

Jeremiah 28:5-9 (NRSV)

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; 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. 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."

Idols and Misleaders

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

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Scripture: Jeremiah 28:5-9

There can be little doubt that most of us in our lifetimes have lived through enormous turmoil. Some of us are old enough to remember the years of World War II, those frightful days when humanity's future hung in the balance. More of us remember the time just afterward, and era when Ward and June Cleaver had the ideal marriage and home, when the churches were filled with people, but also the time of the Cold War when Joe McCarthy's claimed that the government and universities were filled with Communists. Still more of us remember the sixties and seventies, Kennedy's assassination, the Viet Nam War, the Civil Rights Movement, the feminist movement, the sexual revolution and a man on the moon. Almost all of us remember a time when there was no internet or personal computers, when, in fact, computers were behemoths as big as a house. And all of us have been witness to the almost unbelievably rapid rise in global terrorism and wars in the Middle East, but also election of the first black President and the acceptance of differing sexual orientations and same-sex marriage.

The changes in our lifetimes have brought us things we all can agree are terrific. Medical advances have significantly increased the length and quality of human life, for example. And many of us would say that changes in the way we view sexuality, race and gender are great leaps forward. And some of us would say that the computer revolution, while a mixed bag, has brought information and communication to new levels of possibility. On the other hand, the excesses of McCarthy and his contemporary successors, the persistent drumbeat of wars, and intransigence of poverty and hunger disabuse us of any notion that life is pure progress.

Like marriage, our lifetimes are for better and for worse, and we have seen plenty of both. But here's an interesting point. Changes for both the good and the bad tend to unsettle us. Change is hard for us. Even while we have elected the first black President we have seen many in our congress and nation vilify him in ways that can only be explained as a latent and sometimes quite overt racism. Change is hard for us. And that makes us vulnerable. We are vulnerable to voices that soothe us, whispering in our ear what we want to hear. Hear, eat this diet and take these pills and you'll stay young and virile. You don't have to age." "Hear, are you feeling upset? Well that's not right. Somebody must be to blame." "Hear, we don't really have a black President. He's from Kenya. Fraudulent voters elected him. He is an illegitimate President." In the midst of unsettling discomfort, in the midst of change, it is all too easy to welcome the voices that tell us what we want to hear, that tell us that we can and should have it the way we wish it were.

It's not a new phenomenon. Ancient Israel, too, lived a tumultuous existence. From its high-point under King David, the empire, such as it was, soon found itself undermined from within and without. [Slide 1] A small slice of land, Israel was a crossroads through which traders and armies from other lands regularly traversed, the former bringing good fortune, the latter striking terror. Her precarious position and a series of inept monarchs meant that first one and

then another foreign power would rule and often devastate Israel. It's safe to say that ancient Israel lived in a constant state of anxiety.

In this morning's scripture reading we travel back to the middle of the summer in the year 594 b.c.e. David's empire is a 400 year old memory. The loss of the North to Assyria was 130 years in the past. As so often in history, Israel, or what was left of it, Judah, was buffeted by the shifting winds of power: Egypt, Assyria and lately Babylon. Judah's rulers have been judged to be incompetent, but truth be told, it was an impossible job. Every alliance was a bet on which neighbor had the power today and who would have it tomorrow. It was like trying to time the stock market: futile. And so this crossroad between powers was trodden with regularity. It was a wonder that she clung to life as long as she did.

And, now, in 594, the beginning of the end was in fact upon them. Babylon had already taken many of the precious vessels from the Temple, deposed the king and left a puppet in his place. Much of the population had already been marched away to Babylon, modern day Iraq. And those remaining in Judah longed for relief from the doom. In the summer of 594 b.c.e. they wanted to hear a word of survival and restoration. They wanted to hear that those taken to Babylon would return, and that the good old days would return, too. Alas, Jeremiah prophesied that Judah could not withstand Babylon. Her corruption had caught up with her, he said. She would fall.

But there were other prophets, among them was Hananiah. Hananiah prophesied, "Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: I have broken the yoke of the king of Babylon. Within two years I will bring back to this place all the vessels of the LORD's house, which King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon took away from this place and carried to Babylon. I will also bring back to this place King Jeconiah son of Jehoiakim of Judah, and all the exiles from Judah who went to Babylon, says the LORD, for I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon." It was just what they wanted to hear.

