

Pentecost2a – Jeremiah 28:5-9
'The walls won't cave in on you'

1. Today we're looking at the prophetic word of Jeremiah and the false prophet Hananiah. But first let's turn to 2 Timothy 4:1-5 and Paul's charge to Timothy about speaking the words of God into the lives of God's people:

¹ In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: ² Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. ³ For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. ⁴ They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. ⁵ But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.

It's a pretty sobering word to young Timothy!

- “In the presence of God and of Jesus Christ.”
- “Who will judge the living and the dead” (this judgement will happen and no-one has immunity)
- “And in view of His appearing” – because Jesus Christ will return for His people – which quite frankly makes the message Timothy is to proclaim the highest priority and supremely important.

What's the message? The message is the cross of Christ. It's a call to repentance – turning away from a life *captive to the power of sin* and turning to Jesus, believing in him and receiving life in his name!

To do this Timothy needs to be prepared, to watch his own words and life, he needs to correct false teaching and practices, to rebuke and to encourage the people of God. Timothy's called to do this patiently and with attention to the details. *Why?*

Because Paul says, people will ask and even come to expect a very different message. A message usually affirming ungodliness and worldliness minus any call to repentance, and, if you're listening to the culture, minus the call to believe in anything you don't feel matches up to your lifestyle choices.

In other words people will surround themselves with teachers who won't challenge them, or raise the bar, or point them to any kind of obedience or real heavenly hope, who will leave out ugly things like repentance and crucifixion and death, who will water down the real message of resurrection - but continually declare peace, love, wealth, prosperity and comfort - no matter what.

What's the itch in the ear that you want satisfied today? Are there things in your life you want God's word to affirm? Do you want God to say He wills all people to be materially wealthy? That it won't affect your life with God if you opt out of worship? That your faith is private and it's okay to keep it to yourself? The other person is wrong so it's okay to treat them badly or judge them? What about in your marriages & close relationships – what are your ears itching to hear there?

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And are our itching ears ever really satisfied by the scratch of the world? Or are we soothed by the balm that comes from confessing your sin and receiving forgiveness and release so we can walk in the direction the Lord has set for us – the path of true relief and joy!?

False prophets and itching ears are an extremely dangerous combination – and it's happening all around us.

2. Now imagine its 593BC - some six centuries before Jesus, Paul and Timothy. There stands the prophet Jeremiah in the presence of the priests and all the people in Jerusalem.

We should be impressed because Jeremiah's showing remarkable restraint as a false prophet babbles on. The false prophet is Hananiah. He's a prophet of peace – who claims God's authority for a message that goes head to head with God's word spoken through Jeremiah.

- *Which way will the people go?*
- *Which prophet will go home a loser?*

Hananiah is doing exactly what Paul warns Timothy about in the NT! He was tickling itching ears with what they wanted to hear. And he's on very dangerous ground!

The topic is exile - being carried off into captivity by the Babylonians. Some have already been taken into captivity – but word is, there's more to come. If we listen to Jeremiah we're looking at almost everyone being carried into captivity under Nebuchadnezzar because of open and continued rebellion against God.

Jeremiah is telling us there are consequences for open rebellion and breaking the covenant relationship we have with God. He's not saying God doesn't love the people he created – He surely does! He's saying that idolatry and sins of all kinds carry consequences that are painful. He's calling for a changing of ways – repentance, but no-one is listening.

If we listen to Hananiah – it's a much lighter sentence: Two years and everything will be just like it was before

...God is a God of love, he's not angry at your sin. So you've rebelled – it's okay – we all do from time to time. God won't send you into exile for your sin...come on, chin up... don't beat yourself up (or repent), God accepts you just as you are. Let's have a cup of tea...things will look much better in the morning.

Who would you vote for? Exile and captivity or peace and comfort?

