

The Park Road Pulpit
Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church
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It's Hard to See Galilee from Here
Jeremiah 28-29; Mark 16.6-8
Russ Dean, February 1, 2009



Hope doesn't demand progress (says Christopher Lasch); it demands justice... Hope appears absurd to those who lack it. We can see why hope serves us better than optimism. Not that it prevents us from expecting the worst; the worst is what the hopeful are prepared for...¹

Old Hananiah was filled with optimism. And the people loved it. Whether it's what he actually believed or not doesn't really matter. It is what he said to the people. And what he said... is exactly what they wanted to hear. Isn't it convenient how that so often works out for the preachers who are backed by the establishment!? Those who support the popular sentiment of the people?² Oh, there's never a shortage of Hananiah's, those who are willing to seize the mantle of acceptability, to claim the imprimatur of the majority, to flout the praise and the prosperity and the prestige that comes to the one who will simply say what most of the people want to hear.

Then along comes a Jeremiah, who has a different word. Not at all what the masses want to hear. A difficult word that contradicts the conventional wisdom of the day. A word not in harmony with the majority – not at all what they want to hear. And the people call the Jeremiah's crazy... out of touch... too liberal... But the Jeremiah's of every age continue to speak an inconvenient truth, an unpopular message, a prophetic word which sits ill at ease with the establishment ideas of religion and politics, alike. They speak this word because, like their

¹ I do not have a citation for this quotation.

² I removed the following words from an early draft of the sermon because I did not want people to get distracted by a "political" reference so early in the sermon, but I think they are appropriate: "For the last eight years, as we have waged our wars, a host of Hananiah's have lined up to say, 'That's right, Mr. President.' And a whole host of their followers have lined up to say, 'That's right Mr. Hananiah. Preach, preacher! Tell us what we want to hear.'"

forebear, it is a word that will not let them go. It is a word of truth that is “*like a fire shut up in [their] bones,*” even though they may like to keep silent... *[they simply] cannot* (Jeremiah 20.9).

So has the battle raged in every age. A Hananiah comes along to crown the king. To praise the President. To give God the good name of the people he is supposed to serve. And he comes, without fail, with the commendation of the Church. Because in every age, the Church – at least in its majority report – has accommodated the values of Jesus to the values of the society, putting its own security and salvation ahead of *taking up its cross* (Mark 8.34)... or *doing for the least of these* (Matthew 25)... or *laying down its life for its friends* (John 15.13)... and its enemies alike (Matthew 5).

Maybe the reason the Hananiahs remain so popular is not just that their message is filled with optimism and talk of victory, but because human beings have such a short attention span, and it takes time and intentional effort (i.e., work) to see a bigger picture. By the time it’s painfully aware that the “Man of God,” Hananiah, has been down right wrong, the people have moved on to some other gleeful prophet who’s selling another bill of goods. All the while, Jeremiah’s long, slow, painful, but transforming truth is being revealed.

Today’s text is not one of the most familiar in scripture, this story of the battle between these prophets, but it needs be more familiar – because it is played out over and over in our story. Hananiah was educated, erudite, sophisticated, respectable. He had all the poise and prestige that would make any church proud. And, he spoke for the tallest steeple in town. In fact, the tallest steeple in the nation. Hananiah’s voice was accepted and affirmed as one which should be heard.

Then there was Jeremiah. “Refined” was not a word many would have associated with Jeremiah. Some thought of him more like the crazy street preacher you see on some inner city corners, shouting out the judgment of God to passers-by; never seemingly concerned with

whether anyone is actually listening or not. Like his colleague, Isaiah, of whom it is said he walked the streets naked for three years to call attention to his prophecy of destruction, Jeremiah, too, resorted to such symbolic preaching (Isaiah 20). In this episode with Hananiah, Jeremiah had been walking around wearing an ox yoke around his neck to remind the people of their enslavement to injustice, and God's impending judgment, which would result in their enslavement in exile. In part of the text I did not read, Hananiah removes that yoke and breaks it dramatically, a symbolic manifestation of his message of optimism. Jeremiah retorted that God's yoke on the people would be of iron, not wood. Oh, don't you know their audience was enjoying this show!

Jeremiah had been warning for years, perhaps all of his ministry, of this foreboding destruction of the nation by God. His message was not altogether different from an infamous Jeremiah of our own day who proclaimed just a little too loudly for the majority God's damnation of the nation due to its sinfulness.³ And the first Jeremiah wasn't any more appreciated than his name-sake has been! When that destruction did come to Jerusalem, and everybody who was anybody had been carted away to the far, foreign land of Babylon... Hananiah stepped forward with his word of optimism. "No worries, people... 'Our God is an awesome God'" he said, in effect. "It's only going to be two years, and you'll be back. You hardly even need to unpack your bags!" Don't you know the people cheered.

It was just what they wanted to hear.

³ Jeremiah Wright was the pastor of Trinity UCC Church in Chicago for many years. As the pastor to Barack Obama, Wright came to fame (or infamy) in this just-ended presidential election season due to a video clip, which was aired over and over on national television networks, from a sermon in which he declared, angrily, "It's not God bless America... it's God damn America..." Though his choice of words would not be well-received in any church I know, the message, as I am trying to point out, is almost identical to the message Prophet Jeremiah spoke so long ago.

