

Sermon for July 20, 2014 – 6th Sunday after Pentecost

Jeremiah 28:5-9 (AAT)

Theme: To whom should we listen?

- 1) *The man whose message is consistent with all of Scripture and*
- 2) *The man whose message comes true.*

⁵ *The prophet Jeremiah answered the prophet Hananiah before the priests and all the people standing in the LORD's temple.* ⁶ *"Yes, so be it!" the prophet said. "May the LORD do this! May the LORD carry out what you prophesied by bringing back the vessels of the LORD's temple and all the exiles from Babylon to this place.* ⁷ *But please listen to what I say for you and all the people to hear.* ⁸ *Long ago prophets, who were before me and you, prophesied against many countries and great kingdoms about war, calamity, and the plague.* ⁹ *But the prophet who prophesied about peace was recognized to be the prophet the LORD truly sent only if what the prophet said came true."*

Introduction

How do we know that our Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod has the correct interpretation of Scripture? Doesn't every church claim to follow God's Word and back their teachings up with Bible passages?

Maybe all doctrine is merely a matter of interpretation. Who's to say anyone is really wrong? Maybe all that matters is finding a church that speaks to you, that you feel comfortable in. Many people in the world think this way.

Does it really matter whom you listen to on Sunday? And if it does, "**To whom shall we listen?**" With Jeremiah as our guide, let us learn to listen to: 1) *The man whose message is consistent with all of Scripture and* 2) *The man whose message comes true.*

Part One: The man whose message is consistent with all of Scripture

Jeremiah, whose name means "the one whom the LORD appointed," was a prophet in Judah at around 600 BC, right when Babylon was about to capture Jerusalem. For years, Judah strayed from the Lord and would not listen to His repeated calls to repent. Even now, after the Babylonians had captured Jerusalem, taken 10,000 of Judah's elite into exile and installed Zedekiah as a vassal king, the Jews still refused to take God's warning seriously that both the temple and Jerusalem would be destroyed.

Our text takes place in the year 593 BC. The Lord commanded Jeremiah to wear a wooden yoke in the temple to impress upon the people living in Jerusalem that they would remain under the yoke of the Babylonians because of their sin.

Another prophet enters the scene named Hananiah. After standing beside Jeremiah, he announces to all the people gathered in the temple: ² *"The LORD of armies, the God of Israel, says: 'I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon.* ³ *Within two years I will bring back to this place all the vessels of the LORD's temple that Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, got from this place and took to Babylon.* ⁴ *I will also bring back to this place Jeconiah, son of Jehoiakim king of Judah, with all the exiles of Judah who went to Babylon,' says the LORD, 'because I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon.'" (Jeremiah 28:2-4, AAT)*

What a wonderful prophecy! God would come to the aid of his people, just as he had in the past. The LORD would rescue his people, bring back everything that was taken, and even reinstate Judah's rightful king who was exiled to Babylon. Could this be true? A prophet is proclaiming it in the name of the LORD, so it must be true, right?

Listen to Jeremiah's response: ⁵ *The prophet Jeremiah answered the prophet Hananiah before the priests and all the people standing in the LORD's temple.* ⁶ *"Yes, so be it!" the prophet said. "May the LORD do this! May the LORD carry out what you prophesied by bringing back the vessels of the LORD's temple and all the exiles from Babylon to this place.*

Jeremiah loved Judah, so he could imagine no greater news than if Hananiah's words came true. Yes, Hananiah spoke a wonderful prophecy - one that would bring and relief to the entire nation.

But there was one glaring problem.

Jeremiah continues: ⁷ *But please listen to what I say for you and all the people to hear.* ⁸ *Long ago prophets, who were before me and you, prophesied against many countries and great kingdoms about war, calamity, and the plague.*

Hananiah's prophecy, as plausible and beautiful as it sounded, had this great error: it did not fit with the rest of what was prophesied. Even though Hananiah's prophecy relied on God's limitless grace and mercy powerfully demonstrated in Israel's history, it still stood in contradiction to everything the LORD had prophesied through Jeremiah and the other prophets before him. About 100 years earlier Isaiah had recorded a crystal clear prophecy that Babylon would carry out God's judgment on Judah because the people refused to repent of their idolatry and turn to Him. And, as the recent exile of king Jeconiah and the thousands with him proved, God was faithfully fulfilling his threats. Hananiah's prophecy, even though he claimed it was from the LORD, and seemed scripturally plausible, stood in direct contradiction to the Lord's other prophecies recorded in Scripture.

Let us fast forward to today. To whom should we listen? Many Christian churches make bold promises like Hananiah, but are they true? For example, the largest Christian Church in the world officially teaches:

"Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience—those too may achieve eternal salvation." (CCC, 847)

In other words, this Church says that you don't have to necessarily believe in Jesus to go to heaven, but just have pursued "God" as best you could.