This isn't a competition between prophets – The truth is it doesn't matter who you vote for - The Word of the LORD is about God and God's plans! *And He will act...*

Jeremiah says, "Amen! May the LORD do so! May the LORD fulfill the words you[Hananiah] have prophesied by bringing the articles of the LORD's house and all the exiles back to this place from Babylon.[Jeremiah would love it if this were actually the case – but it's not what

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The LORD has spoken to and through him!] ⁷ Nevertheless, listen to what I have to say in your hearing and in the hearing of all the people: ⁸ From early times the prophets who preceded you and me have prophesied war, disaster and plague against many countries and great kingdoms. ⁹ But the prophet who prophesies peace will be recognized as one truly sent by the LORD only if his prediction comes true."

A true prophet's words will actually happen according to God's plan and purposes.

So Hananiah who was not sent by the LORD, and who set the people up to trust in a lie died that year. Hananiah's open rebellion and false prophecy that pulled others into a lie, cost him his life.

And the people were carried off into captivity in Babylon in 586 BC because they refused to repent and trust in God – even though God pleaded with them through his prophets.

False prophets lead themselves and others into a false comfort and a false peace that is actually a deep spiritual exile and captivity.

3. One thing I'm constantly amazed by, is the spiritual insight of people who don't come to church. Who's heard the classic line, "Oh I couldn't come to church, the walls would collapse if I set foot in here?"

What I love about that statement is that people are honest enough to admit that they live in ways that would be confronted in the presence of a Holy and Almighty God. They 'get' the OT image that sinful people cannot gaze upon God and live – such is His glory and righteousness and infinite perfection - that it completely obliterates that which is un-holy and un-righteous.

People who are concerned that the walls of the church may collapse on them recognize that they are living in captivity and exile – away from God and His holy presence. Perhaps deep down they think it's unsafe to come to church.

We may find ourselves tempted to say, "come on, chin up... don't beat yourself up (or repent), God accepts you just as you are. Let's have a cup of tea...things will look much better in the morning."

But we don't want to align ourselves with Hananiah, the false prophet do we?

The risk is that we lead people into greater slavery to sin and captivity instead of pointing them away from their old life and in towards new life in Christ.

The intent is good - wanting to make people feel at peace, but that peace can only truly come through the whole counsel of God.

Our calling is to affirm this thinking in others and in ourselves. Often the first thing to get dumped in a Christian's life when they're racked with guilt or stuck in a pattern of sin is worship. So we can encourage each other here too – not judging each other, but being honest and loving each other with the truth:

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- To say, "You're right – God's holiness and righteousness should confront us. It should cause a deep reverence and humility in us."
- "You're right, the church walls should cave in upon us all – but God's anger at sin was directed at someone else.
- The walls caved in upon Jesus on the cross who carried the weight of our rebellion and un-righteousness.
- Through Him we can enter God's house in humility, with a deep seated reverence to receive forgiveness and help and freedom from the captivity and bondage of sin.
- Friend, the church walls won't cave in on you either!"

A true prophet's prediction of peace has come to pass: I read this to you last week,

¹⁸ *"The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners*

...
*to set the oppressed free,
¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*

²⁰ *Then Jesus rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. ²¹ Jesus said to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."*

You can trust these words. Not only because they were prophesied long ago by the prophet Isaiah; but because they have been fulfilled in Jesus and sealed forever on Calvary's cross for you and me.

Jesus comes to us all today with Good news – releasing news! The walls of the church will not cave in on us or our friends! Jesus has carried all our sins and freed us from the captivity of sin.

4. We keep living this message of freedom from spiritual exile and captivity don't we? We keep hearing God's prophetic word calling us to repentance and faith in Jesus. We keep hearing Jesus' words releasing us from the captivity and slavery of our thoughts, words and actions. The things that are hidden in our lives that God sees, and the things about us that are public and everyone can see.

False prophets and itching ears deprive us of the freedom and release that God speaks into our lives. They may sound appealing in our itching ears, but they deprive us of the gift of repentance that leads to rejoicing in heaven and freedom from spiritual exile and captivity.

So this week, look to Jesus' cross; take comfort in the power of your baptism and be certain that in Him you are no longer a slave to sin, an exile or bound for captivity. Your journey is heavenward. The call of Jesus and the comfort of His cross truly is the balm that satisfies what itching ears need to hear! In Jesus' name, Amen!