

The reading we have from the Hebrew Scriptures is best understood with a little historical background, so I'm going to put on my teacher's hat for a moment and prepare some visual aids.

Here is a map of the Assyrian Empire through the year 671 BCE. As you can see, it extended through most of present day Iraq along the Fertile Crescent all the way into Egypt. Now look at the little spot of yellow right in between the two; it's the kingdom of Judah, which is where Jerusalem is located. As you might expect, this is not a particularly good place to be located from a political point of view, right in the middle of two large and powerful kingdoms. Around the year 605 BCE, Judah was under the control of Egypt, and King Jehoiakim, a vassal of Egypt, was on the throne.

The power of Assyria, however, was starting to wane near the end of the 7th century, and the big threat was Babylon. King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon challenged Egyptian/Assyrian control of this area. He overcame Egypt in the region of Judah, and King Jehoiakim changed his allegiance to Babylon. Several years later, Babylon and Egypt started fighting again, this time closer to Egypt. Both armies suffered heavy losses, and King Jehoiakim thought that perhaps the Babylonians were no longer able to maintain its control over Judah, so he switched his allegiance away from Babylon. Bad move! Nebuchadnezzar still had forces to spare from areas neighboring Judah, and he totally overtook the area, ravaging it. The ruling families, the priests, and the artisans were all exiled forcibly to Babylon. In 587, the walls of Jerusalem were breeched and the Temple sacked. The Temple was the symbol of the religious and political life of Judah, and it lay in ruins, and all the people who might be able to put things back together are now in Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar installed a caretaker king by the name of Zedekiah, and his primary responsibility was to collect the tributes for the Babylonian king.

After several years, Zedekiah got into his mind that maybe if he banded together with some of the rulers from the surrounding areas, they might be able to overcome the Babylonian forces and break free of their occupation. This is the timeframe of our reading today.

What we have are two prophets who believe they are both telling the truth from God. Hananiah believes the time of the Babylonians is over, and in two years, everything will be restored to Judah, including the vessels that were taken from the Temple in Jerusalem. Hananiah's message is exactly the one King Zedekiah wants to hear. His prophecy is rooted in God's promise to take care of God's chosen people; God promised to take care to those who adhered to the covenant of their ancestors. Hananiah forgot or

perhaps ignored, however, that God's people have a responsibility; deliverance can't be expected as a matter of course.

Jeremiah, however, offers the opposing view; he's the bearer of bad news. Babylon will not fall but will still be in control of Judah. He said the prophets who preceded him prophesied war, famine, and pestilence. These were not the words that people wanted to hear. Before I go any further, though, let me describe Jeremiah. In the chapter preceding our reading, God instructed him to build and wear a yoke out of straps and bars, much like one would make for cattle or oxen. It is the way used to domesticate and control beasts of burden. The yoke symbolized the exiles' own captivity, and God was very clear that King Nebuchadnezzar was operating as God's servant. Jeremiah was standing there, in his yoke, telling people that God would not deliver them from their oppressors. God told him that all the nations shall service not only Nebuchadnezzar but his son and his grandson. This is what Jeremiah was trying to demonstrate and tell the people of Judah. The subtext of this is that God felt that the faithfulness of the residents of Judah had waned, and it needed to be restored. The way to do this was by submission to a foreign power for awhile. To Jeremiah's listeners, though, what he was saying was hard to understand; God was intentionally causing God's chosen people to suffer? This just didn't seem right. Jeremiah knows that God is the one in charge. We can't expect to know all of God's plans. God's faithfulness can't just be switched on when the going gets tough. It is steadfast, but its manifestation may look different at different times.

It's interesting that both Hananiah and Jeremiah were referred to as prophets, not Hananiah as a "false" prophet or Jeremiah a "true" prophet. They both held the same stature in the eyes of the people. The people were faced with a dilemma, then, who to believe. In our reading, Jeremiah offered advice, and that was hindsight will ultimately tell who was a prophet speaking the words of God. He said, "As for the prophet who prophesies peace, when the word of the prophet comes true, then it will be known that the LORD has truly sent the prophet." While hindsight is helpful to historians, it is not available to people trying to discern a course of action at the time.

The question for us as well as the listeners of Hananiah and Jeremiah is, "How do we distinguish between alternative truth claims?" We can apply this to a number of situations today. An example is the challenge facing our governmental leaders regarding our national and state budgets. Leaders from both sides claim their position is correct and the only way to proceed. As a result, our government seems to be gridlocked, unable to get anything done.

How do we discern, then, the truth since we don't have the benefit of hindsight? Discernment begins with humility. Humility is a trait that we might not expect of our politicians, but it is a starting place for both them and us. It's easy to believe that our position is borne of God and the position of those with opposing views is not. When we

look at weighty and important decisions, though, those are the times when we need to invite God into our discernment and for us to listen more closely than we ever have before. It's the time to get out of the way so that God's will can find room in which to work.

Parker Palmer stated in an article that we are at times called to stand in the "tragic gap". He defines this as the place between what is and what could or should be. We might not be able to resolve the tension between two opposing views, but we can stand in the covenantal love that brings God's will to life. The tragic gap is not an easy place to inhabit. It is not a place in which to find quick resolutions. Nonetheless, this is the place where our messy and broken communities grow closer to God's kingdom, which we pray in the Lord's Prayer should be on earth as it is in heaven.

Jesus' message in the Gospel takes this thought one step further. He's describing a compassionate welcome that we are to give to those around us, that encourages us to trust, to be open, to share, to avoid the manipulation of others, and to live our lives in a manner that enables us to look beyond our own narrow spheres of concern. This compassionate life leads to human relationships of closeness, warmth, and depth. When we subordinate our own needs, we can begin to see God in those around us. This is the opening we need to start seeing God's purpose in our lives and in the world. The compassionate welcome is approaching each other through God. In the ancient world, hospitality was often a matter of necessity. People had to rely on the kindness of strangers when traveling or they might perish. A cup of water, which normally is a small thing, could mean the difference between life and death when in the desert. Treating those around us with respect, whether they share our opinions or not, is the first step toward letting us create space in which God can work.

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