

Today's readings are a study in contrasts that invite us to transcend them and find deeper meaning. The first is a contrast, and a conflict, between two prophets. Just before the portion of Jeremiah we heard, the prophet Hananiah had told the crowd assembled in the Temple that everything was going to be great, real soon, that recent misfortunes would be undone with no further effort from the people. Jeremiah, with uncharacteristic congeniality, basically says, "Yeah, I would love it if that happened. But we all know that true prophets usually prophesy terrible things. So I'll believe that you're the real deal when your wishful thinking comes true."

Now, in all fairness, God did deliver and restore Israel... *after* all the devastation Jeremiah had prophesied happened. Which reminds us that prophecy isn't so much about predicting the future as about changing the present. As one of my seminary professors said, "prophets are not foretellers, they are forth-tellers," that is, prophets bring messages from God to rulers and their societies, typically pointing out how they have failed to love God and neighbor, and predicting calamity *if* they refuse to change.

It's easy to see why prophets tend to be unpopular. People don't like to be told they're doing something wrong, particularly when it's true, and of course, people are resistant to change in general. Sometimes people prefer death over change. Especially when it's someone else's death. Attacking the bearer of bad news can seem much more appealing than engaging with their message and following through with big, scary changes.

That's understandable, but the New Testament reminds us that bearers of good news don't necessarily fare any better. St. Paul describes a contrast between, on the one hand, sin, wickedness, and death, and on the other, grace, righteousness, and eternal life. He points out that while it's true that Christians have been liberated from the former things, that doesn't mean we can just do whatever we feel like doing without any consequences, because that seeming freedom only enslaves us to our passions, defeating the purpose of liberation.

St. Paul's vivid language is rhetorically effective, but problematic to modern ears. Fortunately, Jesus gives us a different metaphor for Christian discipleship. Jesus does not call us slaves, but ambassadors of God. Paul makes a valid point about God ultimately having all the power, but Jesus's language reminds us that we have agency, too. While God's reality is greater than the created world, that doesn't mean the world isn't consequential. There would be no point to any of this if we didn't really have the ability to choose. The dark visions of the prophets only seem inevitable because we read them after their messages were rejected and their warnings were borne out.

Jesus, in contrast, gives us a bright vision of righteousness and reward, although even this can give rise to misunderstanding. On the one hand, Jesus asks his disciples to commit everything they have, unconditionally; on the other, Jesus names a relatively small, seemingly trivial act of kindness as being sufficient to count one among the righteous. Although if you've ever really, really needed a cup of cold water, receiving

one doesn't feel trivial at all. Which reminds us that God has a special affection, concern, and closeness with the poor. Structural reforms to benefit the poor are as urgently necessary today as they were in the days of the prophets, which is why God is still sending prophets to the world. To demand justice and equal rights, to point out that societies that neglect and abuse the poor come to ruin, to articulate a vision of a world that operates closer to Gospel values, is to be a prophet.

On the one hand, anyone who can communicate can be a prophet. Merely writing to elected officials can be a prophetic act. But on the other, prophets and prophecies are relatively uncommon. Prophets are often solitary figures, perhaps having a disciple or assistant like Elijah had Elisha or Moses had Joshua. Moses also had the 70 elders, but even they were a small fraction of the thousands and thousands of people they were serving. In other words, most people are not called to be prophets, at least, not full time. Most people have to balance multiple competing priorities, hopefully with the wisdom and under the structure God gives us by putting God first, as I mentioned last week.

This is important for congregations to remember. While our entire understanding of ministry is based on a concept of stewardship wherein everything belongs to God, pushing ourselves beyond the brink of feasibility is not love, but hubris. God is well aware that if we take on too much, we will not only fail at much of what we attempt, but we might also harm ourselves and our relationships with others and with God, defeating the purpose of ministry in Christian community. Better to assess our capabilities in view of the needs of the moment and respond in a way that makes sense. Sometimes God calls us to dig wells and build aqueducts; more often, God is calling us to give a cup of cold water to someone who needs one.

That doesn't mean we shouldn't think big. Rather, we should realize that the cosmic and the mundane are not opposed, but connected through the power and grace of God. By the same token, Jesus does send us to represent him, but he also promises that he will be with us. This only seems like a contrast or a contradiction if we forget the fundamentally mystical nature of discipleship. Yes, Jesus ascended bodily into heaven, but by virtue of our baptisms, he also dwells within each of us, closer than breath. Therefore we don't merely represent him, as an ambassador represents a country or its ruler, we *present* Jesus to the world, and he is enough.

His greatness more than makes up for our shortcomings. His goodness more than makes up for the wickedness of the world. This is not wishful thinking, but Gospel truth. So we need not fear anything the world might threaten. When we do what God is calling us to do, whether it seems great or small, we are the fulfillment of the promises of grace, and the rewards God has in store for us are greater than any the world can offer. "The end [and] the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."