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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
2/20/2013, Midweek Lent 1
Jeremiah 28
Has the Lord Really Said This?

PRAYER OF THE DAY

☞ Lord God, our strength, the battle of good and evil rages within and around us, and our ancient foe tempts us with his deceits and empty promises. Keep us steadfast in your Word and, when we fall, raise us again and restore us through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

[Introduction by Pastor Fryer¹: This evening's story takes place in the year 594 B.C. It was a time midway between catastrophes for Judah. Three or four years earlier, in the year 597 B.C., King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon had defeated a futile rebellion by Judah. But he had dwelt with a fair amount of leniency toward her back then. He deported the young King Jehoiachin to Babylon, along with court officials, military leaders, skilled artisans, and considerable treasure, including sacred vessels, but he had not destroyed Jerusalem. He placed a vassal king on the throne—a fellow named Zedekiah.

Just before the time of this evening's story, there seems to have been some disturbance in Babylon. It was a small uprising, quickly suppressed. But word of this small uprising struck hope in Judah and other vassal states that Babylon was cracking. Ambassadors from Edom, Moab, Ammon, Tyre, and Sidon gathered in Jerusalem to discuss revolt.

The Lord instructed his prophet Jeremiah to speak to the king of Judah and the ambassadors of the other states, telling them to submit to the rule of Nebuchadnezzar. They were not to attempt rebellion. As a symbol for their submission, he instructs Jeremiah to wear a wooden yoke—the kind worn by oxen.

But there are nationalistic voices urging Judah to ignore Jeremiah. One of these voices was Hananiah, in this evening's reading.

As it turned out, Judah did back down from rebellion at that time. But her patriotic sympathies remained strong, and five years later she did revolt against Babylon. Her defeat in the year 587 B.C. was devastating. The Temple was destroyed, the walls leveled, and much of the population was taken into Babylonian captivity.

This evening's story, then, is the story of the battle between two prophets.]

¹ John Bright, *Jeremiah*, The Anchor Bible (Doubleday & Company, Garden City, NY 1965) pages XLVI—LIII.

HOLY SCRIPTUREJeremiah 28, RSV

¹In that same year, at the beginning of the reign of Zedeki'ah king of Judah, in the fifth month of the fourth year, Hanani'ah the son of Azzur, the prophet from Gib'eon, spoke to me in the house of the Lord, in the presence of the priests and all the people, saying, ²"Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: I have broken the yoke of the king of Babylon. ³Within two years I will bring back to this place all the vessels of the Lord's house, which Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon took away from this place and carried to Babylon. ⁴I will also bring back to this place Jeconiah the son of Jehoi'akim, king 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."

⁵Then the prophet Jeremiah spoke to Hanani'ah the prophet 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 make the words which you have prophesied come true, and bring back to this place from Babylon the vessels of the house of the Lord, and all the exiles. ⁷Yet hear now this word which 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 to pass, then it will be known that the Lord has truly sent the prophet."

¹⁰Then the prophet Hanani'ah took the yoke-bars from the neck of Jeremiah the prophet, and broke them. ¹¹And Hanani'ah spoke in the presence of all the people, saying, "Thus says the Lord: Even so will I break the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon from the neck of all the nations within two years." But Jeremiah the prophet went his way.

¹²Sometime after the prophet Hanani'ah had broken the yoke-bars from off the neck of Jeremiah the prophet, the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah: ¹³"Go, tell Hanani'ah, 'Thus says the Lord: You have broken wooden bars, but I will make in their place bars of iron. ¹⁴For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: I have put upon the neck of all these nations an iron yoke of servitude to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, and they shall serve him, for I have given to him even the beasts of the field.'" ¹⁵And Jeremiah the prophet said to the prophet Hanani'ah, "Listen, Hanani'ah, the Lord has not sent you, and you have made this people trust in a lie. ¹⁶Therefore thus says the Lord: 'Behold, I will remove you from the face of the earth. This very year you shall die, because you have uttered rebellion against the Lord.'"

¹⁷In that same year, in the seventh month, the prophet Hanani'ah died.

