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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA
June 28, 2020
Year A, Proper 8, Revised Common Lectionary, Track 2
[Jeremiah 28:5-9](#)
[Psalm 89:1-4,15-18](#)
[Romans 6:12-23](#)
[Matthew 10:40-42](#)

In the name of the one, holy, and living God: Amen.

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So how do you tell a true prophet from a false prophet?

Maybe we should start with what a prophet is. Sometimes people think a prophet is someone who predicts the future. And sometimes they do, but sometimes not. Because what being a prophet really means is being someone who speaks for God. Sometimes a prophet has more to say about what's going on in the present, and what God really thinks about it. A prophet is someone who can talk about reality from a God's-eye point of view.

So how do you tell a false prophet from a true prophet?

You can't always, of course. Sometimes events just have to play out. Jeremiah was a prophet in Jerusalem when the Babylonians had invaded and carried off many of the people into exile. He spoke in the name of God to say: this is how it's going to be, and not just for a short time. For seventy years, Jeremiah said, God's people are going to be under Babylonian rule—so we'd better adapt. It wasn't a welcome message. There were more appealing alternative prophets to listen to. One was named Hananiah. He said that after just two years God would smash the Babylonians and bring the good times back to Jerusalem.

We heard Jeremiah's reply to Hananiah today. He essentially says: "Sounds good! I sure hope it happens that way! But if your words come true, *then* we'll know that you're the real prophet around here." And of course it turned out that Jeremiah is right. The exile lasted seventy years. So Hananiah was wrong. But aside from just waiting to see how things turn out, there may be a clue here about how to discern false and true prophets. Hananiah, the false prophet, *tells the people what feels good for them to hear*. It's easy to listen to a prophet whose message you like. It's easy to let liking the message take the place of prayer, and scripture, and shared discernment. That doesn't mean true prophets never share good news. But it does mean that a false prophet might be likely to tell us what feels comfortable to hear.

Our Gospel reading today has Jesus talking about traveling prophets. “Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward.” It seems the earliest churches had many of these itinerant prophets and teachers who went from village to village, sharing the words and teachings of Jesus. In that first generation or so, the Gospels hadn’t been written down yet, so oral teaching by these travelers was how you could learn about Jesus. So it really mattered to know the prophet who came to your village was a true prophet and not a false one. There’s a special document called the *Didache*, or the Teaching, which seems to have been written at this time. It’s not part of scripture, but it’s a precious text because it gives us a glimpse of the lives of these very, very early, first-century churches—and it uses a lot of the same language as the Gospel of Matthew, so scholars think it may come from the very same circles as the Gospel passage we just read.

The *Didache* says you should welcome any prophet who comes to you and let them stay with you for the night with no questions asked. If they stay another night, well and good. But if they stay a third night, they’re a false prophet. It says a true prophet might accept bread for the journey to the next place—but if they ask for money, they’re a false prophet. It says they might tell you to give food to others, but if they order up a banquet for themselves, they’re a false prophet. It says a true prophet might tell you to give to the poor, but if they say, “Give money to me,” they’re a false prophet.

So if we learned from Jeremiah that false prophets might tell you what you want to hear, we learn two more things from the *Didache*. False prophets might be in it for themselves. And true prophets care about people who are poor or excluded.

Jesus tells us something else today: he says even a little act of kindness like a cup of cold water for his sake won’t go unrewarded. Sometimes we might not be sure if we’re dealing with a false or true prophet. But it never hurts to care for someone’s bodily needs. Traditionally that cup of cold water has been expanded into seven traditional “corporal works of mercy,” things we can do at any time to show Christ’s love to other human beings: feed someone who’s hungry, give drink to someone who’s thirsty, give shelter to someone who’s homeless, visit someone who’s sick, visit someone who’s in prison, bury someone who has died, and give money to someone who doesn’t have it. Sometimes we might not be sure what to do to tackle a complicated social issue. Doing one of these basic works of mercy is always the right thing to do. It doesn’t get us off the hook for the deeper work of discernment about how we are to act or vote or march or donate or write letters. But it’s always a good place to start.

Who are the prophets we need to be listening to today?

Again, sometimes it's easier to tell in hindsight. Today lots of people in this country would probably agree that Martin Luther King, Jr., was something of a modern-day prophet: that his message of civil rights and justice through nonviolent protest was in line with what God wants for the world. There's a national holiday on his birthday and a statue of him on the National Mall. But back in 1963 two upstanding, well-educated, respectable Episcopal bishops weren't so sure. Dr. King and his associates were leading a series of nonviolent demonstrations against segregation in Birmingham. And Bishop Carpenter and Bishop Murray of the Episcopal Diocese of Alabama were concerned. So they wrote a letter, together with six other white clergymen, and published it in the newspaper. It called the demonstrations "extreme measures" that were unwise and untimely." It urged Black demonstrators to calm things down, get off the streets, and seek their goals patiently through official channels.

Dr. King was in jail when he read their letter in the paper. He started scribbling his response in the margins of the paper itself, and eventually was allowed to have a writing tablet to finish what became one of the most famous letters in history, the "Letter from Birmingham Jail." He wrote about his understanding of civil disobedience and said, "An individual who breaks [an unjust] law ... and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for law." And he wrote, "True peace is not merely the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice."¹

Bishop Carpenter and Bishop Murray and their colleagues had good intentions. But they got it wrong. It's not always easy to tell a false prophet from a true one. It's easier in hindsight. But there are a few principles that can help us discern. A false prophet might tell you something that's easy for you to hear. A false prophet might tell you something that's convenient for themselves. And a true prophet always cares about those who are poor and excluded.

Meanwhile, Jesus tells us a cup of cold water is always welcome.

¹ "Letter from Birmingham Jail," April 16, 1963; https://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/documents/Letter_Birmingham_Jail.pdf (accessed June 26, 2020).