

July 2, 2023
Pentecost 5
Jeremiah 28:5-9

“To Tell the Truth”

“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.”

“Will the real John Smith please stand up?”

This was the climactic question asked at the conclusion of each episode of *To Tell the Truth*, a classic television panel show in which four celebrity panelists are presented with three contestants and must identify which is the “central character” whose unusual occupation or experience has been read aloud by the show’s moderator. When the panelists question the contestants, the two imposters may lie whereas the “central character” must tell the truth. After questioning is complete, each member of the panel votes on which of the challengers he or she believes to be the central character. Once the votes have been cast, the host asks the question for which everyone has been waiting: *“Will the real [person’s name] please stand up?”* After some brief playful feinting and false starts among the three challengers, the central character finally stands up, often to the surprise of both the panel and the audience. The two imposters reveal their real names and their actual occupations. Prize money is rewarded and divided among all three of the challengers, based on the number of incorrect votes receive by the imposters. *To Tell the Truth* has remained so popular since its debut in 1956 that it has been revived on many occasions, including a recent run on the ABC Network that concluded in 2002.

While trying to guess who among the three contestants on this game show the real person was and who was the imposter was fun, it is another matter when we are confronted with people who pretend to be someone they are not, often with very nefarious purposes. We are often contacted by people who claim to be government officials, corporate representatives, and even long-lost family members, all seeking to defraud us and lead us down paths that can get us into serious trouble. There have been numerous scams in which we are confronted by individuals who want us to believe that they have our best interests in heart, only to discover that they are the embodiment of “wolves in sheep’s clothing.” In an age of advanced technology, we have been introduced to such new phrases as “deep fakes,” *“a video of a person in which their face or body has been digitally altered so that they appear to be someone else, typically used maliciously or to spread false information.”* (dictionary.com).

We need to take extreme care so that we are not duped by imposters who try to pass them off as someone who they are not; we need to be careful that we find those increasingly rare persons who dedicate their lives *“to tell the truth.”*

The issue of dealing with imposters who try to pass themselves off as someone who they are not, often with the intent of abusing or defrauding others, was an issue with which the people of God had to deal throughout history. Being confronted with a situation in which they had to discern which among two prophets was telling the truth is at the heart of today’s first lesson from the book of the prophet Jeremiah, one of the major prophets of the Old Testament. Jeremiah’s story begins with his call from God at a young age to *“go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you ... See today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.”* (Jeremiah 1:7-10). Jeremiah’s extensive ministry was directed at the people of God who had been straying from being faithful to God’s commands and walking in the paths of the Lord who set them apart as a holy nation through whom *“all the families of the earth shall be blessed”* (Genesis 12:3). Jeremiah’s prophetic pronouncements would begin with the phrase *“thus says the LORD,”* making it clear that the message he was proclaiming to the people was not his own words or opinions but the Word of *“the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery”* (Exodus 20:2).

But while the call of prophets like Jeremiah was from the LORD God of Israel and was intended to proclaim God’s Word to God’s people, at the same time false prophets arose also claiming to be commissioned by God with a message for the people of Israel. One of these false prophets who created a challenge for Jeremiah was Hananiah from Gibeon, who appears during a critical period in the history of Judah a message he claimed to be from God that conflicted with the message that Jeremiah was proclaiming. It was during the reign of King Zedekiah that Jeremiah had counseled the king not to join a proposed rebellion against Babylonia:

- “Now I have given all these lands into the hand of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, my servant, and I have given him even the wild animals of the field to serve him. All the nations shall serve him and his son and his grandson, until the time of his own land comes; then many nations and great kings shall make him their slave.” – 27:6-7.

Jeremiah cautions Zedekiah that any proposed rebellion would be totally contrary to the purpose of God. But shortly after he makes this proclamation, the prophet Hananiah appears with a conflicting message which is set in direct and visible

opposition to the words and actions of Jeremiah. Hananiah assures the king that the yoke of the king of Babylon would be broken and that the exiles in Babylon would be back home within two years. He reassures the people and priests that all the looted temple vessels will be returned, and that worship in the Temple will soon return to normal. According to Hananiah's proclamation, Babylon is only a temporary nuisance, not an enduring threat:

- “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.” – 28:2-4.

