

“Who is a Prophet?”
Jeremiah 28:1-17; Matthew 10:40-42
First Presbyterian Church, Marshfield, WI
June 28, 2026
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The lectionary is a great tool and aid to the preacher and a congregation. Some churches put all four of the suggested texts for a given Sunday into the service, as does Faith Lutheran, and over a three-year period the congregation hears most of the Bible read to them. For the preacher who can choose any one or more of the texts for a sermon, they prevent him or her from riding their favorite hobby horses and saying much the same thing week after week. In my case, and I may have said this before, I like to treat the Old Testament text, the Psalm, the Epistle, and the Gospel like four, little Kindergartners, all jumping up and down wanting to be picked. I read the texts through and wait to see which one reaches out and grabs me, and that becomes the text for the sermon.

There is one problem with this, however. The texts are relatively short, probably because congregations don't want to sit through a lot of scriptural reading. Usually, that is OK. But sometimes one needs more context than that gives. That is the case today. The actual lectionary text was Jeremiah 28:5-9, but by itself it doesn't make a whole lot of sense. So, I decided to do something unheard of in the Presbyterian Church. I decided to read the whole chapter! That isn't so bad, because the Gospel text was only three verses long. Even so, we need to add a little more explanation than even the chapter gives.

As a symbolic parable, the Lord commanded that Jeremiah make a yoke and put it on himself. He was told that Judah and all the surrounding countries would be brought under the yoke of Babylon, and that many of the people, including King Jehoiachin, would be carried into exile. It was stated that Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, was the servant of the Lord. Thus, Jeremiah told the people to live under Babylonian rule, because it was the Lord's will, and anyone who said differently was lying to them. That sets the stage for chapter 28.

Here we have two men, Hananiah and Jeremiah, both of whom are held to be prophets. Hananiah prophesies that in two years the rule of Babylon will be broken, the people will all return along with their king, and all the stolen

goods from the temple returned. Jeremiah seems to validate that prophecy with his "Amen." However, he qualifies it by saying that prophets previously had prophesied ruin and destruction on countries that disobeyed the Lord, and while what Hananiah said sounded wonderful, it would only be prophecy if it proved to be true. Hananiah breaks the yoke off Jeremiah's shoulders, as a symbol of his prophecy, and then Jeremiah goes away.

But very shortly, the Lord speaks to Jeremiah and commands him to go back to Hananiah and tell him what is really going to happen.

The prophet Jeremiah said to Hananiah the prophet, "Listen, Hananiah! The LORD has NOT sent you, yet you have persuaded this nation to trust in lies. Therefore, this is what the LORD says: 'I am about to remove you from the face of the earth. This very year you are going to die, because you have preached rebellion against the LORD.'" In the seventh month of that same year, Hananiah the prophet died.

That was only two months after Jeremiah told Hananiah what was going to happen. Just because someone says they are a prophet and have a word from the Lord, doesn't make that true. Many with money and power think they are God's gift to the earth, and have the right to tell everyone else what to do, but they are just people with secular power and a lot of money. That doesn't make them prophets that a person committed to Jesus Christ need acknowledge, much less follow. They are temporary and transient, but we as Christians follow one who is much more powerful than any of them ever will be. We follow Jesus Christ and measure all that we do and whom we follow by what he taught us and showed us in his life, ministry, death, and resurrection. There is where real power lies.

So, who do we know that might fit this role of prophet by living out a life generally patterned on Jesus' life and ministry? Note that no one that we mention will be without fault. They are very human, and had we known Jeremiah, we would have found the same thing. Remember that he really didn't even like being a prophet. If you doubt that, go home and read Jeremiah 20.

Equality and inclusion seem to me to be two trademarks of Jesus' life, crucifixion and resurrection. Nobody is left out. That was the driving force behind the Civil Rights Movement. Martin Luther King, Jr., could well be called prophetic in his

work to gain civil rights for all men and women of color. He certainly was not a wilting violet. He was out on the front lines confronting people who believed that he was the scum of the earth along with all those other black people whom he represented. But he didn't let that deter him. After Rosa Parks sparked the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott by refusing to move to the back of the bus, King oversaw the boycott which lasted for 380 days from December 5, 1955 to December 20, 1956. It was the first real challenge to the south's Jim Crow laws, and was a movement that would finally bring some rights to black people in this country.

The most Christ-like actions of King were his non-violent marches against segregation in the south. He led two marches from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, and though the marchers were committed to non-violence, the police certainly were not. They were brutal with firehoses, billy clubs, and attack dogs. Many of the marchers were imprisoned, and King went to jail numerous times during his life for the cause. In his "I Have a Dream" speech King lays out the foundation of his vision, not only for Black people, but also for the nation. As I look at it, it not only articulates a vision for our nation based on Constitutional grounds, but it is also a profound statement of faith. It is a statement congruent with what Christ would wish for all his people, and for all the children of God. If nothing else, King was prophet-like. Let's look at a bit of his speech at the Lincoln Memorial, delivered on August 28, 1963, which well could be remembered by all of us as we approach our Fourth of July this year.

Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of their captivity. But 100 years later, the Negro still is not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination.

Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy. Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice. Now is the time to lift our nation from the quick sands of

racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood. Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children.

So even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today.

When this happens, and when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, Black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual: Free at last. Free at last. Thank God almighty, we are free at last.

I see nothing in this that would contradict the gospel as it has been given to us by Jesus Christ. Thus, I am not at all hesitant to say that the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was a spokesperson for God at a very troubled time in our history. And we need to continue to hear his message today, for we are sliding backwards in our commitment to racial equality and justice.

I think another contemporary Prophetic voice is that of Greta Thunberg. This young woman, very clear in what was happening to the environment, addressed the UN Climate Action Committee on September 23, 2019. At the time she was

only 16 years old, but wise beyond her years. Here is an excerpt from her speech to the UN.

"My message is that we'll be watching you.

"This is all wrong. I shouldn't be up here. I should be back in school on the other side of the ocean. Yet you all come to us young people for hope. How dare you!

"You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words. And yet I'm one of the lucky ones. People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction, and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you!

"How dare you pretend that this can be solved with just 'business as usual' and some technical solutions? With today's emissions levels, that remaining CO2 budget will be entirely gone within less than 8 1/2 years.

"There will not be any solutions or plans presented in line with these figures here today, because these numbers are too uncomfortable. And you are still not mature enough to tell it like it is.

"You are failing us. But the young people are starting to understand your betrayal. The eyes of all future generations are upon you. And if you choose to fail us, I say: We will never forgive you.

"We will not let you get away with this. Right here, right now is where we draw the line. The world is waking up. And change is coming, whether you like it or not.

It would be nice if more of our young people could see with the eyes and passion of Greta Thunberg, not only in climate issues, but also in the social issues she has addressed since. She has participated in protests against the Russian-Ukrainian war, against the way the people in the Gaza strip are being treated, and most recently about the way this country is treating the people in Cuba. She cares about people, and that is the heart of a prophetic voice. She cares about people

the rich and powerful write-off. Somehow, I think that may well be a sign of prophetic insight. We need to listen to people who care so deeply, that they are willing to put themselves, and even their lives, on the line. That is what Jesus did, and that is what most of the biblical prophets and apostles did. If the message is one of compassion and puts the lives of people before our own, it may well be the Lord speaking anew through his called people to the hearts of his children here in our day and time.

In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.