

A GOD TOO SMALL

Jeremiah 27:1-11; 28:1-11
A Sermon by Robert E. Dunham
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The remarkable encounter between Jeremiah and the court prophet Hananiah that Katharine just read gives us a penetrating insight into the life of the nation of Judah in a time when the nation was threatened by a rising national power just beyond its borders. It is a showdown of sorts precisely at the height of an anxious, fearful time for the people of Judah. People are edgy, at odds with one another about what they ought to do, not unlike our own nation in these dark days, only here the threat is from sinister powers within. In Judah, nowhere does that tension become more palpable than in the battle of words between these two prophets.

Looking back, it is fair to say the issue at hand was the issue of true and false prophecy, and how one could distinguish one from the other. Two prophets called to discern the movement of God in a changing world scene. Two prophets with two *very* different messages. Now, we aren't unbiased about this prophetic conversation. From the beginning we're on Jeremiah's side; he is, after all, the one after whom the book is named. He's the protagonist here.

But today, imagine yourself in the middle of that ancient conversation as a bystander in Jerusalem. The talk in the public square has been increasingly shrill and frantic. The word is that the Babylonian army, under the dreaded King Nebuchadnezzar, is gathering at the border. The tensions are high. It is a most anxious time. At the very height of such suspense and anxiety Jeremiah steps forward to speak. Everyone knows who he is; he has been a vocal and constant critic of national policy and of corruption in the public life of Judah.

The crowd he prepares to address is decidedly Hebrew, proud people shaped by their heritage as God's chosen people. The crowd's patriotism is stirring like a flag in a storm, and people are goading one another to take up arms to defend their land from this foreign threat.

It is precisely then that Jeremiah rises to speak, this time with a visual aid in hand. He carries with him a heavy wooden yoke that he places upon his shoulders, as he begins to pace back and forth through the square. The crowd begins to take notice, and the din of conversation in the square dies down to a hush. Someone shouts, "What's with the yoke, crazy man?" And the crowd laughs. There is a mixture of fire and tears in Jeremiah's eyes as he wheels around and says, "This yoke is the yoke of the king of Babylon. It is the will of our God that we should surrender and submit to the Babylonians. Do so or be forewarned of the consequences."

Now, it's no surprise that there was no spontaneous ovation in response to Jeremiah's advice. Treason and outrage, the crowd yelled. We'll show you, Jeremiah!

We'll show you. You think you know God's will. Listen to a real prophet! Where's Hananiah, the official prophet of the court? Lets see what Hananiah has to say.

Thus invited into the fray, Hananiah casts a long and disdainful glance at Jeremiah. He stands glaring at his rival, until finally he walks over and puts his hand on the yoke around Jeremiah's neck, and says:

Thus says the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel: I have *broken* the yoke of the king of Babylon. Restoration of peace and prosperity is at hand.

Thunderous cheers from the crowd; then all eyes are back on Jeremiah. So, they ask, what do you say to that, Jeremiah? Jeremiah rubs his beard, but does not hesitate with his response:

Amen! [he says, his gaze fixed on Hananiah.] May the Lord do so! May the Lord make the words that you have spoken come true. *But* hear now this word.... The prophets who preceded you and me from ancient times prophesied war, famine and pestilence against many nations and great kingdoms. As for the prophet who prophesies peace, only when the word of that prophet comes to pass will it truly be known that the Lord has sent that prophet.

In short, says Jeremiah, "just you wait and see who's speaking the truth."

Now, earlier I said that the major issue here is true and false prophecy, and how one can distinguish one from the other. Here the battle lines are clearly drawn between fiery old Jeremiah and popular Hananiah. A friend of mine says he used to refer to the latter as "Norman Vincent Hananiah," because of his unflinching optimism and positive thinking. But that may be unfair to Hananiah. Anyway, as this confrontation sharpens, one characteristic difference between true and false prophets emerges rather clearly.

Now, before I go any further I need to note that that false prophets were not bad guys. As Biblical scholar Jim Sanders has noted, they were not off-brand theologians. They cited the same history as the true prophets. They even employed the same style, but they reached different conclusions. In this case, the results are something like this: first, Hananiah:

The Lord our God, who brought us out of the land of Egypt, guided us through the wilderness, and brought us into the promised land, is *fully capable of keeping us here*. God doesn't fool around. When God makes a covenant, he keeps it. Trust and obey.

So Hananiah. Now Jeremiah:

The Lord our God, who brought us out of the land of Egypt, guided us through the wilderness, and brought us into the promised land, is *fully capable of taking us right back out of this land*.

You see? The same traditions and the same authority. Yet opposite conclusions. What's the difference?

The difference, Sanders argues, is theological. And it hinges on a critical choice in interpreting the tradition. All of the prophets, true and false, believed in the doctrines of redemption and providence. That is to say, they believed that God had providentially delivered them from slavery and made them into a nation by divine power. All prophets, true and false, cited the same saving activity of God in their nation's past. The difference is that the *true* prophet put those doctrines of redemption and providence within the larger context of the doctrine of *creation*. And so the true prophet would say:

Yes, God redeemed us.
 Yes, God brought us out of the land of Egypt.
 Yes, God sustained us in the wilderness.
 But it is the God of *the whole earth* who did that,
 and our God is the God of other peoples, too!

