There can be a bit of confusion in our day and age about what exactly it means to be a prophet. And since I am sure that this confusion keeps most of you up at night, I will take this opportunity to sooth your addled minds and explain the prophetic gifts. These days the term prophet is used mainly to describe individuals who correctly predict things that are to come. And this definition is true to an extent, but prophesy and being a prophet entails more than this. Broadly speaking a prophet is someone who is in direct contact with God and is therefore able to speak on behalf of God. Sometimes this speaking may involve the prediction of future events, but it is not necessary for one to be considered a prophet. And when we use this fuller definition of prophet, things can get a bit tricky because it is difficult to discern who is really speaking on behalf of God and who is just making stuff up. The church attracts many who believe themselves to be prophets. They may not say so directly but will assure you that whatever it is they would like done was told to them by God or at least comes with God’s seal of approval. And there is a lot of material for me to make fun of in this department. I could fill volumes with the things I have been assured by church leadership or lay people that ultimately turned out to be wrong. But I have been on vacation and am feeling particularly pleasant so I am going to restrain myself and rather focus on the text we have from Jeremiah today.

The passage is about prophets so I have not wasted your time with this introduction. The snippet we have today sort of drops us off in the middle of a debate between two individuals who are perceived as prophets. The first is Jeremiah and the second is Hananiah. The debate centers on how long the Babylonian captivity is going to last. The Babylonian captivity, for those of you who do not remember, was the time around the year 600 BC when a large number of Judeans from the ancient Kingdom of Judah were made captives in Babylon. Hananiah says he has heard from God that this captivity will be very short and within a few years everyone, along with all the temple treasures stolen by the Babylonians, will return to Judah. Jeremiah on the other hand is not so sure. He wants it to be true saying, “may the Lord fulfill the words that you have prophesied, and bring back to this place from Babylon the vessels of the house of the Lord, and all the exiles.” But he then goes onto explain why he has some misgivings about this prophesy saying, “listen now to this word that I speak in your hearing and in the hearing of all the people. The prophets who preceded you and me from ancient times prophesied war, famine, and pestilence against many countries and great kingdoms. As for the prophet who prophesies peace, when the word of that prophet comes true, then it will be known that the Lord has truly sent the prophet.” In other words, it sounds rather nice, but this is not the sort of thing those recognized as prophets have been saying. In Jeremiah’s telling Hananiah is like the guy who has the Texans winning the Super Bowl or for you Formula One fans has Alpha Tauri winning the Constructors Championship – it could happen but does not seem likely. And this brings us back to my original question which is how do we decide who to listen to in Christianity? What I mean by this is there are all sorts of people who make all sorts of claims about God but how do we know if they are right?

We have had numerous fights in Christianity as of late about what the church needs to do about various hot button social issues. Whether it be human sexuality, social justice or guns, there have been many advocating for the church to have very specific and often diametrically opposed opinions about these things. I do not want to get into which positions are right or wrong but rather want to reflect on what Jeremiah did after being assured by Hananiah that God promised that the Judeans will soon be on their way back to Judah. He basically says, “We’ll see.” That is if after two years we do not return to Judah he will all conclude that Hananiah was not really a prophet; that Hananiah let his own wishes and desires get in the way of his ability to hear from God. And I kind of like this. Rather than getting all worked up about what people proclaim, we might want to take a step back and say “we’ll see.” We’ll see if all of the things that seems so important right now look that interesting in a few years. Will today’s proclamations look like William Wilberforce and his Christian opposition to the slave trade or will they look like many Protestants’ embrace of eugenics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? That is; will they be inspired by God or inspired by the zeitgeist.

I recently read a book entitled *A Time to Build* by Yuval Levin. The book’s thesis is that many of our current problems come from a breakdown in institutions. He says, “We now think of institutions less as formative and more as performative, less as molds of our character and behavior, and more as platforms for us to stand on and be seen. And, so, for one arena to another in American life, we see people using institutions as stages, as a way to raise their profile or build their brand. And those kinds of institutions become much harder to trust.” What this means, in the context of the church, is that people come to the church with their own beliefs and priorities and then expect the church to amplify those beliefs and priorities. We put ourselves at the center of the church rather than God. We, of course, don’t put it this way because as humans we are very good at rationalizing our behaviors. So we become prophets. We don’t say my will be done, but rather insist that we are merely expressing what the Spirit is saying to God’s people. It just happens that the Spirit believes everything we do. So, we claim to be expressing “true Christianity” when, in reality, we are insisting that the institution of Christianity conform to our will.

Last week as the world was transfixed on a submarine in the north Atlantic the stepson of one of the doomed passengers attended a Blink 182 concert in San Diego (Blink 182 is a band that was kind of a big deal in the late 90’s). When asked if that might not have been the best thing to do while awaiting news of his relatives’ fate, he replied, “My family would want me to be here.” I don’t know his family but I am a little skeptical. It sounds like he really wanted to be there and, in an attempt, to gussy up his actions he claimed that they were what his family would have wanted. And this type of justification is not just for the attending of concerts. As Christians, we need to ask if we are following God or just gussying up our own will and desires. And to help in answering this we can circle back to Jeremiah. We need to have the presence of mind to say, it would be great if this is what God was saying but let’s check it against reality. Every so-called prophet who assures us that the church needs to go in a new direction in order to grow or create a fuller understanding of Christianity should be questioned. When something seems out of place with historical Christianity, it could be that God is doing something new but most often its not. As we say, God is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow, meaning new ideas are not all that common. So, it might be wise to take a page from Jeremiah and say “we’ll see” in both ourselves and the wider church so that we may be God’s own this day and forevermore.