Hananiah's word (which he claims to be the word of “*the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel*”) assumes that the Lord will preserve Zion and the people from any serious harm, that the unpleasant events of the present were merely a reprimand and not a serious reality of punishment and judgment. He illustrates his prophecy of the breaking of the yoke of the king of Babylon by taking “*the yoke from the neck of the prophet Jeremiah, and broke it*” (28:10), after which Hananiah declares to the people that “*thus says the LORD: This is how I will break the yoke of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon from the neck of all the nations within two years*” (28:11). Hananiah's proclamation sounds like Isaiah from a century before when the prophet spoke of the yoke and rod being shattered: “*For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian*” (Isaiah 9:4). The threat the Hananiah poses to Jeremiah's proclamation is not because it is blatantly contradictory but because it sounds like the legitimate words of a prophet who speaks in the name of “*the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel.*”

Between Hananiah's oracle and his symbolic act of breaking the yoke that Jeremiah wore, “*a symbolic act to defeat the vision of Jeremiah, to claim the following and thus the appropriate actions of his audience*” (Patrick D. Miller), Jeremiah speaks. Contrary to his usual unqualified denunciation of the oracle of the prophets who claim to be speaking a word of peace from the Lord but who are false prophets, Jeremiah appears to be open to this positive oracle of deliverance. In the presence of “*the priests and all the people who were standing in the house of the LORD*” (28:5), Jeremiah's opening words of response to Hananiah are “*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” (28:6). Jeremiah wishes that Hananiah’s words would come true, for “*prophets may frequently deliver bad news, but they do not delight in the suffering of their people*” (Tyler Mayfield). But then Jeremiah adds a sharp “nevertheless” as he challenges Hananiah’s hopeful words on two grounds, both of which belong to the criteria for assessing the truthfulness of prophetic utterances: “*But listen now to this word that I speak in your hearing and in the hearing of all the people.*” (28:7). One of these criteria is the prophetic tradition, the experience of the community in the past with the words of the prophets. While words of deliverance were prophesied in the past, the greater part of prophetic proclamations in the pre-exilic period is one of announcements of judgement: “*The prophets who preceded you and me from ancient times prophesied war, famine, and pestilence against many countries and great kingdoms.*” (28:8). Jeremiah is likely thinking of prophets such as Amos, Micah, and Isaiah; these prophets delivered oracles of judgment against the people, calling them back to the Lord during times of national crisis:

- “Alas for you who desire the day of the LORD! Why do you want the day of the LORD? It is darkness, nor light; as if someone fled from a lion and was met by a bear; or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall and was bitten by a snake. Is not the day of the LORD darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness in it?” – Amos 5:18-20.
- “On that day, says the LORD, I will cut off your horses from among you and will destroy your chariots; and I will cut off the cities of your land and throw down all your strongholds; and I will cut of sorceries from your hand, and you shall have no more soothsayers ... and in anger I will execute vengeance on the nations that did not obey.” – Micah 5:10-15.
- “The LORD rises to argue his case; he stands to judge the peoples. The LORD enters into judgment with the elders and princes of his people; it is you who have devoured the vineyard; the spoil of the poor is in your houses. What do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor? Says the Lord God of hosts.” – Isaiah 3:13-15.

While prophets also deliver oracles of hope and promise to the people, “*in light of that history, one should be very suspicious of easy words of deliverance.*” (Miller). The second ground on which Jeremiah responds to Hananiah is the test of prophecy, the issue of what happens: “*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.*” (28:9). A teaching in the book of Deuteronomy sets out the fundamental criterion for distinguishing between true and false prophecy:

- “You may say to yourself, ‘How can we recognize a word that the LORD has not spoken?’ If a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD but the thing does not take place to prove true, it is a word that the LORD has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; do not be frightened by it.” – Deuteronomy 18:21-22.

