

In the Holy Land, the chosen people had stopped living out their faith. The Book of the Prophet Jeremiah portrays God's efforts to bring his people back into a covenantal relationship. Speaking on behalf of the Lord, Jeremiah challenged the rampant idolatry of his day despite the personal cost. "Arrest, imprisonment, and public disgrace were his lot" (Intro). Perhaps he felt God was distant, but he pressed on through the storm.

Hananiah, a new prophet, comes along with a message the people are waiting to hear. All will be well. The King of Babylon will fall. The exiled people will return. The temple will be restored. Hananiah is blowing his own horn and not speaking for the Lord. He is a false prophet who hopes to gain favor by telling the people what they want to hear. Does this not describe our own day and age? A vaccine is imminent. A miracle cure is around the corner. There is no need to take precautions. We have beaten back the pandemic.

Hananiah stirred up false hope. He did not rouse up the faithful to return to the Lord as a true prophet would. For his deception and for preaching rebellion against the Lord, he died within the year. Sadly, the news carries stories like this on a regular basis. People who saw no need for caution gathered in great numbers on holiday weekends. Wearing no masks, they became new victims of the virus. Having contracted the disease, they unwittingly spread it to others. They are surprised that youth and good health have not provided immunity. From their hospital beds they have tried to warn others. Too late for themselves, but hoping others will heed their call, they explain "this is real, I wish I had heeded the voices that told me I was foolish." The pandemic has cut a wide path of destruction taking with it many vulnerable individuals who did not flaunt the disease but who came into contact with someone less cautious. All too often, the innocent suffer the most.

Time and time again, we hear from the lips of our Lord, "Be not afraid." He is reassuring us that he can calm any storm on the seas or in our lives. God gives us life and imbues each person with an immortal soul. The body may wither due to illness, but nothing can separate us from the love of God. There is life after death. God's goodness is more powerful than any illness or disease or earthly tragedy that can beset us.

We need not fear death, but we should not invite it. We need to exercise caution. Please wear masks in public. Whenever possible, limit your outings so that as a community we can work together to contain the virus. It requires the effort of everyone to do the right thing.

The Babylonian exile ended after a 50-year period of banishment. In time the King of Babylon was replaced by a new leader who returned people home from exile and helped to restore the temple in Jerusalem. The faith of the people and the help of God were once again in rhythm working together.

Pandemics are much shorter than the Babylonian exile but they seem to recur throughout history. It often takes a year or longer for the natural rhythms of life to be restored. In the meantime, heroic doctors and nurses are on the front line of the pandemic doing all they can to save the physical life. Many are making great sacrifices to comfort the ill. Worldwide efforts are underway to create a vaccine and to search for a cure in the future. Our own small efforts at social distancing may not seem like much, but they are a key part of the solution.

When we rely too much on the ways of the world and are distant from God, we are like the people Jeremiah prophesied to. We may need to do some self-assessment. Have we taken our relationship with God for granted? Do we need to be spiritually reawakened?