

Prophets vs. Politicians

In the name of him who came not to bring peace on the earth, but a sword; dear friends in Christ: I'm sure you've noticed that things are heating up. We're coming into that season when it gets downright nasty and uncomfortable. And no, I'm not talking about summer; that we can live with. I'm talking about election season. We're several months out from the midterm election under a lame duck president – one whose popularity has been steadily eroding, as it usually does late in a president's second term. It means that a lot of seats in congress are up for grabs. As such, we'll soon be bombarded by all kinds of political ads. The initial salvos are already being fired. And several times a week we're getting calls from pollsters who want to know what we think the hot button issues are so they can pass the word to their candidates to talk about those things.

And so the candidates will talk about what the public wants to hear. They'll talk about social issues. They'll talk about foreign affairs. They'll talk about the economy and what they're going to do to stimulate job growth. They'll talk about why their opponents are not fit for office – how they have a record of telling lies (the irony is delicious). And I expect some will talk about the elephant in the room: the problem of our crushing national debt – the fact that we've been spending far more than we've taken in for decades, and that the rate of overspending is ever increasing. It's a problem of gigantic proportion; but they'll tell us how they're going to fix it quickly, easily, and without any pain.

Then the election will take place and nothing will be done to solve the debt problem. It won't make any difference who or what party wins. No politician has the resolve to do what actually needs to be done in that regard. Or if there are a handful, they are too few in number to make a difference. No, the truth is you can't get elected if you say what *really* needs to be done to solve the problem of the debt. And if someone were in office and started to do what needs to be done, they'd never be reelected. One side says we need to spend less. The other side says we need to collect more revenue. Actually, both must be done. It's the simple and logical solution. But we don't want to hear it. With respect to the national debt, we as a people *want to be told lies*. And we'll vote for the guy who tells us the sweetest lie because it's what we want to hear. Meanwhile, the problem continues to grow. It isn't going away. And if it's not addressed, one day it will ruin us.

But I'm not here to talk about that. I only use it as an illustration, because what's true in our politics is even truer in our religion. When it comes to the Word of God and our relationship with our Father in heaven, we – and I'm talking about Christians in general – would rather hear sweet lies than unpleasant truths. And we will tune our ears to the preachers and teachers who tell us what we want to hear.

That's what the prophet Jeremiah is dealing with in today's Old Testament lesson. Jeremiah himself is a genuine prophet of the Lord and a very straight shooter. He tells it like it is. The Lord tells him what to say and to whom, and Jeremiah says it. And it's been costing him big time. For speaking God's truth he has been ridiculed, imprisoned, conspired against, assaulted, and threatened with death. In last week's Old Testament lesson we heard him complain about how even his friends had turned on him and were hoping to see him fall. In his frustration he cried out to the Lord, "Hey, I'm getting beat up for speaking your Word. Every time I deliver a message for you, bad things happen to me. But if I say, 'Nuts to this, I've had it;

this time I won't deliver your message', the words burn within me until I am forced to speak. Lord, you're killing me. But all I can do is continue to trust you, for you've promised to be with me, defend me, and give me strength. So, as much as it pains me, I'll keep doing what you called me to do. I'll keep speaking your Word."

What was Jeremiah's message? What words of truth did the Lord give him to say that people were so loath to hear? I suppose you could say he spoke about a debt crisis; a debt not of money, but of sin. In that regard the people of the nation of Judah had a major spending problem. Their sinning was totally out of control. Every form of corruption and vice you can name were running rampant in their society. Though they alone of all nations had the Law of God and were to order their lives according to it, no one would have been able to tell it by looking at them. In the way they were behaving they were indistinguishable from the godless pagans all around them – in some ways they were even worse. The nation of Judah and in particular Jerusalem its capital, were cesspools of sin.

