
Missing the Prophecies of God

Jeremiah 28:5-9

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on Sunday, July 2, 2017,
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Full disclaimer, Jeremiah has been one of those books that's troubled me in my adult years. As a kid, I was familiar with the opening chapter where Jeremiah's call story is located. Where the Lord speaks to Jeremiah for the first time saying "Before I formed you in your mother's womb, I knew you" and Jeremiah's infamous retort "But I'm only a boy." The other passage that I was most familiar with is the one immediately following today's lectionary in the 29th chapter and the 11th verse where the Lord speaks to Jeremiah saying "For surely I know the plans I have for you, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope." These were hallmarks for Youth Days and Vacation Bible Schools and Youth Revivals at church growing up. But that was the full extent of what I knew about the book of Jeremiah.

I got a little bit older and I remember hearing the multiple references to the Lord telling Jeremiah to go to the potter's house in chapter 18, even gospel greats Walter and Tremaine Hawkins put a song together about this. But it wasn't until seminary that I began to learn about the context of some of the stories in the book of Jeremiah emerged. For it was in seminary that I first heard about Jeremiah being thrown in the bottom of a cistern in chapter 38. It wasn't until seminary that I even knew the stories of Jeremiah walking around with a yoke around his neck, or him physically being put into stocks. And contextually I learned that Jeremiah 29:11, the "For surely I know the plans I have you..." text contextually followed a passage that spoke of how the people of Judah were going to be exiled from their land and subsumed into neo-Babylonian culture. Seminary taught me that without context, the text doesn't exist. It is in this spirit of understanding the context of this morning's text that I will do my level best to share with you what thus says the Lord.

Over the years, my maturity in life and my maturity in understanding and knowing God has revealed that in the book of Jeremiah, that Jeremiah is about the business of forth-telling and not selling fortunes. And to be connected to God in such a way did not lead to a life of fame and fortune. In chapter 20 Jeremiah launches into a monologue where he puts God on notice. Essentially, he told God that this was the end of their contract and that he wasn't going to continue to be Yahweh's prophet anymore. Jeremiah had decided that the opportunity costs were just too high. Jeremiah even curses the day he was born. He doesn't know why the word God has given him is only violence and destruction. He makes up in his mind he's not going to utter the Lord's name anymore. But as soon as he keeps quiet, it's like fire shut up in his bones, and he can't keep quiet—he must do the Lord's will.

This is Jeremiah's life. He is required by the Lord to go back and forth and up and down the country side telling the people of Israel that violence and destruction is coming to you by way of Babylonian captivity. This is not something you'd wish on your worst enemy. Jeremiah is being tasked with delivering bad news all the time. Chronologically, in the book of Jeremiah, the fall of Jerusalem doesn't happen until chapter 39. Here in the 28th chapter, Jeremiah, in the southern kingdom of Judah, is prophesying that as long as the people continue to worship other gods, that they will be

subject to the judgement of Yahweh. That the word coming from the Lord is not one deliverance, but rather judgement.

There are many people these days who don the name of prophet who do nothing more than act as religious *fortunetellers*, but the job of a prophet, as in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, was to be the mouthpiece of God to the people of Israel or Judah and to ultimately be one that is a *forthteller*. Forthtelling is delivering the message of the Lord to the community, what is God telling the collective people. Prophecies, or oracles from God, were often times meant for the larger community, not directed at individual persons. Instead those in this day and age who claim to be prophets are dealing in the business of giving individual fortunes to people telling them to name it and claim it, blab it and grab it, call it and haul it, run around the sanctuary 7 times, call on Jehovah three times, and a check will be in the mail in three days. And don't forget to sew a seed into this ministry. If we only understand prophets in the realm of late night televangelists, then we have truly missed the prophecies of God.

One thing I have learned in my lifetime is that we as humans usually understand God contextually. That often times we bring our lived experiences to our deeper understanding of God. And I think that's perfectly fine. If God made us in God's own image, and if we believe that we are fearfully and wonderfully made, then I would go so far as to say that we would do ourselves and God a disservice if we pretended that we did *not* bring our full authentic selves to forefront when we pray or when we read the Bible or when we do personal meditations and devotions. Each of us would be lying to ourselves if we said we didn't bring ourselves to each of those moments. And if we truly don't bring ourselves to bear in those moments, we run the risk of missing what God is telling us. I don't mean miss in *true* sense that something becomes permanently lost, but it's moment of knowing you didn't quite get it the first time. How many of us remember in school when the math equation finally made sense to you, when you finally got the logic of the chemistry formula and suddenly everything else made sense? It's the idea that if you don't bring your full self to God in those moments, the perspicacity of the revelation has to wait for another time.

