we can forgive others, because he has forgiven us; and we can minister to others because he ministers to us. To have faith in Jesus is to be a servant of Christ. And to be a servant of Christ is to take up his ministry.

There is a word of caution. There are no exceptions, faith always requires action. If we but permit him, our King will lead us to our neighbor; to the hungry family down the block, to the person sick with AIDS or with cancer, to the lonely senior citizen who has no one to talk to, or to the high school student who needs a friend. Those who suffer and bear heavy burdens belong to Jesus and he has always been among them. So if we want to find Jesus, we must join him there.

And on the last day, Christ the King will say to his servants, ‘COME, O BLESSED OF MY FATHER, INHERIT THE KINGDOM PREPARED FOR YOU . . . ; FOR I WAS HUNGRY AND YOU GAVE ME FOOD, I WAS THIRSTY AND YOU GAVE ME DRINK, I WAS A STRANGER AND YOU WELCOMED ME, I WAS NAKED AND YOU VISITED ME. I WAS IN PRISON AND YOU CAME TO ME.’

His servants will say to him, **‘Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give you drink, or naked and clothe thee, or in prison and visit thee?’** And the King will answer, **‘TRULY, I SAY TO YOU, AS YOU DID TO ONE OF THE LEAST OF THESE, MY BRETHREN, YOU DID IT TO ME.’** Amen.

Pastoral Note

Parking lot communion at Bethel Lutheran Church on Wednesday, June 24 and Wednesday, July 1 at 5:30 pm. Please note that this will be a communion service with a brief homily about the Sacrament. All are welcome.