The word of the prophet truly sent by the Lord is the word that will come to pass. The conflict of advice given to the king, the fact that the true word of God had been given through Jeremiah but then refuted by another prophet, and the resultant confusion all explained the disaster that befell Jerusalem in 587 BC, when the Babylonians conquered the city and drove many of its inhabitants into exile. Both prophets – Hananiah and Jeremiah – used typical prophetic language such as “thus says the LORD.” Both claim the name of God. Hananiah may have the upper hand because he appears to be known by the crowd; no one seems to question his authority. But by showing that Hananiah had categorically presented another perspective on the political situation in which Judah was placed and that his prophetic assertions accorded well with popular patriotic sentiments, the Word of God itself had been contradicted: *“The word of prophecy, when it is truly the word of God, is thereby shown to be wholly opposed to the notion of fatalism”* (R.E. Clements). The confrontation between Hananiah and Jeremiah pointed to the essential spiritual inwardness and theological inquiry of God’s message: inner conformity to the nature of God that called for understanding the tradition of Israel’s faith as the true guide to the power of God effective in history.

The problem that must have perplexed the people of this time was how could one tell a true prophet from a false one? Hananiah spoke in the form of prophetic address (*“Thus says the LORD”*), and there is nothing to suggest that he did not do so sincerely. Jeremiah even indicated that he wished that he could believe what Hananiah had said (*“may the LORD fulfill the words you have prophesied”* – 28:6). But the result was that one prophetic word contradicted another prophetic word, to the puzzlement of the hearers: *“How do we know the difference? What’s the test to determine whether a prophet is foretelling the truth or not?”* (Mayfield). Jeremiah does not call Hananiah a liar but points out that Hananiah’s words were not in the tradition of the great prophets of the past and that the event would have to show who was telling the truth. Even when Hananiah snatched the yoke from his neck and broke it, Jeremiah did not respond in anger but quietly went on his way. It was only later, when a new revelation came to him, that Jeremiah denounced Hananiah in the name of the LORD:

- “Go, tell Hananiah, thus says the LORD: you have broken wooden bars only to forge iron bars in place of them! 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. 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. 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.’” – 28:13-16.

While Hananiah did indeed die *“in that same year, in the seventh month”* (28:17), the issue of discerning which prophet was proclaiming the true Word of God versus prophets who claimed to speak in God’s name but whose message was not the authentic Word of the Lord would plague God’s people throughout both Testaments and throughout the history of the Church of Jesus Christ. This early history of the Lutheran Church in North America included problems faced by young congregations when persons dressed as pastors arrived claiming to have credentials to practice ordained ministry, who were later discovered to be imposers whose purpose was to defraud unsuspecting and trusting parishioners. In our media-saturated world, the airwaves and internet are filled with voices claiming to speak the Word of God, whose messages are often wildly different and contradictory. The issue for us is the same issue that confronted the people who were struggling to discern whether Hananiah or Jeremiah was a true prophet: who was the one whose purpose was “to tell the truth,” And who was the imposter?

- “Jeremiah’s citation of the prophets of the past suggests that if we keep reading and listening to the prophetic voices of Scripture, who are for us the authentic word of the Lord, we may have the resources at hand for discerning the voices of those who are ‘truly sent’ in our own time. There are no guarantees, no criteria of credibility that one can slip in to claim truth over falsehood. The only resource one has is attentive listening to the prophets of old to attune oneself for listening to the truth.” – Miller.

Our Lord Jesus Christ gives us a guide as to how we may discern whether a message being proclaimed to us is the authentic Word of God. In the Gospel of John, Jesus teaches his followers that *“if you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”* (John 8:31-32). It is by committing ourselves to an abiding relationship with the Word of God that is ours in our Lord Jesus Christ, in the Gospel message proclaimed by his people, and by

the Word of God that is ours in Holy Scripture that we can know the teller of truth from the disseminator of falsehoods:

- “Let us then consider it certain and firmly established that the soul can do without anything except the Word of God and that where the Word of God is missing there is no help at all for the soul. If it has the Word of God, it is rich and lacks nothing since it is the Word of life, truth, light, peace, righteousness, salvation, joy, liberty, wisdom, power, grace, glory, and of every incalculable blessing.” – Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*.

The work of so-called prophets like Hananiah did not end with his death; it continues through any voice claiming to speak the word of truth when it is in fact the voice of an imposter. We know the true Word of God because it is ours in the Word of God that is incarnate in our Lord Jesus Christ, and because through Baptism we have entered an abiding relationship with that Word so that we know the one who is telling us the truth – the truth that sets us free.

Amen.