The moment is not dissimilar from 1933 in Germany. Like the rest of the world Germany was in the Great Depression. Unemployment and inflation had skyrocketed. Adding to her demoralization, by the terms of the Treaty of Versailles, Germany had to accept full and complete blame for World War I, and she also had to pay enormous reparations to her enemies. The once proud nation was on her knees; finances and self-esteem were in a shambles.

The country was ripe for the picking if someone could come along and tell them that this was but a bad dream, that the Fatherland could be resurrected, and that their proud spirit could be redeemed. There came, of course, just such a savior in the person of Adolph Hitler. Hitler would tell the people what they wanted to hear, gladly peppering his energetic speeches with the language of the church. He was the savior who would bring Germany to resurrection and redemption, he said. When President Hindenburg appointed Hitler as Reich Chancellor on January 30th, 1933, the National Socialist party's ascent to power took on break-neck speed, and many cheered it as the rebirth of the nation.

The young theologian and pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, not yet 27, was not one of them. Two days after Hitler's appointment as Reich Chancellor he responded with a prophetic radio address about leadership, *die Führung*. Bonhoeffer rightly understood that Hitler was becoming popular because he told the people what they wanted to hear. He also understood that in exchange for hearing what they wanted to hear many people would give Hitler a blank check. Into the microphone, with no little courage, the young theologian aimed directly at the problem, saying, "if the leader [*Führer*] tries to become the idol the led are looking for," then the leader

becomes a misleader.¹ Bonhoeffer concluded the address, the “Leader and office that turn themselves into gods mock God.”² Seldom have more prophetic words been spoken. Within less than a decade the death camps would be in full swing toward their stated goal to “exterminate life unworthy of life,” in full swing mocking God.

While Hananiah wasn’t as depraved as Hitler, his message to Judah was alike in its intent to give the people what they wanted to hear and to let them shower him with accolades. Hananiah said what the people wanted to hear, and they loved him for it. The time is near, he said. Things will be good very soon. Our king, our people and our Temple vessels will soon be redeemed. We will be saved.

The people were far more inclined to listen to Hananiah than to Jeremiah, understandably so. But, also, too bad. For nothing Hananiah predicted would turn out to be true. And worse, because the people accepted his words, because they accepted his mis-leadership, they also unwisely accepted the urging of Egypt. The Egyptians advised the Judean king to attack the Babylonians. The results were disastrous. Jerusalem was crushed, the Temple destroyed and the last vestige of David’s empire receded into history.

Before all this happened, when Jeremiah and Hananiah were facing off, Jeremiah simply said, “History will prove who the true prophet is. Events will tell which one of us is right.”

And there’s the problem, of course. Before the events happen, who’s to say for sure how they’ll work out? We have dueling prophets. One says it’s gloom and doom if we keep thinking we can have things the way we want. The other says keep up the good work; happy days are coming soon; what you long for is yours. The people had to make a choice, a wager so to speak. Are you going to take door number one or door number two? They could flip a coin. Or they could take the one we like better. Why not?

But it’s not just a coin toss, is it? Sure, there are some things that are fifty-fifty. But a lot of things are clearer than that. But clear things can seem foggy when we prefer the lie, when we want something to be true even if it clearly isn’t. Smokers for a very long time told themselves that the tobacco companies were right and that smoking was fine. Why. Not because of the balance of the evidence, but simply because that’s what they wanted to be true. In 2003 the Bush administration wanted to attack Iraq. It listened to the evidence that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction, despite the fact that the evidence was slim to none. The administration listened because it was what it wanted to hear.

In the Gospel of John it says that the truth will set you free. The problem is we are often vulnerable to the falsehood. So, how do we come to prefer the truth? This may sound a little simplistic, but the answer is actually very simple. If we trust God, even in the midst of life that seems to turn us upside down, we’ll spend less energy trying to make things appear the way we want them to. However things turn out, God holds us in loving care. And God knows, if can believe that, if we can keep ourselves from following misleaders, idols and lies, things will actually turn out the best they can. The truth will set us free. Amen.

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Berlin: 1932–1933*, ed. Carsten Nicolaisen, Ernst-Albert Scharffenorth, and Larry L. Rasmussen, trans. Isabel Best, David Higgins, and Douglas W. Stott, vol. 12, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), 280.

² *Ibid.*, 282.