

June 28, 2020
These Days of Exile
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Jeremiah 28:5-9

⁵ Then the prophet Jeremiah spoke to the prophet Hananiah in the presence of the priests and all the people who were standing in the house of the Lord; ⁶ and the prophet Jeremiah said, "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. ⁷ But listen now to this word that I speak in your hearing and in the hearing of all the people. ⁸ The prophets who preceded you and me from ancient times prophesied war, famine, and pestilence against many countries and great kingdoms. ⁹ 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."

Hi friends! This is Scout. Scout's my girl. She's a six-year-old golden retriever. Dogs don't get any sweeter than a golden retriever in its prime. Scout is a good dog. Or, shall I say, Scout knows what it means to be a good dog. A good dog stays on the driveway or in the yard, even when she's not on her 40-foot chain. A good dog does not sneak around the house when I'm not looking and run off to wallow in the septic field.



She will be good dog for days on end ... until one day, she smells something on the air and she's gone. Usually only for twenty minutes or so. But it takes thirty more to give her a bath. And then another thirty for me to take a bath and start the laundry. She knows what's going to happen after one of her breakouts. It's back on the chain for her for days and days. She cries, but she accepts her punishment.

I can't trust her, but I do love her, because she's my girl. I'd put her in every sermon if I could. But today I can make it work, because in today's text, the prophets talk a lot about

yokes. Not egg yolks. This kind of yoke. The kind that keeps animals tied to something else, like Scout's chain for when she chooses not to be a good girl. The people of Judah and Israel hadn't been good like God wanted for a long, long time.

That's what I'll be talking about today, right after we pray. *We want to be good, O God, most of the time and when we don't want to be good, we want you not to mind. But that isn't how anything works in this world. May we so thrive in the joy that comes with being good, that it becomes the deepest, widest, highest desire of our hearts. Amen.*

King Josiah was the next-to-the-last king of Judah before Babylon wiped them the rest of the way out. He was probably also the best king of the lot of last kings. He did try to make some reforms. Then he died and his son Zedekiah came to power. Of course, every prophet rushed to the palace to get his two cents in as soon as possible, before King Zedekiah picked who his favorite prophets were going to be. It didn't really matter, because Judah didn't last very much longer and everyone got deported. But Jeremiah was one of the first prophets there, and chapter 27 of Jeremiah is his long two-cents sermon – more like \$2. The gist is this: his word from God is that the whole earth belongs to God, including all the wild animals. Therefore, God can choose whomever God pleases to run things.

No doubt Zedekiah thought Jeremiah was going to say, “*You, boss! God has chosen you to run things.*” But he didn't. Instead, Jeremiah says that God has chosen Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, to run the world. You can imagine how that went over. And the whole time he's preaching this \$2 sermon, Jeremiah's holding a yoke in his hands and drilling down on the point that Judah will either submit to the yoke of Babylon or the one God is going to visit on them through the people of Babylon, through the armies of Babylon, through the reign of Nebuchadnezzar. With the sword, with famine, and with pestilence they will suffer the consequences. War, famine, and pestilence are the three he mentions.

And just in case King Zedekiah was not already convinced, Jeremiah goes on to say, *God also told me to tell you not to listen to any other prophets but me. Not prophets, diviners, dreamers, soothsayers, or sorcerers. Only me.* Which is bold talk, even for Jeremiah. Only not really, because he was crazy. Or, more likely, depressed. See if you can find a copy of Rembrandt's portrait of him – a portrait of misery. Who would want to be Jeremiah? War, famine, and pestilence are a hard sell in any administration – amen? Amen!

And of course King Zedekiah didn't do what Jeremiah said. No sooner was Jeremiah off the dais than along came the next prophet – Hananiah, a one-hit wonder of the Bible. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann says the quickest way to spot a false prophet is to listen for the one saying what kings and presidents most want to hear.

That's Hananiah. His sermon went something like this: *Babylon is defeated. The people and the property already in exile are on their way back to Jerusalem. Within two years Jerusalem will be back to normal. There is nothing, nothing to worry about. All will be well; all will be well; all manner of things shall be well.* Whose sermon do you think the king liked most? Whose do you think the people liked most? "*Good times are just around the corner*" or the one which said "*surrender and submission are our only hope!*"?

Jeremiah's response to Hananiah's response is our text this morning.

