

**Sermon: Prophecy Peace**

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Jeremiah 28:5-9; Matthew 10:40-42**

No freemason ever built a cathedral by starting in the middle, without laying a foundation first. But that's what happens when the lectionary gives you a reading with no context, as it did today. So, here is a quick review of Jeremiah the book, chapter 27.

Jeremiah the prophet lived during a time of great political conflict and theological challenge for Jerusalem, Judah, and the entire Near East.

The central question was: What do we do about Babylon?

In 597 BCE, Babylon took over Jerusalem, deported many of the elite and wealthy, and took possession of the Temple treasure. King Nebuchadnezzar installed Zedekiah as a quasi-king in Jerusalem, mainly to act as a tribute collector. For Israel, it was a national catastrophe. The people were left to live in a ruined world, feeling dislocated and frustrated.

Early in chapter 27, God said, "It is I," who created everything "and I give it to whomsoever I please" (27:5). Everyone – not just Israel – lived under God's divine judgment. Jeremiah suggested that *everything* that goes on in the world is God's work, and isn't that a scary thought?

The Lord told Jeremiah: Make yourself a yoke of straps and bars and put it around your neck, to signify submission both to the will of God and to the political reality of Nebuchadnezzar, which, at this time, happened to parallel each other. The yoke must be worn, and it was unbreakable.

God also issued a warning: Those who recommend *resisting* Nebuchadnezzar – the prophets, diviners, dreamers, soothsayers, and sorcerers – are lying (27:9). "I have not sent them," said the Lord. And if you listen to them, the result will be death by the sword, famine, pestilence, and the destruction of Jerusalem, literally the destruction of peace and wholeness. Anything of value left in the city will be removed to Babylon.

And there they will stay, until that day when the Lord brings restoration. Babylon's domination is the judgment and will of God. Accept it and bear it.

It was also the will of God that all those who *submit* to Nebuchadnezzar shall live and remain on the land. The point, says the Lord, is to live, to survive. That's one thread found throughout both the Bible and history – in slavery, in exile, and even under oppression, the people must always endeavor to survive.

Serve Nebuchadnezzar and live, until that day when the Lord brings restoration and the “many nations and great kings shall make Nebuchadnezzar their slave” (27:7). Divine authority trumps military strength.

That's the gist of chapter 27, the deep background for today's reading. It reflects a very practical approach to dealing with the irresistible force of empire builders.

But how do you sell that in a world filled with conflict? How would the people of Afghanistan, Yemen, or Syria hear these words? It's human nature to take up arms against an invader. How do you tell people to stand down when there are foreign tanks rolling through their town center, or when an angry mob burns down your business?

Closer to home, how do you preach patience to those who suffer from mental illness or chronic pain or disease? How do you say, “Not yet” to starving children and their parents? Does saying “it's God's will” help those who suffer day in and day out? Who wants to hear that? Because it's not true. Human suffering is not God's will.

And that's where today's context-free reading comes in.

You may have heard the phrase, ‘Speaking truth to power.’ That's what's going on here. The prophet Hananiah challenges Jeremiah by prophesying impending peace and Jeremiah knows that that just ain't gonna happen. Not yet.

Because Nebuchadnezzar just isn't going to go away. But Hananiah said that the Lord of hosts had broken the yoke of Babylon and that within two years, all the treasure, all the exiles, would return.

Jeremiah said, “Amen! You know, I hope you're right. May the LORD fulfill your words.” *But*, he said, the true prophets of the past have all prophesied war, famine, and pestilence. Anybody can preach that and be right sooner or later. Just wait a while.

Afflictions were always just around the corner – from Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, and, on the near horizon, Persia – all these had marched through at some time or other, to conquer or just to get to someplace else to conquer.

Then there were the neighboring kingdoms to fend off – Canaanites, Philistines, Moabites, Edomites. You get the idea. There *is* no peace. To proclaim it is nearly impossible. Jeremiah said that when the word of the prophet proclaiming peace comes true, you will know the Lord has sent him, because only the Lord can bring true peace. That doesn't say much about humans and their ability to make and maintain peace.

Nations declare war. People fight them. War destroys lives and cultures and God says, "For what?" I created everything, said the Lord, and I won't have the Nebuchadnezzars of the world kill my people for no reason. But there is a price to pay for agreeing to live in covenant and then breaking the covenant, as Israel had.

Hananiah's intentions were most likely honorable but he and Jeremiah shared conflicting visions of God and what God wanted. Hananiah forgot that deliverance doesn't happen without repentance. God is faithful to the covenant and to the people, but so too do the people need to be faithful to God in return.

Jeremiah was deeply concerned with the political situation and he preached salvation coming after a long period of occupation. Jesus, also preaching in a time of oppression, this time by the Romans, was concerned with the fate of the individual.

Which brings us to Matthew.

Today's Gospel reading picks up where we left off last week, and it concludes a long discourse by Jesus in which he authorizes the disciples to go out and preach, cast out demons, heal the sick, and so on. He also warns them about the cost of discipleship, which is high; it is as much a yoke for us as the straps and bars were for Jeremiah.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that "costly grace confronts us as a gracious call to follow Jesus; it comes as a word of forgiveness to the broken spirit and the contrite heart. It is costly because it compels us to submit to the yoke of Christ and follow him; it is grace because Jesus says: 'My yoke is easy and my burden is light.'"<sup>1</sup>

Jesus is talking not just to the Twelve but to everyone who hears his words. This is another example of the radical hospitality so often shown by Jesus. Anyone can come to Jesus, and, through him, we discover a broad highway that leads to and from God.

Jesus is the prophet Jeremiah was waiting for. And we recall that it was John the Baptist who stood up, pointed at Jesus, and said, ‘That’s him! He’s the one!’

Jesus proclaimed peace and showed us how to achieve it, by each of us committing to making peace at the Communion table, to live in community at every social and economic level, and by our remembrance of the sacrifice made by God. That’s how we make God’s Kingdom here on earth as disciples together in Christ.

At some point in our lives, we will all come up against our own personal Nebuchadnezzar, whether it be in the form of crushing debt, joblessness, illness, grief, guilt, doubt – whatever it is. And when we’re in the grip of it, we can feel so lost and alone, adrift with nowhere to turn. That’s when Jeremiah and Jesus want us to recall the “promise of God’s presence in the midst of an *unredeemed* situation.”<sup>2</sup>

We are never truly alone. We are never truly abandoned. God’s faithful, steadfast love for us is always with us, giving us strength and hope.

We might all be carried off to a figurative Babylon and sojourn there for a time, but we also live in the hope that we will only be there until the day when the Lord will bring us up and restore us to this place. That is Jeremiah’s hope and ours, in Jesus Christ.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone Books, 1995), 45.

<sup>2</sup> Russell Pregeant, *Matthew* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004), 77.