Thus, Jeremiah could stand in the courtyard in Jerusalem and speak in God's behalf, saying:

It is I who by my great power and my outstretched arm have made the earth. And I give it to whomever it pleases me to give it to. Now I have given all these lands into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, *my servant!*

Friends, Hananiah wouldn't have been caught dead calling a heathen king like Nebuchadnezzar "God's servant." But that's precisely the difference! Sanders said that was the difference not only between Jeremiah and Hananiah, but between *all* true and false prophets. And it is a world of difference. Hananiah could not, would not see the God of Abraham as the God of all peoples. In short, Hananiah would not *monotheize*.¹ Hananiah and the other false prophets broke the very first of all the commandments, which is "monotheize!" Have no other gods! Their God was too small. They failed to see that the God they called their own was the God of the whole earth.

The false prophets had orthodox theology. The false prophets had charisma. The false prophets spoke encouraging words in times of uncertainty and fear. The false prophets did everything we think is right. But they did not monotheize.² To monotheize is to rely and call upon God as the Creator of all that is – not the private God of one small segment of creation, but the God of all nations and all people. Only within such a theology could Jeremiah think of a heathen king like Nebuchadnezzar as God's servant.

¹ I have long been indebted to James Sanders and to a presentation he made at the 1976 Princeton Theological Seminary Summer Institute, for his insight into the difference between true and false prophets in this Biblical story.

² This paragraph paraphrases Sanders.

It is little wonder that Jeremiah became so unpopular. Not with us, because we have the benefit of knowing subsequent history. We know he was the one who told the truth. Society always tends to honor its dead prophets and revile and destroy its living ones. And so, I am fairly comfortable in saying that, had I been in Jerusalem that day, well, I might well have sided with Hananiah. I mean, Jeremiah calling Nebuchadnezzar God's servant... goodness, today he might be talking about... well, I don't want to think about it.

True prophets are sometimes hard to hear because they speak words we'd rather not hear; they speak of an omnipotent God of the whole creation, when we're more comfortable with *our* God. Our peril today is not really so different from theirs who heard Jeremiah speak; many Americans and more than a few of their leaders seem to want to domesticate God or reduce God to a kind of partisan guarantor of their own cultural status quo. To claim God for any partisan or tribal purpose is blasphemy. To think that God is somehow our God alone is to violate what the Biblical prophets affirm, and indeed is to subscribe to polytheism.

True prophets arise to warn us of that danger. They point us toward a larger view of the world and the God who made it, toward an understanding of all persons of all stations and nations as children of God, and thus as our sisters and brothers. They teach us to seek the truth and to work justice for those who have been treated unfairly. One God...one world. That is the message of Jeremiah. The one God embraces all of God's children – those who play in relatively peaceful neighborhoods of Bronxville, say, or Chautauqua or Cooperstown, those who dart warily in the war-torn streets of Kabul or Addis Ababa or Aleppo, *and* those migrant children who are huddle fearfully, confined by our government to desert detention tents. The one God is present with us in our formal worship here this morning and earlier today was also graciously present with those who gathered barefoot under a tree in east Africa to break the bread of life and share the cup of salvation. The one God can minister with equal compassion to the needs of a grieving woman whose husband has died in a tragic accident and to the grieving man whose husband is dying of cancer. Hear, O Israel, [said Moses,] the Lord our God, the Lord is one (Deut. 6:4). True prophets remind us of such truth. True prophets remind us to be alert for signs of God's surprising activity in the world, beyond the predictable categories in which we would try to place the Almighty. Such prophets are often hard for us to hear, because too often we live with a perspective that is too short-sighted.

Some years back I heard the wonderful preacher Fred Craddock tell about the summer night his father took him out into his backyard when he was a child. They lay there side-by-side in the grass, looking up at the stars. After a long while his father asked, "Son, how far can you think?"

Fred asked what he meant, and his father said, "Just think as far as you can think up toward the stars." "I screwed my imagination up," said Fred, "and I said, 'OK. I'm thinking as far as I can think.'"

And his father said, “Well, drive down a stake out there now. In your mind, drive down a stake. Have you driven down the stake? That’s how far you can think?” And Fred responded, “Yes, sir.” Then, after a moment, his father asked, “Now, Fred, what’s on the other side of your stake?”

“Well,” said Fred, “I guess there’s more sky.” His father said, “Then you’d better move your stake.”

Fred said they spent the whole evening out there moving his stake. It was, he said, a crazy thing to do, but he could never thank his father enough for doing it, because it introduced him to the whole concept of mystery and awe and the limitations of the human mind. Life is not so easily defined and fixed and settled as we often like to think.

We all forget that truth sometimes. Our boundaries close in, and our vision is narrowed. In such circumstances, even our understanding of God gets squeezed. It happened to the people of Jerusalem when Jeremiah told them a truth they would not hear. They just didn’t want to move their stakes and consider the vastness of God’s creation... to contemplate the one God of the whole world... to comprehend the size of God’s design and the scope of God’s providence... this God who is so vast, so bold, so beyond our imaginations. So, they didn’t. But maybe *we* will. Maybe today, for today might just be a good time for us to engage a little awe and wonder... to pay heed to the prophet’s words... to consider the God of all peoples who on earth do dwell... and – for heaven’s sake, and our own – to move *our* stakes.