

Distinguished  
Jeremiah 23:23-32  
August 14, 2022  
First Presbyterian, Luling

About a month ago, Rachel sent me this image, which I hope I can get up on the screen for you. For those of you who can't see it, it's a rectangle, filled with vertical stripes of what looks like every color of the rainbow, in rainbow color order. She wanted me to count how many different colors I saw. According to internet experts (ahem), if you see 20 or fewer colors, you're with 25% of the population. If you see between 21 and 32 colors, you are in good company with about 50% of the population. And if you see between 33 and 39 colors, you're in the remaining 25% of the population. There are 39 colors all together. Rachel and I both were in that top group, for whatever that's worth. I highly suspect that people with better computer monitor screens score higher on this color distinguishing test, but that's heading off on a rabbit trail away from where I'm theoretically headed. If you want to test yourself, I'll send it to you later.

Where I am headed is this: no matter how many colors you can see on that rectangle, it is really difficult to distinguish between two neighboring colors. Is this one just a tad lighter than that one? Or just a little bit greener or yellower or purpler? Maybe they're the same color after all. The more you look at it, the harder it is to tell, and the more you second guess your first impression.

It turns out that there are a lot of things in life like this, where it's hard to distinguish if something is the same or different. I overheard a conversation the other day about whether HEB brand unbleached flour was different than King Arthur unbleached flour. Not even if it was better or worse, but whether you could tell the difference at all.

Is that buzzard flying on a trajectory that will bring it just over my windshield, or straight into the car? Well, especially at highway speeds, it's hard to distinguish exactly where safe buzzard territory turns into dangerous buzzard territory. Or so I've heard.

None of these things are consequential, unless you're the buzzard on a collision course with my bumper.

But think about things like this: is that person being nice to me because he is nice, or just because he's trying to get something from me? Is that doctor telling me the whole truth, or is she telling me what she thinks I want to hear? Juries have to distinguish who is telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the

truth: the defendant or plaintiff. We are constantly needing to distinguish whether to believe someone, or trust someone, and it is more tricky than we would like.

When we're trying to distinguish whether people are saying true things about God or not-true things, well, then it gets even more consequential and more difficult. We don't typically use these words, but distinguishing between true and false prophets has been a problem for God's people since the beginning.

Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. God says don't eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The serpent says, "oh, it's not a big deal." They can't distinguish difficult truth from easy lie, and they pay the consequences.

Deuteronomy 13 gives instructions that the people shouldn't follow self-proclaimed prophets who tell them to follow other gods. Those are false prophets. And then in chapter 18 gives more instruction, teaching the people that false prophets' predictions will not happen or be proved true, but prophets that speak for the Lord will be proven true by subsequent events. That's helpful, but only over time. If we need to tell right now which prophet is true and which prophet is false, which prophet speaks for God and which does not, we still don't have any way to distinguish the difference.

Jeremiah, of all the Old Testament prophets, seems to have the most trouble with false prophets. You see, God has called Jeremiah to deliver a word of judgment to the people. Nobody likes this. Jeremiah doesn't like it, the people don't like it, the people in power especially don't like it, because Jeremiah is prophesying doom and gloom and despair. But he is the true prophet, speaking the words that the Lord has given him.

The false prophets, and Jeremiah encounters quite a few, are saying the opposite. They're saying no, no, everything is fine. We'll be ok. Stick with the rulers we have and all will be well. There are whole chapters about how the false prophets are promising that God says good things will happen, and Jeremiah promising that God says bad things will happen. It goes on and on and on.

Just before the passage that we read this morning, God is describing how the false prophets are going out and speaking for God, even though God hadn't spoken to them. It's as if they think God won't find out that they're doing so. God assures Jeremiah, and his listeners, that indeed God knows exactly what they're doing. God is a God who is near by, listening in. The false prophets had dreams and decided that God is speaking to them in dreams. God has done that before, we have stories about that throughout the Old Testament, but God isn't doing it now. The false prophets' dreams will turn the people away from God and toward

other gods, just like Deuteronomy warned against.

God says those false prophets have nothing in common with the true prophets, like Jeremiah, like wheat has nothing in common with straw. Wheat is nutritious and strengthening. Straw is for bedding. Jeremiah's words are nutritious and strengthening, what the people need to hear, and the false prophets' words are useless. The Lord's words, given to Jeremiah are like fire, and like a hammer breaking a rock into pieces.

It's clear to God, and it's clear to Jeremiah, and I guess it's clear to the false prophets, that they don't really have a word from the Lord that they're supposed to share with the people. They have a word from *themselves* that they want to share. We can guess at their motivations. After all, tell powerful people what they want to hear, and you'll be rewarded.

But to the average person hearing these messages, these dreams and these prophecies, how in the world were they supposed to distinguish between true prophecy and false prophecy? The law had just told them to wait and find out which came true. Jeremiah gives them some additional clues. If the prophet is telling you only things you want to hear, only things that are easy, only things that confirm the biases you already have, never challenge you to change your ways or do better, not making you take a hard look at your participation in injustice or evil, well, then it's probably a false prophet.

If a prophet is telling you things that you don't want to hear, things that are hard, things that challenge your preconceived ideas, call you to do better, look closely at yourself and your society, well, then that's probably a true prophet.

When someone tells you to love your enemies, to bless those that curse you, to stand up for the poor and the widow and the orphan. When someone tells you that the last will be first and the first will be last. Well. That person is a true prophet.

When we try to distinguish whether the things we hear come from God, this can be a test we apply. It can be as hard to distinguish prophets from each other as it to tell where one yellow ends and another begins. But if someone's words make us squirm, make us look closely at ourself as individuals and as a collective, then maybe it's worth a close listen to hear the voice of the Lord.