That's why context is so important. In today's lectionary text we see that Jeremiah is having an encounter with Hananiah, someone who also has the title of prophet and Jeremiah says:

“May the Lord do so; may the Lord fulfill the words that you have prophesied, and bring back to this place from Babylon the vessels of the house of the Lord, and all the exiles. ⁷But listen now to this word that I speak in your hearing and in the hearing of all the people. ⁸The prophets who preceded you and me from ancient times prophesied war, famine, and pestilence against many countries and great kingdoms. ⁹As for the prophet who prophesies peace, when the word of that prophet comes true, then it will be known that the Lord has truly sent the prophet.”

And that's it. That's all the lectionary points us in the direction of. One of the more unfortunate strivings of the revised common lectionary is that it can sometimes miss the context for the sake of the text. What is worth revealing contextually is that 1) Hananiah is prophesying the opposite of what Jeremiah is: Hananiah is prophesying peace. Jeremiah is prophesying violence and destruction. 2) Jeremiah is throwing shade at Hananiah rather than being prophetic. And he's doing so in front of a crowd of people. In verse five we see that Jeremiah is doing this in front of all the priests and other people in the temple. He's living by the words: “Be ye also petty” rather than being prophetic. 3) By the end of the chapter Jeremiah accuses Hananiah of being a false prophet, and his penalty for being a false prophet is death. 4) The last verse of chapter 28 simply states that Hananiah died.

Jeremiah's shade toward Hananiah is that he's calling Hananiah on to the carpet by saying to him "If you're prophecy of peace is true, then we can only know you're a true prophet if what you declare comes to fruition." That the test of a true prophet; if what the prophet says actually happens. At least as far as this chapter is concerned, the true prophet is Jeremiah because he's the one who's still alive at the end after all the dust settles.

I believe that this text, in the midst of its context, poignantly carries a subtext that is tailored to teach us how not to miss the prophecies of God. For I submit to you today that we—as individuals, as a people, a country, as a nation—will continue missing the prophecies of God if we stay fixated on the text and completely ignore context and dismiss the subtext. I struggled with this passage mightily as I sought a way to deliver a sermon about it. One of the jobs of the preacher is to deliver the gospel message—what is the good news—and I'm not aware of the way in which one can preach judgement and captivity as good news. Even by chapter 29 before the message of hope, Jeremiah tells the Judeans to plan to get comfortable in Babylon, to build houses and plant gardens; to get comfortable in captivity. Jeremiah is the protagonist of this story and conventional wisdom tells me that I should simply echo the words of Jeremiah to those under the sound of my voice. But, my personal context, my lived experience tells me that you can miss the prophecies of God if you just preach the text without context and ignore the subtext.

My context reminds me that the message of getting comfortable in captivity will render differently on the ears of black Americans versus that of white Americans. My context reminds me that the message of getting comfortable in captivity may sound frightening to someone who's currently in an abusive relationship or marriage, or even to a child listening who is being abused by their guardians or caretakers. My context reminds me that the prophecy of getting comfortable in captivity can sound more like a curse, because this word of the Lord can be problematic to someone who suddenly has been immobilized physically due to any number of reasons and now is confined to a wheelchair or is bed-ridden.

I see someone's hand raised in the back. And I think I can hear them asking the questions--So what actually is the good news preacher? I'm so glad you asked. Sometimes we have to dig up the subtext, and uncover the not-yet-revealed prophecies of God, to see just exactly where the good news is. The good news is that God still remains present with the people. Throughout this entire book, Jeremiah is constantly prophesying and preaching what God is up to, which to me means God still cares and God is still here. The good news is that there is still hope in the text if you understand the context and the subtext. The context, the following verses in chapter 29 let us know that after all is said and done that God has plans for you.

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. ¹²Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. ¹³When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, ¹⁴I will let you find me, says the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

If God didn't care, and if God had abandoned the people of Judah in chapter 28, God wouldn't still be speaking to Jeremiah in chapter 29. So, let us be open to the true prophecies of God even on this

day, this second day of July. Here's my final prophetic word to those under the sound of my voice—
here is the word of the Lord: God still cares, God is still here and God is still speaking to us.