

First Reading - Romans 12:1-2

Second Reading - Jeremiah 28:1-9

Sermon - The True Prophet

Alfred Wegener was a German meteorologist in the early 20th century. In 1912, he proposed Continental Drift Theory. In case you don't remember from High School geology, the theory of continental drift suggests that Earth's continents were once joined together into a single supercontinent called Pangaea before they broke apart and slowly drifted to their current positions. In 1912, when Wegener first proposed this theory, he was ridiculed by the geological community. His peers suggested that his ideas were scientific fantasy. It wasn't until the mid 1960's, more than 30 years after Wegener's death, that his theory became widely accepted. The use of sonar to map the ocean floor helped scientists to understand that the continents actually ride on massive, moving tectonic plates, providing vindication for Wegener's theory. The passage of time eventually made clear that Wegener wasn't peddling scientific fantasy after all. He was sharing legitimate scientific theory.

This reminds me somewhat of the words of Jeremiah. In our scripture passage, Jeremiah suggests that one way to discern whether a prophet was truly sent by God was to wait for the prophet's words to come true. Let me put this story into context for you. Jeremiah was a prophet in the southern kingdom of Judah, which included the city of Jerusalem. A little over a century before this story takes place, the northern kingdom of Israel had been conquered by the Assyrians and the people taken into exile. The people of the southern kingdom did not believe that the same could happen to them, but unfortunately that wasn't true. At the time of this story, the city of Jerusalem was under siege. It had been conquered by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, who claimed the city and sacked the temple. While the majority of the population was still living in Judah, many of the leaders had been taken into exile. The King of Judah, King

Zedekiah, was really a puppet king, reporting the Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians. Into this picture come two competing prophets, Jeremiah and Hananiah. On one side, Hananiah believed that the people of Jerusalem should rebel against the Babylonians. On the other side, Jeremiah was opposed to rebellion, warning the people that they should submit to the Babylonians if they wanted to survive. In fact, in a quite dramatic gesture, Jeremiah wore an actual wooden yoke around his neck to symbolize his warning to the people of Jerusalem. I have to admit I appreciate Jeremiah's flair for drama.

Hananiah was the one who shared the message that the Judahites wanted to hear. After gathering the priests and the people together in the temple, Hananiah loudly proclaimed that God had broken the yoke of the Babylonians, and that within two years, all of the treasures pillaged from the temple of Jerusalem would be returned along with the captive leaders. In true dramatic fashion, Hananiah grabbed the yoke from around Jeremiah's neck and smashed it into pieces. Again, I really enjoy the soap opera theatrics of the scene. Jeremiah's response was more measured, however. *"May the Lord do so," he said. "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."* Talk about bringing down the mood. Unfortunately, Jeremiah was correct. The people did eventually revolt against the Babylonians, and when that revolt failed, the Babylonians destroyed the city of Jerusalem, including the temple and most of the population was sent into exile for the next 70 years.

So the results of time showed which prophet was truly sent by God. Jeremiah was the one who spoke the truth. Does this mean that Hananiah

was a fraud? Was he intent on lying to the people and manipulating them for his own purposes? It's possible, but I think it's very likely that Hananiah truly believed that the advice he gave the people was, in fact, God's will. It's possible that the differences in Jeremiah's and Hananiah's messages stemmed from differing understandings of who God is and how God demonstrates God's faithfulness. For Hananiah, God's faithfulness should result in prosperity for God's people. Many people today envision God like this. If we just ask in the right way, God will provide us with all the good things we deserve. Jeremiah's understanding of God went deeper, however. Jeremiah knew that life was not always that simple, and the easy answer, the answer we want to hear, is not always the right answer. Sometimes we have to do hard things.

So what do we do with this story? We live in a world of dichotomous opinions and opposing philosophies. The people speaking the loudest often claim their message is from God, but many of those messages directly contradict each other so they cannot all truly represent God's desires and purposes for the world. Perhaps they stem from differing understandings of who God is and how God demonstrates God's faithfulness. Unfortunately, Jeremiah's maxim that the true message will be revealed in time is not that helpful to us here. We are called to make difficult decisions now, both in our personal lives and in the life of our community and our world. Our lives are filled with competing voices, clamoring for our attention. We must decide who to trust. We can't wait years to determine which prophet has a line on the truth.

Fortunately, if we read carefully, this story gives us more. There is additional advice available here. Notice that in his response to his competition, Jeremiah refers to the many prophets who came before him, the ones who didn't prophesy an easy peace. Jeremiah reminded the people that Hananiah's message was inconsistent with these words from history. His message didn't fit with earlier wisdom. So, when considering whether a particular opinion truly directs us on the right path, we are encouraged to examine it in relation to what we already know. God has

revealed God's self to us in scripture as one who loves unconditionally, who serves generously, who calls us to seek justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. When making decisions, we should ask if the voices we discern are directing us on a path that is consistent with these expectations of love and generosity. This may sound simple but we have answered this question incorrectly many times before. Throughout history Christian's have acted in ways that are wildly divergent from these values of justice, kindness, and humility; the crusades, the inquisition, American chattel slavery to name just a few. In each of these cases, Christian's acted with violence and hatred while claiming their actions were the will of God. In hindsight it is easy for us to see where we went wrong in determining God's will in those moments, but what about the concerns that we face today. How do we relate God's purposes for the world with issues like immigration, of diversity, equity, and inclusion, economic inequality, war, climate change? These are all matters we are called to discern now. How do we determine which opinions should get our attention and which is the right path forward? How do the many voices we hear fit with what we already know?

In the case of Alfred Wegener, fellow scientists were not originally able to connect the theory of Continental Drift with what they knew about the earth. It wasn't until sonar mapping of the earth's floor expanded our knowledge, that scientists could relate their understanding of the world with Wegener's theory. They didn't, at first, have the tools to make sense of Continental Drift. In scripture we DO have the tools to make faithful decisions that pursue God's purposes. We can examine the dichotomous voices in our world through the lens of what we know about who God is and how God demonstrates God's faithfulness.

I am not suggesting that this strategy is always foolproof. We will still get it wrong sometimes. I can admit that I have a bad habit of trusting my first instincts and careening forward, convinced I know what's best. I don't always slow down and include God in my decision making process. The good news is that I have found when I am headed in the wrong direction,

God often nudges me back onto the right path. I have always said that I wish God would speak to me in neon signs with big flashing arrows that say, "Go this way!" However, God is a lot more subtle than that. I have learned that I should pay attention to the gentle prodding of God, the hints of unease about my chosen direction. I have to get out of my own way long enough for God's voice to penetrate my stubborn brain. Getting out of my own way sometimes means being open to hearing opinions from those who don't agree with me, tuning in to news outlets that don't just reinforce my existing opinion on the issues, listening to people from different backgrounds and social locations. Getting out of my own way also means stopping to pray, taking the time and having the patience to hear God's voice above the clamor of all the other noise.

That's often one of the biggest obstacles for me, being still long enough to listen to God. There are so many voices out there. They are loud, and they demand our attention. God's voice is often quiet, so we must be quiet long enough to hear it. But we can hear it if we try. God's path is not always the easiest path. God's answer is not always the answer we want to hear. But God has given us the tools we need to make difficult choices, to discern God's will. Through scripture God has revealed God's self and God's purposes for the world. Through prayer and gentle nudges, God continues to speak to us as long as we are willing to listen. To God be the glory.
Amen