

Jeremiah 28:1-4;15-18
June 29, 2014
The Power of Words
Rev. Adrienne Carr

When I was in Seminary, I took a course on the Book of Jeremiah and fell in love with the old grouch. In my enthusiasm, I must have underlined about two thirds of the Book. I would come into the staff meetings of the church where I was doing my field work filled with my latest insights and a driving need to share those nuggets of wisdom with the minister. He was a strong believer in social justice who had 'been there and done that,' and fortunately he had the patience and courtesy not to roll his eyes at my neophyte zeal.

My fascination with Jeremiah was influenced by the moment in time when I was both a seminarian and a professional advocate for justice. It was a time when refugees from El Salvador and Guatemala streamed into the states seeking sanctuary from death squads. It was a time of high levels of poverty and homelessness. It was the time of the beginning of AIDS. That is why I did so much underlining. Jeremiah spoke to me and I did my best to listen.

Today, the suggested Lectionary reading is complicated. Chapter 27, sets up a confrontation that comes to a head in Chapter 28, and as you heard, is difficult reading. Jeremiah used symbols as well as words to teach what the King did not want to hear. God told Jeremiah to construct a yoke and place it on his shoulders and to write to all of the kings in the geographical area, telling them to accept the yoke of Babylon under King Nebuchadnezzar in order to avoid war, famine and death. Jeremiah also told this to the King of Judah, saying "Don't listen to the words of the prophets who are telling you not to serve the King of Babylon for they are lying to you and you will perish."

The Prophet Hananiah was one of those who prophesized the downfall of Babylon and the return of those who had been carried into exile. His words were sweet with optimism and the king and his court listened with delight because those words were what they wanted to hear. Babylon would disappear and all would be well in Jerusalem. Jeremiah, wearing his yoke and probably looked upon as a spoiler told the king that it would be great if it all came true but it would not. And it did not. Babylon conquered Judah, destroyed Jerusalem and brought the people into an exile that would not end until Babylon was conquered in turn by Persia.

It is often easier to believe a lie than the truth because we want to believe in the lie. I would love to lose 30 pounds and it takes strength of will for me to ignore those ads describing the miracle pill that melts fat off so quickly that in 3 weeks I am model thin. I just want to believe ads like that. Pop a pill, eat some yogurt, buy an expensive car because you deserve it. It isn't limited to commercials. I was channel surfing a few weeks ago and stopped in awe at the brilliant performance of a particularly sleazy TV preacher who proclaimed God's promise that those who, using their credit card, made a \$1000 dollar donation within the hour, would receive \$100,000 within the year. His message was not that money is the root of all evil but the root of all blessing. The only word I can think of to adequately describe this guy's unmitigated gall is Chutzpah that I cannot translate from Hebrew but sounds absolutely appropriate.

So there are lies that at some deep level we know are untrue but we really want to be true but there are other lies that we become drawn into out of fear or ignorance. I received an e-mail from a friend recently. Apparently this e-mail had gone, as they say, viral. And the reason is fear. The e-mail described a situation on an airline involving a group of Muslims who, the writer, a Mr. Petruna said, got on the plane, refused to sit down, intimidated the staff and went down the aisle pointing thumb and forefinger at passengers like guns. The writer described himself as a hero, ordering them to sit. The plane went back to the gate and the muslims were removed.

Let's stop here for a moment and ask ourselves why it is so easy for so many people to believe such a story without question. We are scarred by 9/11. Even now, when I see videos or pictures, I catch my breath at the horror. It is hard to dissociate that dreadful morning when a small number of Al Qaeda extremists who, in sacrificing themselves and over 3000 other people to a perverted understanding of God, wounded our national psyche to such a degree that we still carry some fear that is fanned by both truth and fiction. Thus it is hard to trust our own ability to uncover reality when our pre-disposition is to believe the fantasy.

