



## **Singing God's love in the midst of despair**

Sermon for Sunday, June 28, 2020 (4th Sunday After Pentecost, Proper 8A, Track 2)

Mtr. Tracy J. Wells Miller, Rector

"Your love, O Lord, for ever will I sing;  
from age to age my mouth will proclaim your faithfulness." (Psalm 89:1)

Things have been intense lately.

For the past four weeks, we've been hearing about racism and historic injustices in worship and meetings and discussing it on Realm, our online church forum. It's not an easy topic, and it's highlighted some of the differences and disagreements in perspective within our congregation.

We've also been physically separated from one another for over three months now, and just as we begin to think about the possibility of gathering in person again, we're starting to see a spike in COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations. "Covid stress" is adding an extra layer of intensity to everything happening in our lives and in the world.

William Brosend, professor of homiletics at the School of Theology at Sewanee, the University of the South, says that when preachers sit down to craft their sermons, they should always ask themselves this question:

What do the people of God need to hear from these texts on this occasion?

The pandemic marches on, with cases on the rise.

Racism and police brutality have been thrust into the spotlight again, this time with

- 1 **Y**our love, O LORD, for ever will I sing; \*  
from age to age my mouth will proclaim your faithfulness.
- 2 For I am persuaded that your love is established for ever; \*  
you have set your faithfulness firmly in the heavens.
- 3 "I have made a covenant with my chosen one; \*  
I have sworn an oath to David my servant:
- 4 I will establish your line for ever, \*  
and preserve your throne for all generations."



The Episcopal Church of  
St. John the Baptist

- 15 Happy are the people who know the festal shout! \*  
they walk, O LORD, in the light of your presence.
- 16 They rejoice daily in your Name; \*  
they are jubilant in your righteousness.
- 17 For you are the glory of their strength, \*  
and by your favor our might is exalted.
- 18 Truly, the LORD is our ruler; \*  
the Holy One of Israel is our King.

## Commentary on Jeremiah 28:5-9

[Charles L. Aaron, Jr.](#)

Charles L. Aaron Jr. is Associate Professor of Supervised Ministry at Perkins School of Theology, SMU, in Dallas, Texas. He is the author of *The Bible's Foundation: An Introduction to the Pentateuch*, and co-editor (with Alyce M. McKenzie) of *Parental Guidance Advised: Adult Preaching from the Old Testament*, both with Chalice Press.

We should not oversimplify the scene in this passage. To our after-the-fact eyes, it looks straightforward.

One prophet, Jeremiah, tells the people the truth. The other prophet, Hananiah, tells the people what they want to hear. One appears to us as the brave preacher who endures scorn for speaking the word the Lord gave him. The other appears to us as the soothing charlatan over whom everybody fawns because he offers near-term hope.

We cannot know what went on in Hananiah's head. Did he honestly believe that he preached a word from God? Did he succumb to the temptation to preach the popular word? Did he convince himself that the voice in his own head was the word from God? We preachers can judge Hananiah only if we have never softened the message we knew we should preach. If we have lapped up the praise of our people for a sermon that tapped danced around the sermon we knew we should preach, we cannot judge Hananiah.

What gives the passage its vital importance for contemporary communities of faith comes as one looks at those who listened to both Hananiah and Jeremiah. Each prophet interprets the events of history differently. The scene happens after the initial attack on Jerusalem in 597 BCE by the Babylonians, but before the devastation of 587. The people do not know what to think or to do. Hananiah offers a word that sounds like hope. He advises resistance, trusting that Judah can shake off the attack of the Babylonians. The sense of defeat will last only two years.



The contemporary reader can see the appeal of the message. Doesn't trust in God mean that God will take our side? Won't God fight for us against our enemies? How many sermons on the David and Goliath passage have we heard in which every member of the congregation stands in David's shoes? God will bring victory over the many Goliaths in the lives of the audience. Don't such sermons bring a pat on the back for the preacher? Hananiah gives the people a plan and inspires them to resist the encroachment of the Babylonians. His message sounds strong and energizing.

Jeremiah tells the people to accept what has happened. He tells them to prepare for a long time of exile. Verse 6 indicates he does not want this outcome, but he thinks he brings a realistic word. His famous words in the next chapter sound expectant to our ears, "Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce" (verse 5). Those words sound like planning for future prosperity to us. They sound like taking responsibility and embracing life. To the original audience, they sounded like resignation. When we hear them, we should add to the words "build houses" the phrase "in the last place you want to live." Jeremiah counseled accepting defeat and making the best of it. He carried out the sign act of wearing a yoke to symbolize the relationship between Judah and Babylon.

Jeremiah believed that God would act again, but not soon. He taught the people to make the best of a bad situation, but not to try to get out of it. That message does not get the blood pumping. That message sounds passive and even weak. It sounds like co-dependency. We now know, of course, that Jeremiah, not Hananiah, spoke the word that came from the Lord.

Even with our hindsight about this particular passage in the life of Judah, we do not always know which prophet speaks the truth today. Jeremiah sets out the criteria for true prophecy: which prophet accurately predicts what will happen? The problem comes in realizing that the people couldn't just simply wait to see what would happen in two years. They needed to decide whose advice to follow. Do they practice acceptance, and wait for God to act later? Do they plan for resistance? They had to make a choice now.

If we change the context from war and invasion to injustice, we can see the dilemma Jeremiah sets up for us. Martin Luther King, Jr. entitled one of his books, *Why We Can't Wait*. The title referred to the advice of comfortable people who told King and the rest of the civil rights warriors that racial justice would happen in time. The advice reflected the complacent stance that King and others were trying to rush too fast. Jeremiah counsels waiting, settling in uncomfortably to Babylonian power. Simply accepting and adjusting to the status quo can come at too high a price. Sometimes the Christian response means not accepting the status quo, not acquiescing to events as they stand.

Yet, in certain situations, learning to build a house in the last place you want to live requires courage and faith. A single parent raising children after the death of a spouse, the adjustment to a



handicapping condition that will never respond to treatment, a sudden drop in income that market forces will not fix.

Jeremiah's stance can give the preacher material to discuss the times when acceptance becomes the faithful response to circumstances. Recognizing those circumstances requires wisdom, discernment, and ignoring the voice in our head that tells us what we want to hear. When do we settle in and accept what life has given us? When do we resist and throw off the shackles of the life we don't want or deserve?

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. We do not read a simple passage in this text.