

May the Lord Do So

Prayer of Illumination

Present God,

Settle our hearts.

Still our minds.

And stir our imaginations,

That we might hear your Word for us this day. Amen.

Jeremiah 28:1-11

In that same year, at the beginning of the reign of King Zedekiah of Judah, in the fifth month of the fourth year, the prophet Hananiah son of Azzur, from Gibeon, spoke to me in the house of the Lord, in the presence of the priests and all the people, saying, "Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: I have broken the yoke of the king of Babylon.

Within two years I will bring back to this place all the vessels of the Lord's house, which King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon took away from this place and carried to Babylon. I will also bring back to this place King Jeconiah son of Jehoiakim of Judah and all the exiles from Judah who went to Babylon, says the Lord, for I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon."

Then the prophet Jeremiah spoke to the prophet Hananiah in the presence of the priests and all the people who were standing in the house of the LORD, and the prophet Jeremiah said, "Amen! 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. But listen now to this word that I speak in your hearing and in the hearing of all the people. The prophets who preceded you and me from ancient times prophesied war, famine, and pestilence against many countries and great kingdoms. As 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."

Then the prophet Hananiah took the yoke from the neck of the prophet Jeremiah and broke it. And Hananiah spoke in the presence of all the people, saying, "Thus says the Lord: This is how I will break the yoke of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon from the neck of all the nations within two years." At this, the prophet Jeremiah went his way.

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

May the Lord Do So

At some point during the Babylonian conquest of Judah, the prophet Jeremiah began wearing a wooden yoke around his neck—the kind you'd use to harness oxen to a plow. For years, Jeremiah had been warning that the kingdom of Judah would be destroyed unless the people repented and returned to the covenant they had made with God.

But people weren't listening, so God told Jeremiah to make the warning visible: "Make for yourself yoke straps and bars and put them on your neck." And then tell the kings and leaders that the God who created the earth has chosen to hand the nations over to King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. Tell them that any nation unwilling to put its neck under Babylon's yoke will be punished with sword, famine, and disease.

Jeremiah is not a comfortable companion. He lived through the slow collapse of Judah: the Babylonian invasions, the fall of Jerusalem, the destruction of the Temple, and the exile of the people. The book that bears his name is the longest in the Hebrew Bible, and much of it is filled with Jeremiah arguing with God, lamenting his call, and watching the very future he has been warning people about unfold before his eyes.

By the time we reach our passage for this morning, Judah's collapse has already begun. The Babylonians have carried away the king, thousands of people, and many of the sacred vessels from the Temple. And things are only going to get worse: within a decade, Jerusalem will fall, the Temple will be destroyed, and many more people will be carried into exile.

But in this passage, none of this is known. What is known is that Jeremiah is a drag. He is a broken record, insisting that Judah must serve the king of Babylon if they are to survive. That if they refuse, what has already happened is only the beginning.

But Jeremiah is not the only voice prophesying. Other prophets are proclaiming a very different message: namely, that God has already begun to restore what has been lost, that the people have suffered enough, that Babylon's power is already beginning to crumble. Hananiah is one such prophet. In our passage for this morning, he speaks with the confidence and authority of a true prophet, and his message could not be more different from Jeremiah's.

While Jeremiah proclaims that the people must submit to Babylon if they are to survive, Hananiah declares, "Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: I have broken the yoke of the king of Babylon. Within two years I will bring back to this place all the vessels of the Lord's house, along with the king and all the people who were taken into exile."

"God is already undoing the exile," Hananiah proclaims. "The people have endured enough. In two years' time it will all be over. Life, as the people knew it, will be restored." It is a message of hope. A welcome beacon of light in a dark time.

But Jeremiah does not contradict Hananiah. He does not denounce him. He does not argue with him. He simply says, "Amen! May the Lord do so."

"May God do exactly what you have prophesied," Jeremiah replies. "Of course that is what we all hope will happen."

But Jeremiah doesn't stop there. He goes on to say something that is both humble and unsettling: the prophets who came before us—before both of us, he says, before you and before me—rarely offered words of easy comfort. They spoke hard truths into hard situations. They named reality honestly, even when it was unwelcome, even when it meant acknowledging that God's people had helped bring it about.

"Amen," Jeremiah says. "I hope you're right. But if the prophets who came before us are any guide, a true word from God usually begins with honest truth-telling. Let's wait and see," Jeremiah concedes. "Maybe God will relent. I hope so. Time will tell."

Hananiah, though, is not interested in waiting. He has no use for Jeremiah's humility. He is certain. He is so certain that he reaches out, takes the yoke from Jeremiah's neck, and breaks it.

