

Prophets of Peace
or
How to Prepare for the Coming Zombie Apocalypse

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Jeremiah 27-29

When I first looked at the lectionary options for today, I found something odd. This Jeremiah passage was limited to chapter 28, verses 5-9. Take a look at that section. It actually makes for a more pleasant read, doesn't it? We see Jeremiah seeming to affirm the words of a prophet of peace.

But as you heard a moment ago, that snippet really distorts the rest of the story. To get the fuller context, we need to go back to chapter 27. Jeremiah is a prophet based in Jerusalem. During his time Judah and all of its neighbors were occupied by the Babylonian empire, and the Jewish upper class had been taken in exile to Babylon, along with the "vessels of the LORD's house," the instruments of ritual sacrifice.

In chapter 27 God has Jeremiah create a striking visual aid to help the various kings understand their predicament — a yoke, that he's stuck wearing as a symbol of bondage. He warns the kings and the people that they will be under the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar until the time of his grandsons. Resistance is futile. And most importantly, those who prophesy saying that Israel should resist the occupation are liars.

So now we have the set-up for chapter 28. Along comes another prophet, Hananiah, claiming that God will restore Israel in two years. Given what we've

now seen of Jeremiah's previous prophecy, Jeremiah's words of response take on more of a tone of warning than of affirmation. In verses 8 and 9 he basically says, "All of the other prophets up until you and me have prophesied devastation. But if a prophet predicts peace and peace comes, we'll know God has sent that prophet." Then Hananiah breaks Jeremiah's yoke, saying that God will do the same to the yoke of Babylon.

Perhaps Jeremiah was just relieved to have the yoke off his neck; perhaps he really wanted to wait and see if Hananiah's prophesy was more accurate than his own. Rather than get into an argument or complain about the destruction of his visual aid, he goes away.

This is when God gets cranky. God reaffirms Jeremiah's earlier prophecy, and tells him to go lay the smack down on Hananiah. Jeremiah not-so-gently corrects Hananiah's prophecy, but also tells him that, by the way, he's going to die. Fun stuff! Who feels edified?

I feel bad for poor Hananiah. As a good Israelite, he sought the restoration of God's covenant. He longed for the return of the temple vessels so that sacrifice could resume. He worked for the return from exile so that as one people, the Jewish nation could worship and follow God's law together. He was a prophet of peace; he saw the shape of peace, and he sought its fulfillment.

Perhaps we can think of this as ends-based peace-making — sort of a pragmatic approach. This pattern of thinking would imagine a particular future and seek a way to arrive there. Hananiah saw the list of kings whom Jeremiah addresses in chapter 27 as a viable alliance who could stand up against

Nebuchadnezzar. They were, in fact, planning a major revolt. Did Hananiah sniff the wind and predict that the coming insurrection would topple the occupation? This would mean the restoration of Jerusalem, so surely it must be God's intent, right?

This type of ends-based pragmatism appears to inspire much of US foreign policy. Sometimes it is even accompanied by language of God's will and couched in a veneer of prayer. The thinking goes that it is God's will for people to be free, for democracy to flourish and for our white and/or Christian and/or Jewish and/or oil producing allies to be safe. (Ok, the last part isn't always explicit, but how else to explain policies of US intervention?) For those goals to come to fruition, we must go to war. It is clearly the most efficient and pragmatic approach to bringing about peace.

We pacifists may easily scoff at such arrogant reasoning. We can point to its failure in scorched lands, mounting body counts and failed governments in several parts of the world. This pragmatic peace is not the peace that Jeremiah preaches. In fact, he takes an entirely different approach — one based not in pragmatism, but in presence. In the next chapter of Jeremiah we come to a familiar passage, one that has resonated through the years for this congregation. This is where God gives Jeremiah and the Jewish people instructions on how to live in exile. They are to “build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city

where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.” God goes on to assure them that they’ll be stuck in Babylon for a full 70 years.

(An interesting side note is the explanation given in Second Chronicles for the 70 years of exile. The people were removed from their land because they had been abusing it — the land itself — by not providing it with Sabbath rest. That is, they had not allowed for fallow periods every seventh year so that the land could sustain agriculture. During their exile, to quote the NIV, the land “enjoyed its Sabbath rest.” Anyone who doesn’t think that God is concerned with the environment needs to take a deeper look at the Old Testament.)

I find it interesting that God does not provide a blueprint for return from exile. The people are assured that in time their grand-children and great-grandchildren will again see Jerusalem — but it would not be by warfare or alliances. God’s instruction to them was essentially to fulfill the law where they were and with what they had. The prophet Hananiah understood “peace” to be a return to Israel. But being present in the Promised Land was not essential for seeking peace and pursuing it. God’s peace is not a future development to be constructed at all costs, but a daily way of living wherever we happen to be planted. This is the peace of presence rather than pragmatism.

I suspect that even progressive pacifists can get drawn too far into pragmatic thinking. How often are we more attuned to systemic injustice than to the struggles of our neighbors? How often do we agitate for world peace, but overlook the violence in our own city? Of course I do not mean to say that

systemic injustice and world peace are not worthy of our attention. But I wonder if we sometimes are better at seeing the forest than the trees. A goal of eradicating poverty is noble, but if pursuing that prevents us from loving our poor neighbor, then we have failed in our vocation as peacemakers.

A couple months ago, when that radio preacher was proclaiming the coming of the rapture, some of you probably saw that the Centers for Disease Control issued tongue-in-cheek guidelines for preparing for a zombie invasion. I really wished at that point that I was scheduled to preach, because I had the perfect sermon title in mind: “How to Prepare for the Coming Zombie Apocalypse.” I can finally use that idea in concluding this sermon.

Some people prepare for the coming Zombie Apocalypse by quitting their jobs, selling all their goods, going on vacation, treating themselves to some nice dinners out and stockpiling an appropriate arsenal of heavy weaponry. (As one of my friends points out, machetes don't need reloading.)

As Christians, we are to prepare for the coming Zombie Apocalypse just as God instructed Israel to live in exile. We continue to pursue peace and welfare wherever we are. Come what may, be it disaster, famine, rapture or hoards of drooling, flesh-eating undead, our vocation remains the same.

Jeremiah is a prophet of realized eschatology. The Kingdom of God is not simply a future hope or something that we bring about by taking over the world. It is not something that can be destroyed by exile or by zombies. And if the zombies come, we will even welcome them to pursue God's peace alongside of us. The Kingdom of God is here, it is now and it is us.