

Pentecost 4 – Proper 8 – Year A – 2020

“Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward;”

That line from the gospel links to our reading from Jeremiah this morning because of its treatment of the role of prophet. Jeremiah is speaking to the people between the time the Babylonians initially attacked them and the utter devastation that occurred some 10 years later. In the preceding chapters, God has spoken through Jeremiah that God himself has placed King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon over Judah and many other nations. Jeremiah gives this message to the people and puts on a yoke at God's direction, telling the people “But any nation that will bring its neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon and serve him, I will leave on its own land, says the LORD, to till it and live there.” There is another prophet in the picture, however – Hananiah – who comes to the same assembly and says, “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.” In other words, God will fix it. Everything will be fine. The people should resist the Babylonians, and everything will be restored in a couple of years. The people are torn between the two messages – one that sounds much better than the other. And then comes the passage we heard this morning. Jeremiah says he *wishes* that Hananiah's words were true: “Amen! May the Lord do so; may the Lord *fulfill* the words that you have prophesied...” But then he goes on to say that earlier prophets told of tragedy afflicting many peoples... which came to pass. He tells the people that they will know if Hananiah is speaking truth, speaking God's words, if the words of that prophet come true....and if you read the “rest of the story,” you find that peace does not come. Babylon destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple, and thus began the Babylonian exile.

One lesson to learn from this reading is that we must distinguish, among the many voices we hear in this day, not just between those that are true and those that are not, but between which path is right for *this moment*. As Charles Aaron writes in his commentary this week, “In some contemporary situations, Hananiah's advice to resist is the more faithful response. In other situations, Jeremiah's counsel of acceptance becomes the word from the Lord. Jeremiah and Hananiah set those choices before us.”ⁱ

The choices are *always* set before us. When is the time to act, and when is the time to wait? This week Laurel, Mississippi mayor Johnny Magee signed an executive order removing the state’s flag – which contains the Confederate flag within it – from all city-owned buildings. As he did so, the black mayor said with tears, “I have lived through some things with this flag and as they told Dr. King to wait. Time for waiting is over.”

It does seem as if we’ve come to a pivotal point in the world today. Issues of justice – concerning how we respond or don’t respond to the COVID crisis, or the environmental crisis, or respecting the dignity of each and all persons regardless of skin color or national origin or any other signifier we use to separate people into groups and make them other – have been brought to the forefront. How do we distinguish between demonstrations and riots? Between nay-sayers and soothsayers? Which is the prophet to whom we should listen? Which prophet should we welcome?

We can only look to the Gospel for guidance here. For the past three weeks we’ve been hearing Jesus calling his disciples, sending them out to carry out his mission – to cure the sick, bring good news to the poor, cast out demons, raise the dead, and warning them of the kinds of responses they will get and the divisions that will come if they carry out this mission. The mission Jesus gave those disciples and us is pretty clear and straightforward. The people of Judah were looking to the prophets for an answer as to how they should respond to the Babylonian king – and they had two different messages. We essentially have one message in the Gospel: care for the poor, cure the sick, preach the Good news of God present with us, cast out evil when we see it, raise the dead. These are the values of the gospel against which we should judge *every* message.

And today we heard Jesus talk about welcoming. Whoever welcomes a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward. As with all those warnings we heard last week about what might be in store for those who follow the gospel, this doesn’t sound too wonderful! The prophets were not often rewarded well. But perhaps the point is that if we are truly welcoming another – a prophet, a righteous person, or simply offering a cup of water to a stranger – we will receive the reward they have, or put in another way – we will receive what they are carrying. Another spin on that is that if I want to welcome you, I need to be willing to welcome what you bring with you.

New Testament scholar Stanley Saunders puts it this way: “These acts of welcoming come at a cost that surpasses food, water, and shelter. They bind those who offer welcome integrally with those who are welcomed. These acts are not ‘one off’ events, but constitute the defining feature of the mission, generating the social settings where God’s way is articulated, discerned, and either accepted or rejected.”ⁱⁱ What I hear Saunders saying is that “welcoming” is an ongoing way of being – where I will encounter God, and become more able to discern the way of God, and then choose to follow it or not.

But perhaps what has given me another perspective on welcoming is COVID-19. COVID-19 has taught us something. What we carry – knowingly or unknowingly – is catching. We can pass on to others something we are carrying around, without our ever knowing it. If someone welcomes us into their personal space – especially if we are not wearing masks – it’s very likely that we will pass on to them whatever we are carrying, and they will pass on to us what *they* are carrying. The hope here is that we are carrying is life-giving.

When someone lets us into their space - If we are carrying the values of the gospel – care for the poor, the outcasts, the good news of the presence of God – that comes with us. If we are carrying the virus of hatred or ill-will, we will transmit that instead.

Jesus said, “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.” Our hymn today speaks of *all* being welcome – but that is true only if we can welcome what comes with the stranger – their culture, their differences, their “otherness” – and see there the same face of Christ that we bear. “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.”

Amen.

[Jeremiah 28:5-9](#)

[Psalm 89:1-4,15-18](#)

[Romans 6:12-23](#)

[Matthew 10:40-42](#)

ⁱ Aaron, Charles. https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4501

ⁱⁱ Saunders, Stanley. https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2134