It begins with "Amen!" And, as I understood the Commentary, if we knew Hebrew we'd laugh at that very first word. We would hear Jeremiah's sarcasm, "*You wish!*" we might hear, *You wish! Don't we all wish God would make this situation disappear and life go back to how it was. But listen to what I am telling you, you Hananiah, you King Zedekiah, you Judah: God has never sent a prophet to tell us everything is fine just the way it is, that there's nothing to worry about, that there is nothing required of us. When the word of the prophet who preaches this comes true, everyone will know what prophets God has sent.*

He also said one more thing the lectionary never includes. He says directly to Hananiah, *Oh, and you will be dead in a year.* And Hananiah was. It's not critical to our story, but too good a detail to skip since we are in the neighborhood. Not every day was a bad day to be Jeremiah. But I feel for Hananiah, I do. I've preached that same sermon, more or less. That "*God will not abandon God's people, no matter what*" sermon. That word is all over the Bible. It's a word we like a lot.

Thing is, the word Jeremiah preaches is also all over the Bible. Times when God put up with and put up with people's disobedience and Israel's corruption – until God didn't: Adam and Eve, remember; that bunch in the desert, forever fussing and complaining; that one time God just sent out poisonous snakes to bite and kill them; then King David, remember – the very height of Israel's power and glory – that one brief shining moment she held every inch of dirt promised to Abraham.

But then, like Scout off her chain, David caught the scent of something, And stood on that roof sniffing the air, deciding what kind of man and what kind of king he would be next. He knew it was wrong. He knew it would defile himself and his country. He didn't need it; he had plenty of it already. And yet, he took it anyway. He raped a woman and he killed her husband and he straight-faced lied about it to God and to his people. And from that moment, from King David to King Zedekiah, anyone who can read can trace the continual descent of Israel from glory to destruction.

Only the prophets could see it at the time, of course. 500 years of pleading with the kings to reform their ways. If it was a contest, we'd have to call Jeremiah the winner. Sword and famine and pestilence. Occupation. Deportation. Exile. His litany is terrible, and spot on.

Yet, Hananiah was right in ways he himself did not figure. Babylon was defeated. He was right about that. Mostly it was his timing that was off, 70 years more or less. And then the remnant of exiles did return to Jerusalem, along with a wagonload or two of treasures and the story composed by the priests in exile, sitting and sifting their history through the sieve of that exile to find the essential truth of their lives and their life together in God. *No wonder we're in exile under a yoke we do not like. We spent 400 years resisting a yoke under which would have thrived.*

They finally understood. And of course, this is but a sliver of what they understood. This is but a sliver of the prophets we have to read. There is no book of Hananiah, amen? What they understood is that as much as they hated hearing prophets preach about war and famine and pestilence, what they hated even more was prophets preaching submission. They hated being told they had to do what they didn't feel like doing, what they didn't want to do. It just burned them up. So they simply turned their ears to different prophets who told them what they wanted to hear.

Guess who didn't care who they listened to? Babylon. Babylon just kept being Babylon until it got eaten by a bigger Babylon named Persia. And the Jews who didn't die in Judah died in exile, most of them still kicking their feet about the unfairness of it all.

But some didn't. Some submitted and lamented and repented and grew into the lives, the life together with God, that God had been offering since Sinai. That's the best treasure they brought back. The gift of covenant. A relationship with God that is not made of this world and cannot be taken from us by any threat this world might muster. Not war or famine or pestilence, not disease or quarantine or a failed economy. This covenant, this relationship with God, is breathed to life and kept alive by fidelity and obedience. What is fidelity? Trusting God for what we need. Trusting that all we need is what God gives.

Obedience, organizing our thoughts, words, and deeds according to what God desires of us: justice, kindness, and humility. We are living in a kind of exile now, aren't we? Exile from the lives we had six months ago, from lives we very much want back. And maybe, like those kings and citizens in Judah, we'd very much like someone with authority to tell us what we want is on the way, that this crisis is almost over. It won't be me. For all I know this could go on for years. For all I know that old way is never coming back. It would hardly be the first time, for our country, for humanity.

Here is what the Word tells me: Every day we breathe upon this earth is another day spent in exile, a day we have not yet known what it really means to be in the presence of the Lord. And time spent pining and wishing for days gone by or different days to come, whatever freedom or happiness we think those days hold, is wasted time, time that we might have been brave and faithful and full of joy at how God is with us here and now,

showing us how to love and be loved in the world as it is NOW. Not yesterday and not tomorrow – NOW! in a world aching to be loved.

We can kick our feet all we want, friends, and when we've worn ourselves completely out, right here's where we'll be, with the same choice God's people have faced over and over again, to resist these days, or months or years, of exile by being mad about it or denying it is even real or pretending it really isn't all that big a deal, not really. Or we can submit ourselves to the yoke of covenant, wherein we may just discover God trying to teach us something important, something we have had all wrong for a long time and didn't even know it. Or maybe God is about to do a brand new thing and has in mind for us to be part of it, if we can only let go of our death grip on the past and the future.

Wouldn't it be something to be part of that, friends? Wouldn't it though? Let's pray.