

Hard Truth and True Good

5th Sun. after Pent. – 07/02/23 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Jeremiah 28:5-9 Pastor Keith Besel

v. 9, [Jeremiah said,] “...when the word of that prophet comes to pass, then it will be known that the LORD has truly sent the prophet.”

Introduction

✘ Our Old Testament Reading today grabs ahold of us New Testament Christians and just plops us down in the middle of a public conflict between two prophets, as it says in verse five, “...in the presence of the priests and all the people who were standing in the house of the LORD”. And as it does this it makes a huge assumption that we all know what’s going on.

→ But I’m guessing that most of us have little if any clue of the gravity of this incident, especially about why it should be any concern of ours now 2600 years later. So let me see if I can help to set the stage:

→ It was three years ago, in 597 BC that the powerful King Nebuchadnezzar and his Babylonian army conquered Jerusalem from the north and then took more than 3,000 of Judea’s leaders and royalty as their servants, along with the precious vessels and accessories from God’s Holy Temple back to Babylon. (Jer. 52)

✘ Jeremiah, as God’s prophet, remained in Jerusalem, as did a number of the so-called prophets who still remained on the Temple “payroll”. The messages that these Temple prophets proclaimed was consistently one of encouragement and what we might call “people-pleasing” messages, while Jeremiah’s message most often called the people to repentance and warned them of even worse tragedy and more destruction to come at the hands of the Babylonians because of their refusal to leave their self-centered worship which had utterly corrupted God’s truth and Temple. Jeremiah even publically told Zedekiah, the king of Judah, “Do not listen to the words of your prophets who are prophesying to you...for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you” (Jer. 27:16). If they would not repent, Jeremiah said that even more people would go into exile; that the city wall and God’s Temple would be destroyed and it would be many years before the exile would finally end.

→ But one particular Temple prophet, a man named Hananiah, stood up against Jeremiah, calling him an imposter and said that all would be well within only the next two years. He said that God told him that the city’s leaders and princes, along with the Temple vessels, would be back in Jerusalem soon. Hananiah’s was a “good” word for sure; one that made the people happy; that lifted their spirits, while Jeremiah’s words seemed to only bring the people down since they were hard and harsh and “judgmental”; making everyone see their guilt.

✘ So, you tell me, which of the prophets do you suppose the king and the people wanted to believe? Which one was more popular – Hananiah with his “good” words or Jeremiah with his “hard” words?

→ It’s the basic question that the people were asking about their own God, “If He truly loves us, than how could the LORD allow Nebuchadnezzar to take His people and His vessels captive? Isn’t He supposed to be the Defender of His people?”

I. Many “Hananiahs” deceive us.

✘ That question is an old one, but not a good one, because it’s a question built on the assumption that earthly success, honor, popularity and glory are supposed to just naturally come to God’s people. It’s based on the false understanding that being a believer; living as a Christian is

supposed to be a life that is “easy” and always “happy”; one where God automatically “approves” and “affirms” whatever lifestyle or behavior or priorities that I; that we want to have.

→ Honestly it is a system that calls God’s actions into question, whenever He disagrees with the standards and innovations of the current culture or with what each individual believes. It’s a mindset that is convinced that we can actually define and determine what God says and how God should act in our lives and in our world.

→ And so, yes, even in our age today, we hear the voice of false prophets like Hananiah say things like this: “If you just have enough faith, God will heal you.” “If you become a Christian and join our church, God will keep you from hardship.” “If you just trust in God, He will protect all of your things.”

- ✘ But friends, throughout all of God’s history, those who have trusted Hananiah’s message, have been deceived into believing that God’s primary purpose and reason for existing is just to give them stuff; that Jesus’ main goal is to fix all of your problems; that He’s just sitting up there in heaven to give you whatever you want. Faithful theologians have long called this kind of thinking the “Name it and Claim it” theology.

→ But Jesus said in Matthew 6:19, “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal.” He’s telling us we shouldn’t listen to Hananiah or the lies of his descendants today.

- ✘ Why not? What’s so bad about listening to Hananiah? I can think of three reasons: First, false prophets like Hananiah try to get us to be more comfortable than we should with all of our earthly comforts and kingdoms. Just like some false prophets today, he tries to tell us that God loves “our homeland” more than others. For Lutherans, the nation of Prussia was where many of our spiritual ancestors first originated. Their army wore belt buckles that said, “God is with us.” But Prussia no longer exists. So does that mean their God was a phony?

→ The Hananiahs say, “God is a patriot who will support and protect our land even though we have turned to false gods and worshiped them; even though many Israelites sacrificed their children to the Baals; even though we Americans have sacrificed millions of our children in abortion.” In fact this week we wear t-shirts and proudly proclaim, “God bless America” while Americans rage in fury against those who confess God’s Word and pass ungodly laws that seek to limit what Christians can say or do – all in the name though of “freedom.”

→ Let’s face it, while our freedom of religion is so very important in America, it is sadly so misunderstand by a large number of American Christians. Yes, we celebrate the fact that we live in a country where we can freely worship the one true God without fear of physical harm or imprisonment, but that doesn’t change the fact that there is only one true God, who has given us His one and only truth in the Bible! You see, we must be careful that we don’t fall to Hananiah’s lie and end up worshiping our freedom or worshiping America, because we worship God alone – whether we are free here on earth or not!