HYMN LBW 230 *Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Your Word*

SERMON

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹⁵And Jeremiah the prophet said to the prophet Hanani'ah, "Listen, Hanani'ah, the Lord has not sent you, and you have made this people trust in a lie. ¹⁶Therefore thus says the Lord: 'Behold, I will remove you from the face of the earth. This very year you shall die, because you have uttered rebellion against the Lord.'" (Jeremiah 28:15, RSV)

In the Bible, there are stories of murder, rape, adultery, and betrayal. Perhaps these stories catch our attention more than a passing story like this one—the story of an argument between two prophets. But this story too is an awful one. Indeed, for me it is the most awful. One or the other of these prophets is wrong. One of them has said "Thus saith the Lord," when the Lord has not said so. He is misrepresenting the Word of the Lord. And when that happens humanity is struck a terrible blow. For what greater and more necessary treasure do we have on earth than the Word of God?

This sermon amounts to two laments and a cry of hope in spite of the laments. One lament is for the false prophet. The other is for the church that listens to that false prophet. Let's begin with the false prophet. His name is Hananiah.

HANANIAH

What is said to Hananiah is the worst thing that could be said to a preacher come the great Judgment Day:

¹⁵And Jeremiah the prophet said to the prophet Hanani'ah, "Listen, Hanani'ah, the Lord has not sent you, and you have made this people trust in a lie. (Jeremiah 28:15, RSV)

We live in a town with lots of well-educated people, and there are sophisticated Lutherans sitting in the pews of our Lutheran congregations all over our land. Many of our people are learned, yes, but also they are trusting. They trust their pastors. Why shouldn't they? If the pastor says, "Thus saith the Lord..." most people trust their shepherd.

This puts great responsibility upon the shepherds. What a horrible, horrible thing it would be to hear the True Shepherd say to a pastor, "I did not send you, and you made the people trust in a lie."

We do not know that Hananiah was insincere. In a way, this increases the horror of this story. The Bible calls him "the prophet from Gibeon." It does not

call him the “pretend prophet,” the “make-believe prophet,” or the “unbelieving prophet.” Whatever objective credentials it takes to make someone a prophet, Hananiah seems to have had them. I imagine he graduated from a good seminary, his ordination papers are in good order, and people listen to him as a prophet.

Furthermore, we know nothing of his internal spirit in relationship to what he preaches. He uses the high traditional formula of the prophet. He says,

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: I have broken the yoke of the king of Babylon.

He is putting himself forward as the mouthpiece of the Lord. He is not presenting himself as a theologian talking *about* God, but a prophet speaking *for* God. “Thus says the Lord of hosts...” It is a dramatic and awesome sequence of words for a mere human being to say.

And as far as we can tell, he is not a flat-out liar. When he says, “Thus saith the Lord...” he seems really to believe that the Lord has said so.

What a mystery! He imagines himself to be a prophet speaking the very Word of the Lord. But he is wrong! And in being wrong, he leads the people on toward disaster.

I am trying to defend the man! I do not want to accuse him of deceit, but rather of confusion. Perhaps we can explain the disaster of Hananiah by saying that he was inspired, but by a wrong spirit.

Jeremiah, the true prophet, was inspired by the Holy Spirit. Jeremiah’s great contemporary Ezekiel is articulate about this in his own life:

¹And he said unto me, Son of man, stand upon thy feet, and I will speak unto thee. ²And the spirit entered into me when he spake unto me, and set me upon my feet, that I heard him that spake unto me. ³And he said unto me, Son of man, I send thee to the children of Israel, to a rebellious nation that hath rebelled against me: they and their fathers have transgressed against me, even unto this very day. ⁴For they are impudent children and stiffhearted. I do send thee unto them; and thou shalt say unto them, *Thus saith the Lord GOD.* (Ezek 2:1-4, KJV)

This is the proper arrangement: the Spirit enters the prophet and enables him to speak the very Word of God: “Thus saith the Lord...”

Well, *some* kind of spirit seems to have entered Hananiah, and he opened his mouth and spoke, “Thus said the Lord...” only it was not the Holy Spirit who entered the man. It seems to have been the spirit of the times, the spirit of

nationalism or enthusiasm. He spoke with confidence, he might even have spoken with a good conscience. But for all that, he spoke falsely, and he caused the people to put trust in a lie.