Is this statement true? It sounds like a wonderful and comforting promise - especially in light of the billions of people on this earth who do not know or believe in Jesus - some of whom may be our own friends and family members. The theologians who wrote this promise will point to the fact that Jesus died for the sins of the whole world, and to passages like 1 Timothy 2:4, which clearly states that God *wants all people to be saved and to come to know the truth.*

But the problem is that this promise contradicts other clear passages of the Bible. First of all, if you look at this false promise carefully, it does not rely on Jesus for salvation, but on what a person does - his own works before God. This contradicts the Gospel itself! Secondly, while it is true that Jesus died for everyone's sins - even for those who do not believe in him - Jesus also says: *"I am the Way, the Truth, and the*

Life, . . . “No one comes to the Father except by Me. (John 14:6, AAT) The Scriptures are clear - faith in Jesus is absolutely necessary for salvation - as the Bible says: *No one else can save us, because in all the world there is only one name given us by which we must be saved.*” (Acts 4:12, AAT) Jesus died for all, but only those who believe in him will receive the benefit of his salvation. This is why he urgently calls those who know the Gospel to share it with others.

I could go on and speak about a lot of other false teachings infecting churches today - how things like homosexuality and abortion are often defended with Scripture passages. So how do we know who speaks the truth? Inevitably, Scripture itself will give the answer. False teaching, even when it is proclaimed in the LORD’s name and defended with Scripture passages, will always (in some way, shape or form) contradict other portions of Scripture.

This is why it is important for us to study the Scriptures, so that we may know what is true and what is not. False doctrine may sound harmless and appealing – as it did in the case of Hananiah’s false prophecy concerning Judah’s rescue - but in the end it always proves to be both dangerous and harmful.

Part Two: The man whose message comes true.

Jeremiah warns Hananiah: *the prophet who prophesied about peace was recognized to be the prophet the LORD truly sent only if what the prophet said came true.*”

There are two ways to find out if what a prophet says is true. The first is to search Scripture itself, as Isaiah says: ²⁰ *To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn. (Isaiah 8:20, NIV84).* The second way is to see whether or not the prophecy comes true - as Moses himself said: ²¹ *Perhaps you think of asking, ‘How can we tell what the LORD has not said?’* ²² *If a prophet speaks for the LORD, but it doesn’t happen or come true, then the LORD didn’t say it. (Deuteronomy 18:21-22, AAT)*

Hananiah’s prophecy was proven false. Less than 2 years after Hananiah’s prediction, Zedekiah led a rebellion against Babylon, and King Nebuchadnezzar responded by destroying Jerusalem, the temple, and by exiling almost every inhabitant of Judah to Babylon.

As the case of Hananiah demonstrates, we should only believe the prophet whose teachings come true. “But,” you may ask, “how does this truth apply today? No one really “prophesies” any more do they?”

Yes, preachers still prophesy. Even I prophesy - but not in the way you are probably thinking. If you were asked what the word “prophecy” means, you probably would say that it is a prediction of the future. While it is true that the word “prophecy” often means something like that, it also means something else: the proclamation of anything God has revealed to us.

Now, I think it is safe to say that none of us have received a direct vision from the LORD (at least not to my knowledge). But, through the Bible, God has revealed a lot to us; for example our need for salvation and how we receive it. He has told us the signs to expect before the end of the world and what will happen on that day. We know about the resurrection of the dead, the separation of believer and unbelievers, the destruction of the old earth and the creation of the new. We know God will send all who rejected him to hell and take those who believed in him to eternal paradise. God has revealed these true prophecies to us through Scripture, and when we share them with others, we become his prophets.

But what about all those modern theologians who say Christ is not coming or that there is no hell to fear? What about the pastors who point to your works for salvation instead of Christ - whose teaching might

match some, but not all, of Scripture? Well, aside from the fact that the Scriptures already reveal them as being false, time will also tell, as Jesus himself warns: *“Not everyone who calls Me ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter into the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who continues to do what My Father in heaven wants.* ²² *Many will say to Me on that Day, ‘Lord, Lord, didn’t we prophesy in Your name, drive out demons in Your name, and do many miracles in Your name?’* ²³ *Then I will tell them frankly, ‘I never knew you. Get away from Me, you who are so busy doing wrong.’ ”* (Matthew 7:21-23, AAT).

So, to whom should you listen? Which Church should you join? It would be easy for me to say: “stick with me, because I speak the truth,” but that really isn’t saying anything different than what any other pastor or evangelist says. So how can you determine if I or anyone else speaks the truth?

First of all the person who speaks the truth will not speak a message that contradicts the Bible. So compare what he says with all of Scripture - looking at proof passages in their proper context. To do this, we need to continually read and study the Bible.

In the end, though, God will reveal his truth. Do not believe the man who speaks presumptuously, whose predictions and prophecies do not always come true. He is a false prophet who misuses the name of the LORD. Rather study the Scriptures and you will know the truth. Then you won’t have to wonder whom you should listen to. You will already know because you will know the truth. Amen.