

June 28, 2020
Lectionary 13, Year A
Jeremiah 28:5-9

The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
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Emmanuel, Norwood, MA
Zoom Worship

Not Back to Normal

When I made the decision back in April to postpone my sabbatical, I comforted myself with some very unrealistic ideas. I thought, well, maybe, if the high school actually does the summer musical this year, Abigail and Julia will be able to participate in it. I thought, well, maybe, if Calumet opens this summer, the boys will be able to spend their week at camp after all.

Of course, now it seems ridiculous that I thought that those kinds of things might be happening this summer, but, remember, this was early April. We were only weeks or a month into the lockdown when I was thinking like this, with some optimism about the future. Back in early April, schools hadn't even officially been closed for the year.

I knew that things were bad, right then, but I didn't have a clear sense of how long they would stay that way.

Maybe I was just comforting myself with magical thinking. To be honest, my magical thinking has continued.

A couple of weeks ago, Sophie Donovan told me her good news. She was going to spend the summer working at Calumet. Calumet is open this summer after all. Just the family camp, and with many restrictions in place in terms social distancing, mask wearing, and non-existent food service, but still, it's open.

So, I imagined that we could go to Calumet for a few days this summer. We could take our tent and our kids, and our dog, and set up at a campsite in a quiet campground, look at the stars, wave at our camping neighbors from

a distance, breathe fresh mountain air, swim in a mountain lake, and literally and figuratively just catch our breath for a few days.

Then we read the details of what such a trip would involve. Social distancing, check, no problem. Mask wearing when in buildings or off campsites. No problem, we're used to that now. No food service, fine, we could cook our own food at our campsite. No use of the playground equipment, not an issue. You could only come if your camper has its own bathroom as the bathhouses wouldn't be opening.

Now, that's a problem. You might have heard me say, "tent". We don't have a camper and obviously, our tent doesn't have plumbing.

So, there's just one more thing that won't be happening this summer, one more way in which this summer just can't get close to anything that approaches "normal."

In our Old Testament reading for today we have a tale of two prophets. The prophet Jeremiah and the prophet Hananiah.

We've talked about Jeremiah before. He is known as "the weeping prophet". He was called to be a prophet when he was very young.

In his call story, which is found in the first chapter of the book of Jeremiah, he responds to God's call with these words, "Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy" (Jeremiah 1:6)

But God responded to him saying:

"Do not say, "I am only a boy";
for you shall go to all to whom I send you,
and you shall speak whatever I command you.

Do not be afraid of them,
for I am with you to deliver you,” (Jeremiah 1:7-8)

Then the Lord touched Jeremiah’s mouth and gave him words. Words to speak over nations and kingdoms, words to speak to kings and rulers, to religious leaders, and other prophets, words of judgment and destruction, words that would pull the mighty from their thrones.

Jeremiah’s prophetic ministry, the words that he was compelled to speak were a burden to him and a burden to those who listened to him. But they were true and he was obedient to God. He spoke and he acted in accordance to messages that the Lord gave him to share.

The encounter between Jeremiah and Hananiah that we find in today’s tale of two prophets from chapter 28 of Jeremiah occurred because of something that the Lord commanded Jeremiah to do in chapter 27.

Thus said the Lord to Jeremiah: Make yourself a yoke of straps and bars, and put them on your neck (Jeremiah 27:2).

Jeremiah was told to make a yoke, like one worn by oxen working in the fields and to wear it around the royal court in Jerusalem, and in the temple, as he spoke to foreign emissaries, to political leaders, to religious leaders, and even to the king of Israel, King Zedekiah himself. This is what he was to say:

Bring your necks under the yoke of the king of Babylon, and serve him and his people, and live. Why should you and your people die by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence, as the LORD has spoken concerning any nation that will not serve the king of Babylon? Do not listen to the words of the prophets who are telling you not to serve the king of

Babylon, for they are prophesying a lie to you. I have not sent them, says the LORD, but they are prophesying falsely in my name, with the result that I will drive you out and you will perish, you and the prophets who are prophesying to you. (Jeremiah 27:12b-15)

What Zedekiah had been doing was gathering emissaries from the lands surrounding Judah and trying to make alliances with them against the Babylonians. Their idea was that they could stand up to the power and might of the Babylonians and, with their joint powers, turn back the Babylonian forces, and even make the Babylonians give back the treasure that they had taken from Temple in Jerusalem.

Obviously, the word that Jeremiah had from the Lord was that this was the wrong thing to do. Rather, he preached that they should submit themselves to the power of the Babylonians, recognizing that God had decided that the Babylonians would be a tool of correction against God's own people, for the way in which they had forgotten God and God's law. And the message was that if they did not submit to the Babylonians, then worse would come, they would be carried far from their land, they would suffer exile.

But the prophet Hananiah had a different message. In the verses immediately preceding today's reading, Hananiah confronted Jeremiah with his message. Hananiah said,

“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” (Jeremiah 28:2-4).