→ Think of Joseph and Paul in prison or those Christians today in countries like North Korea or Libya or Pakistan who still have the joy of believing in Jesus even while their lives are in danger every day here on earth. And speaking of Jesus, think of the work that He did for us – all while He was bound to the cross by each one of our countless sins. Earthly freedom and “living the American Dream”, while not necessarily evil by themselves – they are not what defines the Christian life.

- ✘ The second bad thing about listening to Hananiah is that he doesn’t speak like a prophet. This one is a little harder to understand. Jeremiah says in verse eight, “The prophets who preceded you and me from ancient times prophesied war, famine, and pestilence against many countries and great kingdoms”. Like it or not, all of the nations that we see, even America, will one day

topple. The possessions you and I have will always leave us unsatisfied and unsaved. And the earthly accomplishments, skills, and glories of men will pass away and be forgotten by time (Eccl. 1:11). Even most of the miracles that we seek from God have to do with earthly things; healing, paying bills, and getting ahead in the world.

→ But the true prophet will remind us that even those whom Jesus healed or raised during His earthly ministry have all now died. I find it interesting that when I, as a pastor, minister to members approaching death, quite often the family of the dying person tries to keep me from talking about death. But folks, we all need to be ready to stand before the judgment seat of God. And pretending death won't come is neither wise nor faithful to the truth. So false prophets turn us away from the very truth we need the most, which is our need for a Savior; the only Victor who died and conquered death in our place.

✘ The third problem with listening to Hananiah is that he preaches that God must always bring peace and earthly victory. Yet Jesus is clear in today's Gospel Reading, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth ... but a sword" (Mt. 10:34).

→ I know what many people think, "Isn't Jesus called 'the Prince of Peace'" (Is 9:6)? Yes, He is. But His peace is not a peace that comes from giving in to His enemies or sacrificing truth or love just to avoid conflict. Jesus is the King of what's called the Church Militant. He does not and cannot peacefully coexist with evil. If someone or something blatantly defies God's will; that is a time when Jesus and His people cannot seek a compromise.

→ Jesus overcomes evil by taking all of its lies, threats, fury, and murderous rage; facing it head on and coming out alive and victorious on the third day. He proclaims the hard truth because that's what we need, just as Jeremiah said of Hananiah at the end of chapter 28:(15-16), "...you have made this people trust in a lie. Therefore Yahweh says, 'Behold, I will remove you from the earth'..." and seven months later Hananiah died.

II. Jeremiah prophecies true good.

✘ I know, Jeremiah sounds like a prophet who prophesies doom ... and he is! But it is doom to the false hopes and the false dreams of the false prophets. Ultimately Jeremiah prophesies about God; the only God who does not lose; who cannot lose no matter how strong or popular His enemies appear.

→ And the only Word that Jeremiah proclaims is the Word of God; the only Word where what's right or wrong is not determined by an opinion poll, but instead by God's all-knowing love for His people. The God that speaks through Jeremiah is the One who preserves His people even when kingdoms, rulers, and fortunes perish. His messages and truths are not temporary or changing from one day to the next. No, His Word and victories alone are timeless, and His people are eternal.

✘ Most important, Jeremiah teaches us here how to tell the true prophet from the false ones. Verse nine, "As for the prophet who prophesies peace, when the word of that prophet comes to pass, then it will be known that the LORD has truly sent the prophet."

→ In fact God's consistent prophetic message has been proclaimed throughout the generations. Just like Jeremiah, the true prophets have told us that God would lift up a Savior that could not be corrupted and would not fail (Jer. 23:5; 33:14-26). They have preached words of ultimate hope, such as Jeremiah 7:23, "I will be your God, and you shall be My people" and in 16:19, that God will bring salvation to all nations, and in 4:2, that all nations will share in His glory (4:2).

→ Our God is not content to allow the record of salvation to be merely ancient teaching, for He promises this to His believers of all time in Jeremiah 31:33-34, "I will put My law within them,

and I will write it on their hearts. ...for they shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest... For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”

✘ These prophetic truths and so many more have all come true through the work of Jesus Christ; the One to whom all true prophets and preachers must always point the souls of all mankind. For Jesus alone has delivered His people from sin, death, and the power of the devil, and Jesus alone brings true and eternal peace – not necessarily physical peace to us here on earth, but peace into our souls for all of eternity!

→ So a prophet is not a true prophet if he is proclaiming his own word instead of God’s and if he is not ultimately pointing to Jesus Christ as the only way to the Father for forgiveness and salvation.

→ Sometimes that necessitates the hard truth of God’s judgment against sin. But when that hard truth leads souls, not to the misleading dreams and false goods of the world, but instead to the one and only “true good” of God’s love and free salvation in the blood of Jesus, then it is the greatest message our souls can ever receive!

✘ And how do we know it is true? because through Jesus Christ, every word of the apostles and prophets is fulfilled, and in Him, we have eternal peace. Amen.