

Denying the Prophet

Jeremiah 28: 5-15

Galatians 5: 16-17, 22-26

Toy Story 3

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Jeremiah 28: 5-15

Then the prophet Jeremiah spoke to the prophet Hananiah in the presence of the priests and all the people who were standing in the house of the Lord; and the prophet Jeremiah said, ‘Amen! May the Lord do so; may the Lord fulfil 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.’

Then the prophet Hananiah took the yoke from the neck of the prophet Jeremiah, and broke it. And Hananiah spoke in the presence of all the people, saying, ‘Thus says the Lord: This is how I will break the yoke of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon from the neck of all the nations within two years.’ At this, the prophet Jeremiah went his way.

Sometime after the prophet Hananiah had broken the yoke from the neck of the prophet Jeremiah, the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah: Go, tell Hananiah, Thus says the Lord: You have broken wooden bars only to forge iron bars in place of them! For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: I have put an iron yoke on the neck of all these nations so that they may serve King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, and they shall indeed serve him; I have even given him the wild animals. And the prophet Jeremiah said to the prophet Hananiah, ‘Listen, Hananiah, the Lord has not sent you, and you made this people trust in a lie.’

Galatians 5: 16-17, 22-26

Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

Lotso-Huggin Bear, all pink, soft and cuddly, looks like just the perfect stuffed animal to snuggle with at night, to hide with in a thunderstorm, or to be a part of many imaginary adventures. He is eager and excited to welcome Andy’s former toys to the Sunnyside Daycare. He lets Woody, Buzz, and all the other toys know that they will all be played with every day, all day, 5 days a week. And even better,....

“When the kids get old, new ones come in. When they get old, new ones replace them. You’ll never be outgrown, or neglected. Never abandoned or forgotten. No owners means - no heartbreak!”

All of the toys—except for Woody—are ecstatic about this news. They see this forever playtime as a miracle. They will never be left alone, forgotten, abandoned, or stored away in a cardboard box in a dusty old attic.

Woody tries to remind them that belong to Andy, they are his toys. He tries to keep them loyal to Andy, but Lotso-Huggin’s promise of everything a toy could ever want was too good to let it pass by.

The toys after all are convinced that they were destined for the trash, not for storage in the attic to await playtime with another child. Despite evidence to the contrary from Woody, the toys feel rescued by Lotso. He encourages their belief, affirms that Andy no longer wanted them, and so they belong to, are loved by, no one any more.

Woody stands his ground, a lone voice in the wilderness, and he leaves the daycare, while the rest of Andy’s toys remain in what they believe is utopia, the promised land.

Woody had tried to share a prophetic message with the other toys. He tried hard to remind them of who they were, whose they were, who loved them and where they belonged. He urged them to stay true and loyal, and to hear the truth that were never destined for the dump, despite the false evidence to the contrary.

But Lotso, the false prophet, told the toys just what they wanted to hear. His words did not come from a genuine truth, or love, but motivated by his own dark heart and dishonest mind. His words were so sweet, so welcomed, that the toys heard what they wanted to hear without question. As a false prophet, Lotso shared his good news *at the surface level*, not the whole truth that would be worse than being stored away, forgotten or abandoned.

The toys learned the truth of the false prophet when they were locked in the toddler room, and spent the first day being thrown, smashed, slobbered on, and were left feeling grubby, dirty and achy. This was not the playtime adventures that they knew and now expected more of. Lotso, motivated by his own self-interest had fooled them.

Lotso was the cunning false prophet, “the wolf in sheep’s clothing,” that Jesus warned about. He appeared to offer good news, but it was false hope and empty words. False prophets offer what people want to hear, but they are really telling lies, either outright lies or highly edited truths.

A false prophet is a person who spreads soothing but false teachings or messages while claiming to speak the Word of God, or of false gods, and from their own personal agenda. Whether for deception, personal gain, acclaim, or a desire to be popular among the people, false prophets are motivated by self-interest, not the good, nor the God, they speak of.

False prophets are almost as old as time itself. The Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures, certainly had their share. Jeremiah, more than any other prophet, recorded the trials and challenges prophets endured as he taught the news that people need to hear, but did not want to hear. Jeremiah, a prophet of realism, spoke of God’s rewards *and punishments*, good *and evil*, faithfulness *and disobedience*. He was known for his perseverance despite danger and rejection, and in time, Jesus will often quote Jeremiah’s words.

Prophecies from someone like Jeremiah are not welcomed, but prophets like Hananiah who promised only goodness, who promised peace, restoration and reconciliation *without any change* in the attitudes or behaviors that created problems in the first place, were received with open minds, and welcoming hearts. The only requirement of the people is a little bit of patience. Hananiah’s words are sweet, encouraging and trusted. Jeremiah tried to intercede before the false prophet made a difficult time, their exile to Babylon, even worse.

‘Listen, Hananiah, the Lord has not sent you, and you made this people trust in a lie.’”

Trust in a lie. It's easy to do, it's easy to trust what we want to hear, especially in a difficult time and we are reaching for comfort, normalcy, stability, peace. This is fertile ground for false prophecy as a quick fix. Buzz and the rest of Andy's toys were thrilled to hear that they would be played with every single day with a never ending classroom of kids. The people of Jerusalem wanted redemption and return without changing their ways. They wanted to follow the easier way of the pagan gods rather than to follow the covenant their ancestors had made with God.

Trust in a lie. It's easy to do, it's easy to trust what we want to hear, especially in a difficult time and we are reaching for comfort, normalcy, stability, peace. This is fertile ground for false prophecy as a quick fix. Our world remains deeply impacted by the Coronavirus, and there is no end in sight. We are weighed down, and just the right words, in the right tone, sometimes carefully gift wrapped by a charming personality, can lead us to trust in a lie.

A few months ago, an African preacher and self-titled prophet created a video titled, "Africa will shock the world." He alleged that in the developed world with all our capacity in health care, we are dying by the thousands while in Africa, where there are no resources nor capacity, people are anxiously wondering if Africa can survive. He says that, "Africa will not see dead bodies all over the continent due to the following reasons: Africa believes in God, upholds some values that God expects the nations to uphold, has stood its ground to believe in the sanctity of marriage...He goes on to present this value to God as the reason why God should save the Africans and spare their lives. Africa believes in a God who comes to our situation and rescues us." He encourages faithful waiting only, a false hope.

News stories and social media posts abound of actions or drugs or vitamins that will cure the virus, and of a connection between blood types and susceptibility to Covid-19, or the ability to hold your breath for 10 seconds as a test for Coronavirus. These lies are all false hopes, false prophecies, that add to the problem rather than help or heal. A bad situation is made worse, and the true interventions are ignored and dismissed.

Just as it was for the people who heard both Jeremiah and Hananiah, it can be a struggle for us to discern the voice of God, the voice of good, amidst the many voices claiming to be God's voice. It takes wisdom and spiritual insight to discern the true message from the false, and to hear a prophetic voice like Jeremiah's to adapt and try to make life meaningful in the unusual times. As a prophet of realistic hope, he exhorted the people to understand the times.

What are we being called to do to make this unusual time meaningful? What true hopes emerge while life is lived at a different pace? What have we come to understand differently about ourselves, our world, and God's calling?

Paul encourages us to live and be guided by the Spirit, the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. These are also the qualities of a true prophet, one whose teachings will encourage worthy behavior, provide spiritual benefit and provide real hope. There is so much that we cannot change now, but there are also things we can do for our world, our community, ourselves as we heed Paul's words, the realism of Jeremiah and Woody's prophetic reminder of whose we are, and who loves us the most. Amen.