Then they got Jeremiah's letter in the mail, which encouraged them to settle in... for the long haul. "Seventy years..." he said, "Seventy long years you'll be in Babylon. You might as well get used to it." And his strange message got even stranger. He didn't tell them to just resign themselves to this terrible sentence... to seventy years of sheer misery and pagan domination. Hardly. Jeremiah encouraged the people to enjoy... Babylon! *Build a house... plant a garden... inter-marry your children... For in the welfare of the city is your welfare.* Can you imagine how devout Jews in an enslaved exile in a pagan land heard this letter? Yes... his name couldn't have been mud any more if it had been Jeremiah Wright. Because as far as they were concerned he was Jeremiah Dead Wrong.

And then they observed their third anniversary in Babylon... And then their fifth... And then their twenty-fifth... and by that time... no one could even remember who Hananiah was, and the teenagers thought of themselves... as Babylonians. And when those first children born in Babylon returned to a "foreign" city named Jerusalem, bringing their grandchildren with them, they also brought a God and a faith that had grown. A God who was bigger than one box in one room in one Temple in one sacred city. And a faith that was now strong enough to find that great big God walking step by step with the people even *through the valley of the shadow of death* (Psalm 23). To exile... and beyond.

In a few minutes, the Chair of our Annual Ministry Plan Committee, Brian Smyth, will present to you a recommendation to reduce our budget by \$61,000. Almost 10%. We've worked hard, folks, you have worked very hard, indeed, for the last eight years to build that Ministry Plan, the staff and the programs and the facilities and the missions that it represents. And in the time it takes to say, "All in favor, say aye"... almost one of every ten things we were trying to do

in 2009 will be gone. For a pastor who has taken great pride in the work of this church – not because it's his work, but because it is good work – that's a hard pill to swallow. And before I try to start trying to turn this ship around in this sermon, let me be wise enough and courageous enough and honest enough to speak Jeremiah's word to you: It may not even be over, yet. And what we have lost we will not regain in this budget season. Maybe not in the next three. I'm probably not telling you anything that you do not know. You have been listening to the economic forecasts, just as I have, and you know that those who were once considered expert economists (I'm not sure there's any such thing as an expert economist anymore!) say we haven't hit rock bottom yet... they've even stopped guessing when that may come.

So we might as well settle in, Park Road Baptist Church. For the long haul. I want to ask you to join me, and the rest of your ministerial staff and lay leaders, in pledging today to do just that, but not with long faces and the resignation of failure and dread. Just with the conviction of faith that trusts, come what may, the God who walked with Israel in and through their exile, will be with us, and will just as assuredly bring us back to our Jerusalem, a better, stronger, more vibrant people.

We have much to learn because of this difficult time. I hope as a nation we can regain an appreciation for the joy of hard, honest work – that should always be chosen over the shallow ecstasy of a quick profit. I hope the fear of failure will bring us together, teaching us to trust in the best in one another – even those with whom we have ideological differences. I hope our losses will remind us of what is important: faith and friends and family, and that a diminished portfolio may cause us to appreciate the best things in life, which are always the simple things. The things we need no money to have. And I hope that the global connectedness of this economic calamity will remind us that there really is no such thing as my money – that just as

my bank account, my financial security, is tied to a world-wide market, so is my personal and spiritual security tied to my relatedness to a universal family. We are in this together. Christian and Muslim and unbeliever alike. American and Japanese and Iraqi. Together. And one “world is enough for all of us.”⁴

As church, I hope we will learn the same lessons. And in being reminded that we already have more than we need, I hope and earnestly pray that we will reach out with what we do have, even more generously (yes, even more generously in 2009), within these walls, and to serve the *least of these* who live apart from us – but very much within our reach. *For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.*

On that Sunday morning when Jesus’ most faithful disciples reached the tomb to take care of his body, their dreams, which had already been shattered, must have fallen into the very pits of their stomachs. Death had taken away his life. Now someone had even taken away his body. A young man met their panicked confusion; as far as they knew he was just a wild-eyed dreamer, dressed in white. He pointed into the distance, toward home, and offered the most ridiculous promise anyone had ever made: *He is going ahead of you to Galilee... there you will see him...*

It was hard to see Galilee from there.

And it’s hard to see it from here. It’s going to be a “long and winding road,” folks.⁵ We have more bumps to cross, more hills to climb. Jeremiah never said exile would be easy, just that

⁴ From the album, “Spirits in the Material World,” by the Police, the song is entitled, “One world (not three).”

⁵ I know that writers are supposed to avoid using clichés, and I avoid them like the plague! Obviously this cliché is from “The Long and Winding Road” made famous by the Beatles.

it was the reality. But if we stay together... And if we walk with deliberate steps of faith... taking every one in hope... committing all we are in love... Jesus will meet us there.⁶

It's how the story ends.

May it be so!

⁶ My allusion is to Paul's famous words in 1 Corinthians 13.13: *And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.*