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Settling Down in Babylon

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

In this morning's sermon, we continue with that passionate prophet Jeremiah. We looked at him last week and noticed his fervor for the Lord. Nothing lukewarm about that man! We continue with Jeremiah this morning.

My text for this sermon is our First Lesson, Jeremiah 28. If you should like a title for my sermon, I call it "Settling Down in Babylon." You might think that a bad thing to do -- to settle down in Babylon. After all, Babylon is a foreign land. It is not the Promised Land. It is not the land of destiny for Israel. Nonetheless, that is the drift of this morning's First Lesson: If the Lord brings us to Babylon, then we should settle down there. We should pray for that foreign land, though we would rather not be there. Above all, wherever we might be and in whatever condition of life we might find ourselves, we should seek for and cherish the Word of the God. Let me tell you the story I call "Settling Down in Babylon."

## The setting

In this morning's reading, Jeremiah has listened to the preaching of a rival prophet, Hananiah, and has wished him well, saying:

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. (Jeremiah 28:6, RSV)

So, Jeremiah prays that Hananiah's prophecy will be true. But now that word "yet" comes along. Jeremiah says this to Hananiah:

<sup>7</sup>Yet hear now this word which I speak in your hearing and in the hearing of all the people. <sup>8</sup>The prophets who preceded you and me from ancient times prophesied war, famine, and pestilence against many countries and great kingdoms. <sup>9</sup>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. (Jeremiah 28:7-9, RSV)

That little conjunction "yet" is a word signaling a counter movement. It is a word signifying caution. It is a word that suggests that Hananiah's prophecy might

not be true. That is, it is a word that suggests that Hananiah might be a *false* prophet speaking in the name of the Lord what the Lord has in fact *not* spoken.

Let me review the history some. Just a few verses before this morning's reading, Hananiah had confronted Jeremiah in the Temple of the Lord and had publically contradicted the preaching of Jeremiah. This confrontation between Hananiah and Jeremiah took place between two waves of disaster that overtook Judah.<sup>1</sup> The first disaster took place in 597 BC, when King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon captured Jerusalem and deported part of her population, along with sacred vessels from the Temple. The second wave took place ten years later, and was much worse. That was 587 BC, when the armies of Babylon devastated the city, destroyed the Temple, and took most of the inhabitants into exile in Babylon.

Our particular story takes place midway between these two disasters. Jeremiah has been urging his land, Judah, and other nearby lands to yield themselves before the might of Babylon. In his dramatic way, Jeremiah had fashioned himself a wooden yoke and went around wearing it on his shoulders, preaching that Judah should patiently bear the yoke of Babylon.

But the prophet Hananiah confronts Jeremiah in the Temple, tells him that he is wrong about bearing the yoke of Babylon, and, claiming the holy language of a prophet, speaks these words to Jeremiah:

<sup>2</sup>“*Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: I have broken the yoke of the king of Babylon.* <sup>3</sup>Within 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. <sup>4</sup>I will also bring back to this place Jeconiah the son of Jehoiakim, 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.”  
(Jeremiah 28:2-4, RSV)

So, Hananiah does this thing: In the name of the Lord he contradicts the preaching of Jeremiah.

Jeremiah gives his rather peaceful answer, praying that Hananiah's prophecy is true.

Then, Hananiah dramatizes his preaching by snatching the yoke from Jeremiah's neck and breaking it. It was a very striking contradiction of the true prophet, Jeremiah.

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<sup>1</sup> The year is 593 B.C., according to a footnote in the New Jerusalem Bible.

## Hananiah — a man of our age

Hananiah uses words that I, as a preacher, would tremble to use unless I was quite confident I was speaking the truth:

Thus says *the LORD of hosts*, the God of Israel:

But there is no hesitating or trembling for Hananiah. He forges right ahead, using the name of the Lord to support his preaching. He must either be a cynical man, who does not care one way or the other whether he is really speaking what God commands him to say, or he is a deluded man, who has somehow convinced himself that his own dreams and political analysis are the same as the Lord's. Either he is a cynical unbeliever or by his own personal fiat, he equates his view of things with the will of the Lord — as if they had to be the same thing.

Hananiah is the man of our age. He is the patron saint of liberal pastors and bishops. He is the one who with perfect confidence departs from the Bible and the church's traditional interpretation of the Bible and contradicts the two thousand year old teaching of the church on such things as abortion, goddess worship, and moral relativism. Hananiah does not flinch. He claims the name of the Lord for his new teaching. But, he might be wrong.

In the case of Hananiah, he was indeed wrong. And within a year, he was dead. Furthermore, his death was not by accident, but by the decree of the very Lord whose name Hananiah had invoked:

<sup>12</sup>Sometime after the prophet Hananiah had broken the yoke from the neck of the prophet Jeremiah, the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah: <sup>13</sup>Go, tell Hananiah, Thus says the LORD: You have broken wooden bars only to forge iron bars in place of them! <sup>14</sup>For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: I have put an iron yoke on the neck of all these nations so that they may serve King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, and they shall indeed serve him; I have even given him the wild animals. <sup>15</sup>And the prophet Jeremiah said to the prophet Hananiah, "Listen, Hananiah, the LORD has not sent you, and you made this people trust in a lie. <sup>16</sup>Therefore thus says the LORD: I am going to send you off the face of the earth. Within this year you will be dead, because you have spoken rebellion against the LORD." <sup>17</sup>In that same year, in the seventh month, the prophet Hananiah died. (Jeremiah 28:12-17, NRSV)

What is the Second Commandment? Our Catechism students know the answer to that, I am quite sure, because they just took their major exam on the Ten Commandments and so far they have all gotten the Second Commandment right:

You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.