Hananiah doesn't simply reject Jeremiah's message. He reaches out and removes from Jeremiah's body the very sign God told Jeremiah to wear and he breaks it in half before the priests and all the people, declaring, "Thus says the Lord, this is how I will break the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar from the neck of all nations within two years."

And Jeremiah?

Jeremiah simply walks away.

It would be easy to conclude that Hananiah has won. The yoke has been broken. The crowd has witnessed it. The prophet of hard truths has left the building. It's hard to imagine standing in that crowd and not siding with Hananiah.

But Jeremiah doesn't walk away because Hananiah has won. Jeremiah walks away because time will tell. The question can no longer be settled by argument. Jeremiah has borne faithful witness to the word he has heard from God, and that is all he can do in this moment.

Jeremiah isn't a prophet of doom, no matter how dire his forecasts. He is a prophet of truth. And the truth, in his experience, is that hope cannot bypass reality. Hope that promises restoration without reckoning isn't hope at all. It is an escape from the harder, more faithful work of naming reality honestly—of asking how we got here, and what it looks like to be faithful in the reality we actually inhabit rather than simply waiting to be rescued from it.

Jeremiah doesn't answer Hananiah that day. He walks away. But he isn't done. In the very next chapter, Jeremiah writes a letter to the exiles in Babylon—the very people Hananiah has just promised will be home in two years. And in that letter Jeremiah tells the exiles to “build houses and live in them. Plant gardens. Get married. Have children. Seek the welfare of the city where you have been sent.” And then he offers one of the most profound statements of hope in all of scripture: “For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.”

Hope, for Jeremiah, can't pretend the exile isn't happening. Hope asks what faithfulness looks like within the exile. Hope, as Jeremiah understands it, trusts that God can be found there—in Babylon, in exile, in the hard place where God's people actually are. Hope doesn't wait for reality to change before it begins living faithfully within it.

This is an ancient story. But it is not a distant one. Jeremiah and Hananiah have been dead for two and a half thousand years. But the choice they represent—a hope that asks us to reckon honestly with reality and a hope that promises we can simply return to the way things were—is a choice we face every time we find ourselves somewhere we'd rather not be.

Looking back on the early days of COVID, I remember how compelling a hope like Hananiah's can be. I remember debating with Pastor Jenny about whether we should celebrate Easter on Zoom or wait and celebrate when we were back in person. I argued for waiting—I was certain we'd be back to normal in a month, two at the most.

I was wrong.

I wasn't the only one.

Because COVID wasn't just an interruption. It was, in many ways, a revelation. It revealed the fragility of systems we had assumed were stable, from supply chains, to healthcare, to the economy. It revealed the consequences of erasing the boundaries between human and wild spaces, consequences that made something like COVID not just possible but inevitable. It revealed deep inequities in who got sick, who died, who could work from home and who could not, who had healthcare and who did not. And alongside the pandemic came a public reckoning with structural racism that was no longer possible to ignore.

And what most of us wanted—understandably—was for it to be over. For things to return to normal. For someone to break the yoke and declare, “Two months, maybe less, and we'll be back to the way things were.”

But the harder question, the Jeremiah question, was whether the way things were was something worth returning to. It is the question of what faithfulness looks like once we have seen what has been revealed.

For the most part, we went back to the way things had been. We declared the shutdown over. But Jeremiah's question remains: given what has been revealed, what does faithfulness look like now?

Because Jeremiah didn't stay away. He walked away from the crowd, from the broken yoke, from Hananiah's certainty and the people's applause. And he waited. He walked away, and he waited, and he listened. And when the word of the Lord came to him again, he returned.

"Build houses," he said, "plant gardens. Marry and have children and find spouses for your children. Seek the welfare of the place where you are. Not because the exile is good, or just, or what God wanted for you, but because this is where you are. And God can be found here. God is already here—in Babylon, in the hard place. 'I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.'"

That is the word Jeremiah carried. The word he kept coming back with. Because a future with hope begins by seeing reality as it is. A future with hope requires the courage to reckon honestly with how we got here. A future with hope asks what faithfulness looks like now.

We are not so different from the people standing in the temple that day. We, too, know what it is to long for the easy word, the quick resolution, for someone to step forward and promise that soon enough we'll be back to the way things were. We have stood with that crowd. Most of us, if we're honest, still do, at least some of the time.

But the invitation—the one Jeremiah keeps returning to extend, even after the yoke has been broken, even after the crowd has chosen the easier hope—is to something harder and more honest. It is an invitation to see reality clearly, to reckon honestly with how we got here, and to ask what faithfulness looks like now. It is an invitation to trust that God can be found in the reality we actually inhabit; to trust that the hope on the other side of honest reckoning is more solid, more real, and more worth having than the hope that simply promises a return to the way things were.

Amen. May it be so.