

“Still Finding Value in the Old Stories”

Jeremiah 28:5–9

Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman

First Baptist Church, Raleigh

June 28, 2026

I want to suggest that we begin today by taking a step back and trying to look at what we are doing here in the way that outsiders might look at us. We are living in a time of heightened division in this nation, perhaps second only to the time of the Civil War. Economic disparity is massive and growing exponentially, as the market is sky high, a symbol of wealth at the top, while the majority of people are struggling to pay their bills and worried about how long their jobs will exist in the time of AI and downsizing. Wars endure in Ukraine and around Israel; who knows about Iran? And the earth itself is panting with exhaustion.

What are we doing in a time of such immense need? Well, we gather each week in this lovely room, we hear some nice music, we pray for the world, and then we read stories about people who lived 2,000 years ago and more. It must appear strange to the outsider, a waste of time, utter nonsense! Bill Gates once said he didn't go to church because there were so many better ways to spend his time. He may have backtracked some, but this is how many people feel. It's why they are at coffee shops right now or on the golf course or still in bed. Why do we choose to do this, especially at such a critical time?

Well, we believe that God is here or we are reminded here that God is present everywhere and working for good. This much alone is critical. It grounds us and keeps us in touch with hope. We also need beauty in our lives, visual and auditory beauty, something to remind us that there is more than hardship and struggle in life. And we believe prayer makes a difference. Then, we consider these strange, ancient texts, week after week, because we believe they are God-inspired, even if we don't understand exactly how, and because each generation for 2,000 years has confirmed that there is value in them.

Some may equate our worship with the image of Nero fiddling while Rome burned, though it is a mythic image — the violin hadn't been invented yet, he was thirty-five miles away, and he responded promptly once the fire

started. He did blame the Christians, but he wasn't the first leader or the last to look for scapegoats. But while some may view what we do as a waste of time, especially our interest in ancient texts, we find meaning in these activities and value in these texts we consider sacred.

Consider our reading from Jeremiah, which dates to the sixth century BCE. It is a time of national crisis. King Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians have been in the land for many years, taking leaders into exile in 597 BCE, along with treasures from the temple. Judah has become a vassal of the Babylonian Empire, but King Zedekiah of Judah resists, which only causes more trouble.

Just before our reading, Jeremiah puts a yoke around his neck and tells the leaders of Judah that they will live under the yoke of Babylon for some time, and anyone who says otherwise is lying, whereupon a prophet named Hananiah, son of Azzur, from Gibeon, walks into the temple and proclaims a different message. It is August of 594 BCE when Hananiah says God has spoken to him and told him God has broken the yoke of the king of Babylon and within two years, it will all be over, the treasures will be brought home, and the leaders as well.

As we join the story, Jeremiah responds, saying basically — I hope you are right! He never liked the message of doom and gloom he was given to proclaim. “Amen! May the Lord do so,” he says; “May the Lord fulfill the words you have prophesied, and bring back to this place from Babylon the vessels of the house of the Lord, and the exiles.” But then he adds that the prophets before them prophesied war, famine, and pestilence. They came not to pat the people on the back but to tell them how God felt about them, how they needed to change or risk judgment.

“As for the prophet who proclaims peace,” he says, “when the word of that prophet comes true, then it will be known that the Lord has truly sent the prophet.” In other words, time will tell, but Hananiah does not speak in the normal prophetic way. At this point, just after our reading, Hananiah takes the yoke from Jeremiah's neck and breaks it, saying, “This is how I will break the yoke of King Nebuchadnezzar!” and Jeremiah walks away.

So, this is a critical time, and these are critical issues. We're not talking about esoteric religious ideas that have little practical impact. We're talking

about the future existence of a nation! And we have two prophetic figures who express diametrically opposed opinions. One says the war is almost over, victory is at hand; the other says – not so fast, a long period of captivity is coming. Who should the people believe, and how do they make this decision? As Jeremiah notes, time will tell who is right, but they have to decide now. On what basis should they do that?

The story doesn't provide a precise formula, but before we get to what it does provide, we should note how similar Judah's predicament is to ours. Many stories begin with something like, "In a time long ago in land far away." The first Star Wars films began with, "A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away," to which Ian would add, "lived Star Wars!"