In Luther's *Large Catechism*, he warns Christians against using the name of the Lord to prop up a lie, which is indeed a horrible thing — to mislead and rip off our neighbor by promising to do something in the name of the Lord, but then not doing it. So that is awful. But in Martin Luther's mind, there is an even greater evil when it comes to taking the name of God in vain. That is when preachers claim "Thus saith the Lord," when the Lord has not said so:

The greatest abuse, however, occurs in spiritual matters, which pertain to the conscience, when false preachers arise and peddle their lying nonsense as the Word of God. (Martin Luther, *The Large Catechism*, Tappert edition.)

Dear God, please save your ministers from that: from peddling our lying nonsense as the Word of God. Teach us to so cherish the Word of God that we truly fear the millstone being fastened to our necks and being drowned in the depths of the sea (Matthew 18:6). Even more, let us fear that the souls of anyone entrusted to us should be lost because we preached our own lying nonsense and called it the Word of God!

Hananiah has said that the Lord would break the yoke of Babylonian within two years. It was a lie. It was Hananiah's lying nonsense.

## The Jews must settle down in Babylon

Let's now turn to a more positive subject: Jeremiah's counsel to the people of Judah, especially to the people held in Babylonian captivity. Jeremiah writes to them and encourages them to do what my sermon title says: they are to settle down in Babylon. Jeremiah tells them that they will not be there for two years, but rather for seventy years. They will see their children born there. They will see their grandchildren born there. Furthermore Jeremiah urges them to make those seventy years to be *good years*.

Listen, then, to the words of Jeremiah to the Jews exiled to Babylon:

<sup>4</sup>Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: <sup>5</sup>Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. <sup>6</sup>Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. <sup>7</sup>But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. <sup>8</sup>For thus

says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let your prophets and your diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams which they dream, <sup>9</sup>for it is a lie which they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the LORD. <sup>10</sup>For thus says the LORD: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfil to you my promise and bring you back to this place. <sup>11</sup>For I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. (Jeremiah 29:4-11, RSV)

In that far-off land, the Jews might indeed long to be back home. Who could blame them for that? Who could blame them for hanging their harps on the willow trees and wondering “How shall we sing the Lord’s songs in a foreign land?” (Psalm 137) But however sad they might be, Jeremiah asks them to pick themselves up, do not yield to despair, but rather to start life anew in this foreign land. Indeed, they are to do the very best of things: they are to marry and have children. They are to seek the welfare of the foreign city where they live and to pray to the Lord of Israel on behalf of the land of their captivity. They are to persevere in goodness and they are to believe that God has not abandoned them, but rather has his good plans for them — plans for peace and not for evil, “to give you a future and a hope.”

## **And we must settle down in Babylon**

Let us be encouraged by Jeremiah. Let us consider his advice to the Jewish captives and make it our own. Let us think to ourselves such thoughts as these:

A change in my circumstances does not mean that God loves me less. Exile from home does not mean that God has forgotten me. Even a fall into defeat and uncertainty, when all the good I have tried to do so far seems suddenly to be undone... none of these things need ruin life for me. Rather, I mean to settle down here in Babylon and build myself a good life in this strange land. For I know that nothing can separate me from the love of God in Christ Jesus, and that his plans for me are plans for good and not for evil, that I might have hope and have a future.

You live your life, let us say. The years pass by, and suddenly you look up, as it were, and it dawns on you that you are no longer young, no longer healthy. You were granted your threescore and ten years or maybe even more, but the scale has tilted dramatically, and now you find yourself dwelling in Babylon. This is not where you lived most of your life, but this is where you are living now.

Or you have labored faithfully in the field for many a year. And now suddenly, you find that a lawsuit has been brought against you for negligence. Years of good work as a doctor or a nurse or a financial adviser now have a shadow cast upon them. The insurance company settles, people tell you it is inevitable in a litigious society that you will be sued no matter how careful you are, and you believe it, yet find yourself discouraged. You are living in Babylon. This is not where you wanted to be, but it is your new home maybe for years to come.

Or you have tried to live an orderly financial life all your life. You have paid your bills on time, you have not lived extravagantly, but suddenly you find that, say, you need to replace the roof on your church and steeple, and it is going to cost an awful lot of money. This, many of you will recognize, is not some random example, but a reality facing our congregation, Immanuel. We are worshiping here in the undercroft for the happy reason that construction is beginning on our slate roof. It is a necessary project and one we are trying to do well. It will be a gift we will give to future generations here at Immanuel, that they should not have to worry about their roof for a long time to come. But this roof looks like it is going to take every penny in sight. Our Church Treasurer, dear Michele Michaelis, has already given a financial analysis to our Board of Trustees, alerting us that we might have to cut \$50,000 from next year's budget. But there is not a lot of fat in our existing budget, so cutting \$50,000 is going to change our circumstances. It is going to cast us into Babylon, far away from home where we have been comfortable. How long will we be there? Seventy years? I don't know. But I do know that even in Babylon the Lord will be us and that our duty is to make the best of things there, pray for Babylon, and wait for the good plans of the Lord to manifest themselves for us.

Babylon is everywhere. If we live long enough, we seem to end up there. A man and woman live in holy marriage for fifty years. They have loved each other for so long they can no longer imagine life without each other. But now one of them must learn, for their beloved has died. Now the surviving one lives in Babylon.

"We have here no lasting city," the Bible says (Hebrews 13:14). Good times seem never to last forever. So, we have no lasting city. But thanks be to God, the Bible is able to go on to a hope that transcends these up-and-down times:

<sup>14</sup>For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city *which is to come*. (Hebrews 13:13, RSV)

For now, we might dwell in Babylon, but a better city is coming. This I firmly believe, for Jesus Christ will make it so. What remains to us is to live well in Babylon, if we should find ourselves there, and try to make Babylon a good place too, for that town also belongs to Jesus, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.