In the New Testament, Jesus himself issues a warning that every preacher should note and take to heart:

⁴²And whosoever shall offend one of these little ones that believe in me, it is better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he were cast into the sea. (Mark 9:42, KJV)

This is no joke. What happened to Hananiah? The punishment specified in Deuteronomy fell upon the man:

²⁰But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in my name which I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that same prophet shall die.' (Deuteronomy 18:20, RSV)

And Hananiah died within two months.

So I lament the man. He might have been sincere, but he seems to have neglected the good advice Jeremiah gave him. Jeremiah urged him to measure his prophecy against the prophetic tradition as a whole. For one thing, the true prophet calls people to repentance. Not only does he preach against sin, but also he calls for repentance. But Jeremiah notes that the preaching of Hananiah is somehow unlike that of most prophets. It is out of step with them:

⁷Yet hear now this word which 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 to pass, then it will be known that the Lord has truly sent the prophet." (Jeremiah 18:7, RSV)

Hananiah's preaching does not call for repentance. He suggests that all is well in Zion. He encourages people onwards in the direction they already want to go, and he is willing to do so in direct contradiction to what the Lord had really said through Jeremiah. Hananiah, then, takes the God-appointed yoke off the shoulders of Jeremiah and breaks it. This seems to have so rattled Jeremiah that he has nothing to say at the moment and simply goes away. But when the word

of the Lord does come to Jeremiah, he speaks it to Hananiah, thereby prophesying that man's death. He dies, and I feel sorry for him, a deluded preacher.

FOR THE PEOPLE

But now there is a second lament: a lament for the people who were misled by the prophet. This story raises up a serious matter for a Christian congregation: It is possible that the congregation is being misled by its pastor.

St. Paul certainly believed that to be true in various churches to which he wrote. Perhaps his most striking words about that are in the first chapter of his letter to the Galatians:

⁶I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and turning to a different gospel -- ⁷not that there is another gospel, but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. ⁸But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed. ⁹As we have said before, so now I say again, If any one is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed. (Galatians 1:6-9, RSV)

I must live by this discipline too. If you judge me, for example, to have departed from the Word of God, then you must call me to repent. And if I persist in saying "Thus saith the Lord..." when the Lord certainly has not said any such thing, then you must turn me out. Too much is at stake. The lives and souls of our people are at stake. The future of our children, our marriages, our health—all is at stake. For when Hananiah breaks the wooden yoke, the Lord places an iron yoke upon us, and that is worse.

Consider things from the point of view of the Lutheran Confessions. The fundamental definition of the "church" in the Augsburg Confession places the holy Gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ at the very heart of things:

[VII. Concerning the Church]

It is also taught that at all times there must be and remain one holy, Christian church. It is the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is purely preached and the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel.

When the Augsburg Confession emphasizes that the gospel is to be “purely preached,” it thereby acknowledges that there can be pseudo-gospel. Indeed, if this were not so, there would have been no need for the Lutheran Reformation in the first place. But there is always a need for Reformation. There is always the need to stand on guard against impure proclamation of the Gospel.

Someday I mean to speak of the place of our congregation, Immanuel Lutheran Church, within the ELCA. If I should seem the Lord’s will, I mean to speak of the place of Immanuel within the whirl of voices represented by the ELCA. Our national church is a large one, and as it is with any large church, so with ours: the voices can be chaotic and contrary. In any age, it is possible for a congregation and for individual Christians to find themselves between Jeremiah and Hananiah. Those two prophets were saying contrary things. They cannot *both* be right. The people are going to have to choose, and they should pray for God’s guidance in that.

Again, much is a stake. When a false prophet throws off the wooden yoke of God, he thereby exposes the people to the iron yoke, and that is bad.

HOPE

Finally, I end with a cry of hope. My hope is based on the resurrection of Jesus Christ. He has promised that not even the gates of hell shall prevail against the church (Matthew 16:18). Hananiahs might get things wrong. They might mislead folks and cause suffering along the way. But truth shall triumph, error shall fade, and salvation belongs not to Hananiah, but to the true Saviour, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.