Shortly thereafter, Hananiah broke the yoke that Jeremiah was wearing as a symbol that the power of the king of Babylon would be broken by God. Hananiah said, “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” (Jeremiah 28:11b).

So, now we get to our reading for today. Jeremiah had prophesied submission to the Babylonians, a submission that would last for generations.

Hananiah had preached resistance and that restoration would come in a couple of years.

Jeremiah acknowledged that that sounded like good news. He said in our reading for today, in response to Hananiah’s prophecy, “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.”

But then he said, “But listen now to this word that I speak in your hearing and in the hearing of all the people. The prophets who preceded you and me from ancient times prophesied war, famine, and pestilence against many countries and great kingdoms. 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” (Jeremiah 28:6b-9).

The word that Hananiah spoke of a quick and easy victory against the Babylonians, of a restoration of the Temple treasures and of the people

who had been taken into exile during the first Babylonian attack sounded like good news, great news, in fact. Things getting back to normal. The king of Judah restored to his power, the temple treasure returned, the leaders of the people, who had been taken to Babylon restored to their homeland and their positions.

As good as that all sounded, Jeremiah believed, in fact, he knew that that was not how it was going to be. Things were not going back to normal. Not anytime soon. Not for that generation. Maybe not ever. Maybe things would never be exactly the same again.

But he had no proof. Just the word that had come to him from the Lord who had touched his lips and who had given him words to speak.

Perhaps if you've never had normal taken away from you, it's hard to understand how tempting it is to indulge in magical thinking. The idea that you can just get back to the way things were, that you can fall back into old patterns of living, patterns that might have been comfortable, habits that have been engrained by long familiarity.

As a society, we are in that place right now. That place where it is so tempting to imagine that right now, today, we can just get back to normal. Just because we want to.

We see that in people who are rebelling against social distancing and mask wearing. We see it in people demanding freedoms that harm their neighbors. We see it in people who think only of their own risk in their behaviors and attitudes, and not about the risk to others. We see it in people who seek to prevent people who are different from them from living their lives fully, with the same rights as the majority.

We are living in a time when we just can't listen to Hananiah. We are living in a time when "back to normal" is just not what's called for.

We see that, we know that when it comes to the pandemic.

We see that, we know that, when it comes to race relations in our country.

We can see that normal is deadly. It's deadly in terms of the virus. It's deadly for people of color in our country.

So, we don't know when normal is coming, and we know, and in some ways, we pray, that the old normal never comes back. We don't know what normal will look like next, because we know it can't be just exactly the same as it always has been. Not when it's killing people, not when it's killing the earth itself.

We know from long experience in this country and as people of faith, that what is "normal" can change when it needs to change. Sometimes that change comes slowly, over the course of years and with generations and sometimes change comes from one moment to the next, but we know that for the sake of the wellbeing of those who are suffering, for the sake of life for all people, some things must change and a new normal must emerge.

We just are living in a hard and challenging place, where we don't know what that could look like, and we don't know when it will happen.

Of course, we can't make a one to one parallel between our time, a time of pandemic and social change, to the time and experiences of Jeremiah and Hananiah.

Their time and their experiences were different. They were facing different challenges and different threats. They identified God's activity in

those challenges and threats differently than we might. But we can still gain some wisdom from what they went through and how they responded to it.

Hananiah chose the path of getting back to normal as quickly as possible. Back to the old normal, the way things used to be, what he might have identified as the good old days, believing that that was what God wanted, things the same as they always had been, with a community neither shaped nor changed, not reformed or renewed.

But Jeremiah had a different vision, he had a different word from the Lord, that God was working through the events of history to reshape God's people. Jeremiah recognized that it would take time for the transformation that God was working toward to take place.

Perhaps that is the kind of vision that we are called to have. The vision to see God working through world events, not maliciously causing pain and suffering, but working through it to turn us back to each other in love and compassion, ironically, using a time of distance, a time when we are all wearing masks for us truly to see each other, for us truly to listen to each other's stories, for us to reach out to each other with compassion, for us to ask the question, if things can't be the way that they used to be, how can they be better? What can change for the better?

I've heard some people celebrating that because of this time of pandemic that we're living through people are being much more careful about washing their hands. And that's great.

But when my thinking is less magical and both more realistic and more hopeful, I hope and I wonder and I pray about what deeper changes we will have cause to celebrate, when the new normal emerges from this time

when so much of the ways that things used to be, just a few months ago, are going through this time of trial. How will we as people, as a community, be shaped and reformed to be more just, to be more compassionate, to be wiser, to be readier to hear other people's stories, other people's voices?

That is our call during this time, to seek not to go backwards, in the way of Hananiah, but to move forwards, even though the prophets might be warning us, that the way is long, and sometimes hard. Still we are called to go forward, and see where our God can take us. Amen.