

Although our passage from the Old Testament is brief, the message it conveys is eerily relevant to us today as the people of God in the year of our Lord 2020. The prophet Jeremiah has been preaching a wildly unpopular message to the recently defeated and occupied people of Judah. The Babylonians have unseated the Judean king, stolen sacred objects from the Temple, and driven many into exile. The people are afraid of further violence, of stricter oppression, and of losing their identity. Jeremiah, a prophet of God, has received a word from God that he enacts by wearing a heavy yoke around his neck. His message? Submission. Acceptance. Patience.

Jeremiah encourages the people of God to submit to the yoke of their enemy, to put down roots and grow where they are planted. For a grieving people with sorely wounded pride, we can imagine that this message might not sit well. Hananiah, on the other hand, has an opposing message. His message for the people of God is uprising, resistance, immediate action. Hananiah proclaims that the Lord will break the yoke of the oppressor, and demonstrates this by forcibly removing the yoke from Jeremiah's neck and destroying it in the sight of everyone.

These two prophets, both prophesying with loud voices to any who will listen, both claiming to speak in the name of God, are preaching opposing messages. Jeremiah and Hananiah are in conflict, and with them the entire family of God. The people of God will have to choose one or the other of these messages in order to move in any direction at all. They can choose to fall in line, to submit to the reality of their situation and live their lives as best and as faithfully as they can, as Jeremiah counsels. Or they can choose to wage war, to rise up against the Babylonians and trust that God will bring them the victory, as Hananiah promises. We know now that Jeremiah was the true prophet and Hananiah the false one, as the suffering and death that Jeremiah warned would come with insurrection did indeed come to pass. Jeremiah himself acknowledges that the only way to know for sure which prophets are true and which are false is

through the clear vision of hindsight. We can read the story and presume to know who the good guy is, simply because our passage today is a reading from Jeremiah, not Hananiah. But for the faithful and vulnerable people who first heard these two conflicting messages of submission and resistance did not have the benefit of foreknowledge or of hindsight. They simply saw two men, equally righteous in the eyes of the law, equally strange and loud and unsettling. Both claimed to know the will of God for God's people, and both had very clear ideas about how to fulfill that will. It was up to each individual and to the whole body of the faithful to determine whose truth was of God, and how they would respond to that Godly message. The people who heard these messages were faced with a moment of choice that required deep, prayerful, careful discernment. They did not all choose rightly, and many suffered for the impatience of a few.

Jeremiah was ultimately right, both about the wisdom of submitting to Babylon and the suffering that would come with resisting that yoke. But his message fell on many closed ears, as Hananiah's message looked like the easier, faster, more emotionally satisfying option. Hananiah convinced the crowds that choosing submission was faithless, that Jeremiah was choosing to live in fear over trusting in God. Jeremiah could not offer a recipe for avoiding unpleasant truths or for taking back control when we felt helpless. Jeremiah had no easy answers to offer, no quick solutions or warm and fuzzy reassurances. Jeremiah had the truth, which can only come from God. And Jeremiah was able to hear that truth and share it abroad because he had learned how to listen. Jeremiah, like all true prophets, lived a life of constant discernment.

Like Hananiah, we often balk when asked to be patient, we get squirmy when we are expected to wait. We do not like to feel passive, or weak. We do not like to admit that we are vulnerable. But like Jeremiah, and like Jesus, and like the many saints and mystics that have walked in their footsteps, we have the gift and the obligation of discernment. Like the people who listened to

these two battling prophets, we live a life that is full of decisions that define us as individuals and as community, choices that can turn us toward or away from the path of righteousness. Every day, we must choose to leave our home or not. We must choose to wear a mask or not. We must choose to vote in elections or not. We must choose where we spend our money, and how we spend our time; who we work for and how we do our jobs. We must choose how to engage in difficult conversations, and whether or not to show up in uncomfortable and even unsafe places. The life of faith is a constant flow of choices, and a faithful life is one led from a posture of prayerful discernment.

When we feel we are being presented with an either/or decision, with a framework of us vs. them or right vs. wrong, we have reached a point that Jesus constantly challenged. The Pharisees were always giving Jesus dualistic questions, scenarios meant to trap him between two evils, between two goods, between the truthful answer and the faithful one. But Jesus very rarely answered the question that was asked. More often than not, Jesus challenged the question itself, challenged his questioners to look for God's will, asked them to look in the mirror. Jesus responded to one simplistic question with many, always seeking nuance, always looking for the need behind the question. Jesus challenged simple answers, and constantly reminded his followers that the kingdom of God would not come easily.

Jesus modeled for us the practice of humility, the duty of faithful discernment. Big moments in the ministry of Jesus were always preceded by prayer, both in solitude and in community. Before he calmed the seas, Jesus slept. Before he raised Lazarus, Jesus prayed to his father in heaven. Before he gave up his life for his friends, Jesus brought them together to pray and be refreshed in body and soul. All of these are moments of discernment, moments in which Christ our teacher models for us how to find and listen to the will of God.

Jeremiah and Hananiah had a colorful and dramatic conflict of viewpoints. Jesus and his followers were in a constant state of question and answer and question and reflection. We today are in our own season of discernment, as we face an ever more complicated world of choices. Every day that we wake up with breath in our lungs and the Spirit in our hearts, we are giving another opportunity to listen for the will of God, and to choose the path God calls us to walk with him. In this season of discernment, we are being invited to listen deeply, to grapple with opposing viewpoints and competing worldviews. We have the opportunity to make small, moment-by-moment choices with faithfulness and with the humility to understand that the next right thing might look different from the last right thing. Discernment is a prayer posture, one that must take the shape of our entire lives.

As the prophet Jeremiah reflects to us that we can only know true prophets once their prophecies have come to pass, we may not know if our choices were right or wrong until long after we've made them. But if that is true, if we won't know until the end of the story, what will we wish we had done differently? Who will we wish we had listened to, what voices will we wish had been louder? Will they be our voices? Sometimes the faithful response to our circumstances is patience, as Jeremiah counseled Judah. Other times it is resistance, like John the Baptist cried from the riverbank. Sometimes, we must settle uncomfortable into the tension, and choose both, as our savior did when he dined with the ones who would betray him. We may not all be prophets, but we all face hard choices. Thank God we will never have to face them alone.