Biblical texts are set in a time long ago and far away, but the issues are still the issues we face. In our text, it is a time of national crisis; there is a need for wisdom. God's help is sought, but multiple people, claiming to speak for God, say diametrically opposed things. Thus, the people are left with the responsibility of discernment. Is this not what we experience today? As we have noted, there is no formula here. We don't want to follow the people of Judah's example. They get it wrong. But there are things of value we can learn from this old story.

The first lesson is a word of caution about believing everything we hear about the meaning of a given time and the trajectory of the future. Many people speaking with great certainty and presumed authority express strong opinions about the significance of this time and what it will mean for the future. Some applaud the upheaval of government programs and the radical change in how decisions are made while others deplore all this and fear for the future. Some celebrate the advent of AI and other technological advances while others point out the practical downsides, in addition to the reality that the human capacity for technical innovation is not matched by growth in ethical reasoning. Many fear for the future of the church while others see hope in change.

Predicting the future is a precarious undertaking. A member of another church I served, the chair of my search committee there and an economics professor, once asked me if I knew why God made meteorologists. When I hesitated in confusion, she said, "To make economists feel better." I could

only reply, “And the reason God made prophets and apocalypticists was to make meteorologists feel better.”

Years ago, Bob Dylan noted that “The Times They Are a Changin’” but to what no one knows. That was the case in 1964 when the song was released as the Civil Rights movement was underway, an unpopular war in Viet Nam was raging, and many social norms were being challenged. It is still the case today. There are many hopes and fears, and most of us have opinions, but only time will tell. Integration did not destroy the nation, though some still oppose it. The war in Viet Nam finally ended, though there have been other wars. And while some might want to turn back the clock on social change, most do not.

I remember a deacons meeting in another setting where an older man lamented cultural changes he thought weakened the church. He wanted to go back, but an older woman said, “You want to go back to the 1950s? A world which wanted women married while I was single, which wanted women at home when I had a career, a world where people of color were not equal... No thanks, I don’t want to go back!” There are always different perspectives on the present and the future.

A second lesson in our story is a word of warning about easy answers and simple solutions. Hananiah’s message is attractive. *The war is almost over. Prosperity is on the way. God has always been good to us. Don’t listen to this fearmonger.* Even Jeremiah would like to believe it could be this easy, but it is not. The truth is often not what we want to hear, but the way forward can only be found through truth. Jeremiah is the one speaking for God, speaking truth. Judah will fall.

Someone has said that there are two great pathologies in our culture. One is denial. The only antidote is radical truth-telling. The other is despair. The only antidote is radical hope based in community (quoted by Douglass Bailey, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 3, p. 175). All people need hope, but genuine hope begins with truth.

The question remains as to how we discern truth. It is helpful to weigh any claim against what we know of reality. The people of ancient Judah know the Babylonians are in the land. They are a powerful force which desires to take possession, and there is no reason to think they will change their minds. Judah’s only hope is for deliverance by God, but they have not changed their

ways. We have the benefit of hindsight, Jeremiah is right, but Hananiah's message doesn't square with reality.

How about our situation? What are the realities of our time and place and what might they suggest about what is true? It may not be what we want to hear, but the only path toward hope is through truth.

There is one other word of caution some have noted in our story – to beware of resting on God's grace as if we own it. Grace lies at the heart of our faith and looking back at how God has helped us in the past is a trusted resource in times of need, but a presumption of deliverance in a specific way at a specific time, especially for a nation, is unwise.

This is what Judah does in light of Hananiah's prophecy. The God who has delivered them in the past will deliver them now. But God will not. The Babylonians take them into exile. God still cares about them. Abandoning them to the consequences of their own decisions is a last-ditch effort to redeem them, but it is not what they want or expect.

Coming up on the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, we are in danger of giving in to the temptation to think we own a kind of grace or favor. We have come this far through many challenges, even a Civil War. We have always found a way forward or God has always brought us through. We will be fine; we will find a way.

Perhaps we will, but there are no guarantees. I am not predicting doom and gloom, just recommending open minds. We are a relatively young nation. Where God is in our shared life is debatable. Our history is a mixture of nobility and embarrassment. We still have tremendous potential, but we will never approach it if we presume to rest on some kind of grace or favor. God has many hands and feet in the world.

We might prefer a formula to all this, some method of knowing for sure who speaks for God, but God gives us the responsibility of discernment and there is much to help us in this ancient story. We shouldn't believe everything we hear, we should be wary of easy answers and simple solutions, and we should be careful not to make presumptions about God's favor. That is a lot of value in one old story.