

Karen Hollis June 28, 2020, Jeremiah 28:5-9

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be reflections of your word to us today, in Jesus' name we pray. Amen

It was over 3 months ago that we decided to suspend worship in our church building and since then the world as a whole has found itself in crisis. There are a number of responses to the crisis and a number of different perspectives shared by leaders and citizens of the world . . . everything from Bonnie Henry's mantra "stay home if you can, wash your hands often, don't touch your face; if you have to go out stay 2 meters from others and wear a mask" to "there is no pandemic going on, it's just the media making up stories, it's life as usual." As the conditions of the pandemic continue to shift and change, we have to continue to re-evaluate our own boundaries and comfort level with different activities or expanding our bubble. Sometimes it seems easier to just pretend nothing is going on, especially when we see a friend in person and we want to give them a hug (I was introduced to someone the other day and my one hand had to stop the other from reaching for a handshake). It's exhausting . . . COVID fatigue is a real thing. If someone could just tell us when this will all be over, we could at least have a target in mind.

The prophet Jeremiah tells the story of another time in history where people were trying to discern the right thing to do in the midst of different voices. We haven't spent time with Jeremiah since I've been here. He was a prophet in the kingdom of Judah (just outside of Jerusalem) around 600 BCE when the kingdom was threatened by Assyria and then Babylonia. By the time they feel the threat of the Babylonians, the people of Judah are already weary and want to believe it is possible to defeat the Babylonians and focus on their lives again . . . they want to believe this so much that they will listen to anyone it seems who will tell them what they want to hear.

In the story presented to us today, it's the summer of 594 BCE and prophets, priests, and people are gathered in the temple. Jeremiah is wearing a wooden yoke over his shoulders as a symbol of Babylon upon

them. Hananiah, a contemporary prophet to Jeremiah, stands up and proclaims: ‘thus said the Lord of hosts, God of Israel: I have broken the yoke of the king of Babylonia. In another two years, I will bring to this place all who have been exiled in Babylonia.’ Jeremiah says ‘Amen, I hope that is true – I hope God has broken the yoke of Babylonia. However all of the prophets before us have prophesied war and famine, so you are the one who needs to be proved right . . . and only time will tell.’ Unfortunately, the lectionary stops there, cutting out the dramatic conclusion of the scene when Hananiah takes the yoke off of Jeremiah’s shoulders and breaks it, saying “Thus says the Lord, this is how I will break the yoke of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon!” After which the text says Jeremiah goes on his way. (pause)

How are the people supposed to know who to believe? Who speaks wisdom that will keep the people safe? What may not be clear from this small piece of the story is, Jeremiah isn’t trying to bring everyone down . . . he has heard a message from God, encouraging the people of Judah to submit to the Babylonians to save their own lives. If they fight, they will lose; if they surrender, they will be spared even if they are exiled. Jeremiah doesn’t profit from this message, rather he struggles with the responsibility of sharing it, but faithfully shares it all the same. One wonders, what does Hananiah have to profit from his message? Is he like the false voices we’re hearing today, those seeking praise or popularity, seeking short term personal benefit? Or does Hananiah just have a different vision of God?

The reason the people listen to him, though probably has more to do with the people and for what they are longing and craving. The people of Judah cling to a message that this will all be over soon, rather than sustained hope in God’s faithfulness.

I don’t think you need to hear from the pulpit that listening to Bonnie Henry and taking her seriously is in your best interest. We all have a huge appreciation for her. I do think there is a longing in all of us that makes day to day living through this pandemic a challenge.

This story from Jeremiah highlights for me of the concept of hope in scripture – it is not situational. The people of Judah in this story forget that hope is not tied to any kind of sign that things will get better. Hope

is waiting in the tension, waiting in the expectation that God will show up and be present. God always does show up, because God's faithfulness is far beyond our own.

What do you need to do to sustain yourself through this season? What are the pieces of self-care or activities? What are the resources you need to access? What's your practice of discernment when conditions change and you have to find your own comfort level again? What helps you feel God's closeness? And what reminds you of God's promise when God feels far away? I invite us all in this season to be in the tension of hope, in the tension of waiting expectantly. We will make it through this season, at home together, with God's help.