To make matters worse, the means by which the Lord had given his people to deal with their sins through worship and sacrifice at the Temple had also become corrupt through and through. Pagan idols and their altars had been set up alongside the Lord's on its sacred courts. The same priests who offered sacrifices to the Lord were just as likely to offer them to Baal or one of the other Canaanite deities. And for the same reason: not as offerings to atone for sin through the shedding of blood and thus by grace to receive forgiveness – no, that would involve some sense of guilt and shame which the people didn't have. Rather, the sacrifices were being offered to obtain the favor of the gods. I do something for you, now you owe me, Lord. It's the exact opposite of what true worship of the Lord is all about. Beyond that, cultic prostitutes, staples of pagan fertility religions, strolled through the Temple grounds plying their trade. They even had permanent quarters built for them there. And pretty much everyone was okay with all of this. They liked it this way. And the general belief was that the Lord liked it that way too. "After all, we are his chosen people. We can do no wrong."

The Lord gave Jeremiah the difficult task of bringing these people to see their sin and rebellion against him for what it was: a growing mountain of debt that needed to be paid or else it would crush them. Jeremiah called them to repent, to return to the One True God, and to offer right sacrifices. He told them that if they failed to do so, the Lord would destroy them all.

Indeed, at this point the Lord had already fired a number of warning shots at them. To make them see how serious a matter this was, he brought the army of the Babylonian Empire against them to put them into subjection. On their first visit, they took a number of captives as hostages. Among them were Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. They also took a number of sacred vessels that were used for worship from the Temple. It was their way of saying, "Our god is stronger than yours". It was meant to be a humiliation, and it was. And at the time the Lord told his people, "I let this humiliation happen to you because you're not listening to me. Learn the lesson. Repent of your sins and return to me."

But they didn't. And so, a few years later he brought the Babylonians against them again. This time they took some 50,000 people into exile and resettled them in penal colonies far from the Promised Land. Families were ripped apart. Parents were separated from their children – never to see them again. It was awful. And again the Lord told them through Jeremiah, "This happened because of your rejection of me. Learn the lesson; because if you fail to repent this time, there won't be another. I will come against you with total war from Babylon and they will wipe you and your nation off the face of the earth."

They were hard words to hear. And Jeremiah had the unpleasant task of delivering them. That's why people hated him so much. That's why they made his life so miserable. And that too must have hurt Jeremiah; not for his sake, but for theirs. He had the sad misfortune of observing first hand that his message by which they might have turned and been saved was landing on deaf ears, and that despite his pleading and cajoling, they weren't going to listen to him; thus they were dooming themselves to destruction. Jeremiah is known as the "weeping prophet" because he cried not for himself, but for the people he tried to rescue and were lost.

And adding salt to his wounds, no doubt, were the voices of the false prophets who were telling the people the lies they wanted to hear. Chief among them was a fellow named Hananiah. His name means, "God is gracious"; and that's a good summary of his message. Where Jeremiah was telling the people that God was angry because of their sins and was threatening to bring judgment upon them, Hananiah was telling them, "No, no, no! God is gracious and kind! He'd never do anything like that to us. We are his chosen people. He loves us just the way we are! And Babylon? Forget it. They are a crumbling empire whose heyday is past. We needn't fear that toothless tiger. Why, I prophesy that in less than two years all your family members who were taken away into exile will come back to us here and that the sacred vessels taken from the Lord's Temple will be returned. Everything is going to be just fine. Trust me; I'm a prophet. I know."

Actually, Hananiah was far more a politician than he was a prophet. He knew what to say to make people happy. He told them what they wanted to hear. So he was very popular. The people loved him; they gobbled up his words. He also had the ear of the king and the nobles. They considered him a great man of God and honored and rewarded him accordingly. They especially liked his prophecy that the threat of Babylon was over and done with, and that the people and things that had been taken would be soon returned.

It's precisely to this prophecy that Jeremiah is responding in today's reading. And you have to understand that when he says, "Amen, may the Lord do so" to Hananiah, he means it in the sense of "Oh yes, wouldn't it be nice? But you can forget it 'cause it ain't gonna happen." And then he goes on to warn everyone that the true prophets of the past and present have been declaring God's judgments against sin in the form of war, famine, and pestilence. And they've all come true. Their history was full of such examples, and they all knew it. And now here comes Hananiah telling them not to worry; all will be peace and happiness. Well, we'll see, said Jeremiah. We'll see that the Lord has sent you to say these things when they come to pass.