But I could not let the story go and pulled up a fact checker program. This is what I found. Mr. Petruna was not even on that flight. And, yes, among a group of foreign nationals on the plane, there was a non-compliant passenger who did not speak English and when asked by the flight attendant to turn off the phone, appeared to ignore her. For that reason the plane returned to the gate and the passenger, with a companion, was met by a TSA agent who explained the need to turn off the phone. They got back on the plane and went on to Atlanta. See for yourself by going to factcheck.org. I have the website available in the Narthex. The website is: <http://www.factcheck.org/2009/12/what-happened-on-flight-297/>.

The voices of false prophets are everywhere and in every time. They give one tribe or one nation or one culture the right to dominate, control or destroy another. It is sadly ironic that throughout our country we have named rivers, roads and even states after the Native tribes that our European culture all but eliminated at the urging of those voices. It is even sadder that despite all wars that have been fought in all the nations, humanity has not learned to spurn the advice of those false prophets. And today, in our country, those voices breed distrust and distrust breeds fear; not only of Muslims but also of those others who don't fit in to our "way of life;" the poor, the homeless, the cast offs of society.

Those voices are not only on the nightly news or in newspaper letters to the editor; they are a part of each of us, telling us what we want to hear or what we don't want to hear. Those voices are learned vocabulary embedded in our psyches. For some, the voices tell us that we are privileged and deserve to have recognition. We are encouraged by those voices to demand our rights: the right to be first in line; the right to go directly into an appointment without having to wait like everyone else; the right to tell everyone how to think and act because we are more knowledgeable than anyone else and are convinced that we are the center of the universe. Those voices give permission for bullying, maybe from childhood on. The false prophet voices wound us as we obey their suggestions. Our actions stimulated by those voices can lead us into embittered loneliness, as in our self-centeredness, we drive away any possibility of friendship, leaving us with only distant acquaintances and remote colleagues.

Equally insidious are those voices, perhaps echoes from childhood, that tell us we are too thin, too fat, too tall, too short, too plain, too awkward. They tell us we do not have the intelligence to succeed, the ability to fit in or the talent to sing or dance or write or dream. We come to believe that we don't matter and enclose ourselves in cocoons of fear. Listening to those lying voices leaves us with withered souls and dangerous bouts of depression.

Those micro and macro false prophets influence each of us and all of us, to some degree, in the decisions we make at home, on the job, in the polling place. They influence our relationships with friends and strangers. They influence the way we raise our children and the world view that we present to them. They put up barriers within us that affect both logical thinking and compassionate action.

Pope Francis, a man of practical wisdom has said:

If one has the answers to all the questions - that is the proof that God is not with him. It means that he is a false prophet using religion for himself. The great leaders of the people of God, like Moses, have always left room for doubt. You must leave room for the Lord, not for our certainties; we must be humble.¹

Despite my illustrations, I don't think that many of us are consciously false prophets or the acceptors of the words of false prophets. We simply want to lead ethical lives in comfort and safety, and pass those values on to our children. We don't want war or hunger or homelessness for ourselves or for future generations. But we need room, as Pope Francis says, for doubt. If the words all seem too easy about any issue, leave room for doubt. Ask yourself questions. Ask others questions. If you don't feel comfortable in your heart about a piece of news referring to a Muslim or an African American or any minority, fact check the item.

If you take scripture seriously, answer for yourself the questions, "Who is my neighbor?" and "What is the greatest commandment?" It is time for us to still those voices that divide and hear the voices that unite. This is not about nationalism. It is about recognition that we are one family, the family of God. This family is far from perfect. After thousands of years, we are still learning how to create peace and stability for all. There is no room for the lies of false prophets. We are having a hard enough time dealing with the difficult truth that we don't get along. Hiding from that truth will not change it. So, beginning from where we are, let us commit to seeing all the one another who inhabit our little part of the world as friends we have not yet met; as distant cousins within the family.

God grant us the eyes to see, the ears to hear and the minds to accept the wonder of our human family in all its glory and struggles. Help us to remember the original blessing, "God saw all that had been created and behold, it was very good."

¹ <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/keywords/prophet.html#rLecpzXGHR6i4vOV.99>