

Jeremiah 28:5-9

On May 13, 1940 as Hitler was advancing into France, Belgium, and the Netherlands, Winston Churchill, about to become Prime Minister, did not hold out hope of a speedy victory or of an early peace, but he uttered these difficult words to the British parliament: “*I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears, and sweat.*” Can you even imagine a politician today campaigning with a slogan like that?

The prophet Jeremiah is not campaigning, yet his message is similarly difficult. Babylon, with its king Nebuchadnezzar, is rising in power. It has already taken captive many of the people of Judah, along with the sacred vessels in the temple. God tells Jeremiah to make it clear to His people that their enemy, Babylon, would indeed conquer, that the exiles and vessels would not come back for a long time, that Nebuchadnezzar was, in fact, God’s servant, and He was using him to judge His people and call them to repentance.

In our text we meet another prophet...Hananiah. He delivers a message that opposes what Jeremiah says. He tells the people that within two years the power of Babylon will be crushed, and all the exiles and vessels of God’s house would return to Judah. Now, which prophet would you rather believe?

Like the people then, we surely would want to believe that God was on our side and not on the side of our enemy; that the difficulties we face would soon be over; and so we would want to listen to Hananiah and not to Jeremiah. Even Jeremiah himself wishes that what Hananiah says was true. “*Amen!*” he says, “*May the Lord do so; may the Lord make the words you have prophesied come true...*” But he knows better. He knows that what lies ahead for God’s people is blood, toil, tears, and sweat. He knows this because God put His words into his mouth, and not into the mouth of Hananiah.

I wish that I could tell you today that soon, very soon, the virus would come to an end and would not resurface, and that the people in our country would unite – that peace would reign instead of violence. But if I said such things, I would be, like Hananiah, a false prophet. Throughout history God sent His prophets not to pat His people on the back and tell them that their future was bright and cheery, but to warn them; to tell them that what was coming, as Jeremiah says, was “*war, famine, and pestilence.*”

I am no prophet at all, and woe to the one who thinks he is. The only prophets to whom we are to listen are God’s prophets in Scripture. And their message to God’s people then is also for His people today. The message is this: repent.

Do not take lightly what is happening all around us. We are quick to blame the devil for the virus and for the tidal wave of unrest and violence that is sweeping across our land. Yet could not all of this be from God? Nebuchadnezzar, Judah’s enemy, was God’s servant to bring His people to their knees in repentance. We should not dismiss as absurd the possibility that God is behind everything today. That the virus and those inciting violence are His servants, and that He is wanting to drive us to our knees and repent while there is still time.

I cannot force my neighbor to his knees. I cannot make the people of this nation repent. But I can fall to my knees. I can repent. And I should, for the sins of which I am guilty are no less in the eyes of God than the sins of those around me.

Today people are pointing the finger of blame at everyone else, and not at themselves. They are even blaming those who lived hundreds of years ago. This is not repentance. This is not humbly bowing before God and crying, *“God, be merciful to me, the sinner!”* What we see today is similar to what we see in our text. Hananiah is proclaiming God’s grace and favor, but without repentance. He is promising victory without suffering. He is, in effect, preaching the resurrection without the cross. *“Let others repent, not you,”* are his words to the people of Judah.

Friends, the world will always listen to the Hananiahs of our modern age. Do not be deceived by them. Jesus clearly says that to follow Him, we must expect suffering. We must deny ourself and take up our cross.

As He says all these things to us, He reminds us that He was willing to deny Himself and take up His cross for us. There was no easy road to victory for Him. Nor is there for us. For as we follow Jesus, we may indeed be offered blood, toil, tears, and sweat. But take comfort. It is Jesus’ blood, toil, tears, and sweat which guarantees your victory in the end.

“As for the prophet who prophesies peace,” says Jeremiah, *“when the word of that prophet comes to pass, then it will be known that the Lord has truly sent the prophet.”* In Jesus, God gives you the word of peace. He is God’s true Prophet, for He made the word of peace come to pass. He did this by offering Himself upon the altar of the cross for all sinners. In Christ, God is at peace with you. In Christ, God forgives you all your sins. Each and everyone of you He forgives.

So why does Jesus say, *“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.”* The sword that cuts to the heart must come first. Repentance before peace. Otherwise it is a false peace, the kind Hananiah promised.

Our world will never be at peace because the world refuses to repent. You, however, are daily called to return to your baptism through repentance. There in your baptism is God’s peace, for there in those waters is the blood, toil, tears, and sweat of Jesus for you. Amen.