I don't suppose I need to tell you that they didn't. But I will tell you that right up until the day when the hammer of God's judgment fell on them, the people of Judah enjoyed listening to the lies they wanted to hear just as much as they enjoyed denying the truth that Jeremiah proclaimed. They didn't want God's prophets preaching his Word to them. They wanted politicians. That's what they got. And they were happy. Then they were destroyed. And now they're in hell.

Let their ruin be a warning to us and to the Church of our day, because the sin nature in all of us prefers sweet lies to hard truths. And there is no shortage of false prophets – theological politicians – who are around to tell us what we want to hear. We had a timely example of this a little more than a week ago when another sizable American church body voted in convention to redefine marriage as a union between any two people regardless of gender. Furthermore, they granted permission for their pastors to bless same sex unions in states where it's legal. They've gone the way of Hananiah the false prophet. Instead of telling people, this is sin and God condemns it; they're telling them, no, this is good and God will bless it. Why are

they saying this? Because it makes them happy—for the present, anyway. In the long run ... not so much. May we continue to pray for their repentance.

But that's just one specific example that's very clear. In a broader way, with respect to God's Word we all tend to hear what we want to hear and reject the parts we find unpleasant. Perhaps the most wide spread way in which this occurs today is a thing called Gospel reductionism. It's the idea that because God is good and kind and gracious (and he is), and because he forgives sins, then nothing is out of bounds. All is forgiven. All is peace with God and happiness. It leads to universalism: the teaching that in the end, everyone will be saved. It doesn't matter what you believe about Jesus. No one ends up in hell. It's a great teaching for politicians because people like to hear it; but it's not so good for God's true prophets, because it isn't what God says.

Closely related to this is that tired old canard that the politicians love to preach that goes, "God hates sin, but he loves sinners." There are several problems with this. First, it's an unbiblical expression. Nowhere does it appear in Scripture. Second, it falsely separates sin from the person who commits sin. You can't do that. Sin is not a substance. It's evil thoughts, words, and actions that always take place within and by a person doing them. Sin doesn't exist apart from sinners. But the biggest problem with this false teaching is there's no Christ in it. If God loves sinners, then there's no reason for him to send his Son into the world and have him bear in his body the penalty of our sins upon the cross. If you want to know how God feels about sinners, you have to look at what happened to Jesus. He was whipped to bloody shreds, and lifted up in agony suspended by nails, while his Father poured out his righteous fury against sinners upon him. God can't punish sin. He can only punish sinners. In Christ he did. And it's only when sinners repent and trust in Christ and his saving work upon the cross that they receive the assurance that their sins have been forgiven for his sake. Then God sees them as washed clean and righteous; not as sinners. *In Christ* he loves them as his perfect and innocent children. Sinners he sends to hell.

But the effect that this widespread notion that God loves sinners apart from Christ and without any mention of his cross has had upon the Church has been to lead us away from any sense of God's wrath on account of our sins. If God loves sinners, then the more I sin the more God must love me. There's no need to fear God's judgments. There's no need for shame. There's no need to repent. There's no need for Christ. I can do whatever I want, and God still loves me. That's exactly what the sinful flesh in us wants to hear. But that's not the Word of God and the Gospel of Jesus Christ by which we are saved.

I could go on and talk about how this softening of God's Law shows up in the way we downplay specific sins today and how we in the church are often indistinguishable from our unbelieving neighbors; and if I had more time I would. But for now the question to consider is this: What do you want in a preacher? Do you want a politician or a prophet? Speaking for myself, I know the temptation is always to want to be liked and say things that you'll want to hear. Just as the sin nature in all of us wants to be told sweet lies, so the sin nature in the preacher wants to gratify his hearers by telling them. But that isn't what I've been called to do. If when preaching God's Law I'm not stepping on your toes, making you feel uncomfortable, pointing out your sins, and calling you to repent, then I'm not being faithful to you or to the Lord. Worse, if I'm not doing those things, then I can't be proclaiming to you God's forgiveness for the sake of Christ. And because that's true, Friends, let this be your prayer: that the Lord in his mercy would send the Church of our day prophets, not politicians. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!