

SCRIPTURE

Jeremiah 32:1–3a, 6–15

The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD in the tenth year of King Zedekiah of Judah, which was the eighteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar. ² At that time the army of the king of Babylon was besieging Jerusalem, and the prophet Jeremiah was confined in the court of the guard that was in the palace of the king of Judah, ³ where King Zedekiah of Judah had confined him.

⁶ Jeremiah said, The word of the LORD came to me: ⁷ Hanamel son of your uncle Shallum is going to come to you and say, “Buy my field that is at Anathoth, for the right of redemption by purchase is yours.”

⁸ Then my cousin Hanamel came to me in the court of the guard, in accordance with the word of the LORD, and said to me, “Buy my field that is at Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, for the right of possession and redemption is yours; buy it for yourself.” Then I knew that this was the word of the LORD.

⁹ And I bought the field at Anathoth from my cousin Hanamel, and weighed out the money to him, seventeen shekels of silver. ¹⁰ I signed the deed, sealed it, got witnesses, and weighed the money on scales. ¹¹ Then I took the sealed deed of purchase, containing the terms and conditions, and the open copy; ¹² and I gave the deed of purchase to Baruch son of Neriah son of Mahseiah, in the presence of my cousin Hanamel, in the presence of the witnesses who signed the deed of purchase, and in the presence of all the Judeans who were sitting in the court of the guard.

¹³ In their presence I charged Baruch, saying, ¹⁴ Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Take these deeds, both this sealed deed of purchase and this open deed, and put them in an earthenware jar, in order that they may last for a long time. ¹⁵ For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.

MESSAGE: Buy the farm

This morning we heard an account of Jeremiah buying a plot of land. It seems to be a rather innocuous little story – almost a bit of filler. At first glance this little insertion may seem completely unnecessary – does anybody really care if Jeremiah bought a field? Why is it in the bible – does it speak at all to how we live our lives today?

In fact for some, this kind of overly detailed chronicling is one of the very things that makes the bible difficult to read and seemingly irrelevant. It would seem that this passage is one that could easily be passed over – certainly not material for an entire sermon, especially when the New Testament reading scheduled for this morning is Lazarus and the rich man.

Lazarus and the rich man is all about heaven and hell, the uncrossable chasm that separates good and evil, terrible people getting the torment that we think they deserve – that seems like

an easier and more teachable tale – it’s viscerally satisfying and caters to our cultural understanding of just desserts.

But, Lazarus and the rich man are low hanging fruit – you can sort through that on your own. I think there is a much more important principle buried within Jeremiah’s redeemed field. Let’s dig it out together.

Before we dive in I want to go off on a quick tangent and make an observation. In the book of Acts there is a description of an encounter between Philip, one of Jesus’ disciples, and an important Ethiopian. The Ethiopian was reading scripture aloud as he traveled and so Philip approached him to speak.

Philip asked if the man understood what he was reading, and the man replied ‘How can I, unless someone explains it to me?’

Often we read the bible, and though we are familiar with all the words and know the definitions of each one of them on their own, we don’t grasp the concept that they are trying to present.

We know the words, but we don’t know what is being said. This isn’t limited to the bible – any reading that we do that deals with challenging subject matter will present us with this difficulty. We have to stop and think; process what is being communicated before we move on.

Often we need help. The Ethiopian Eunuch despaired ‘How can I understand this unless someone explains it to me?’ He was an educated man with an important position, but he needed help – Philip was sent specifically to provide that help.

This speaks to the importance of Christian community. We can’t figure all this stuff out on our own no matter how gifted we are – none of us are so knowledgeable and wise that we are able to grasp the contexts and contours of all these stories without help, without input from others. That is just one of the many reasons that it is almost impossible to be a Christian without a community – this why we gather together – to gain the benefit of all our shared wisdom.

This story of Jeremiah buying a field is exactly one of those stories. We read the words, and though the words are simple and the repetitive writing style comes across as pedantic, without help we tend to miss the main point.

If we want to understand the significance of Jeremiah’s purchase we have to understand the context. We need know what was going on, and what was going on was war.

Judah had a puppet king – Zedekiah. At the time there were two superpowers in that part of the world: Babylon and Egypt. Israel lay right in between these two. To keep the peace alliances were made – for many years Judah had been allied with Babylon, paying them tribute.

At a point when Babylon appeared to have been weakened, Judah stopped paying their tributes, so Nebuchadnezzar of the Babylonians showed up with his army, removed the Judean king and installed young Zedekiah instead, someone he knew he could control.

Tributes resumed and life was relatively peaceful for about ten years. And then Zedekiah thought that perhaps life would be even better if Judah allied itself with Egypt instead. As you might imagine, Nebuchadnezzar was not pleased to be dealing with this issue a second time, so when our little story this morning opens the backdrop is that the Babylonian army has surrounded Jerusalem.

This time they are not intending to remove and replace the king – they intend to destroy the city. They will tear down the walls, burn the homes, destroy the temple and take all its treasure. Thousands are about to be slaughtered, those who are left that have any strength or intelligence will be carted off to Babylon as slaves.

This is the end of Jerusalem. In our current culture in which help is only a phone call away, very few of us can even imagine what it would have been like to be in a city surrounded by an unstoppable army that simply wants to hack you to pieces. There is no hope, there is no escape. There is only suffering and destruction.

The future of Jerusalem seemed hopeless. Things were even worse for Jeremiah. Not only was he in a city that was about to be razed and burned – he was a prisoner. Jeremiah had foreseen what was about to happen and he had been going about telling people to lay down their weapons and surrender because the approaching army was doing God's will.

Telling God's people in God's city that God was about to wipe them out using a foreign army tends to be considered sedition and treason, so the King had put Jeremiah under guard while he decided what to do with him.

This is the context in which today's story takes place. A vast superpower had surrounded the city, intent on killing everyone inside. Jeremiah was locked up awaiting a likely execution by his own people. And God had washed his hands of the whole mess, saying 'I'm not going to save you people from this, in fact I'm the one doing this to you.'

Things couldn't possibly be more dire.

At that moment, in wanders Uncle Shallum's son Hanamel. He pulled Jeremiah aside and said 'Um, so I'm in some trouble – and I need cash. But I've got an old field just outside the walls, there. Would you like to buy it?'

Now, this is almost comical – can you imagine how the sales pitch goes? 'Let me show you the property. Just peek over the wall here. Keep your head down – don't let those archers see you, they'll put an arrow in your eye. Now there's my land – over there.'

‘You mean where all those chariots are parked?’

‘No – further on. Look past the catapult, over where they’re slaughtering the pigs. There’s a nice olive tree there. Oh, no.....they’re burning the tree. Well, I’m sure it will grow back. What do you think – 20 shekels? Maybe 17?’

Now who is going to buy that land? If Bob Ferguson were still with us he would tell us that real estate is all about location and timing. Right place and right time. Hanamel’s land might have had some value when there was peace, but once the invading army was camped on it, that field instantly became worthless.

Jeremiah may have had some use for a field when there was peace and when he was a free man, but as a prisoner who was facing execution by both sides, he had no use for property. So why did he buy it? What does this story mean?

The short answer is that this land purchase was a prophetic act. God told Jeremiah that his cousin would come to him, trying to unload that field and Jeremiah was to buy it. This was not a prophesy of words, but a prophecy of action.

In spite of the surrounding army and apparent hopelessness of the situation, Jeremiah bought the land and told his secretary Baruch to save the deeds because there would come a time when Jeremiah would claim that land as his own.

The purchase signified the presence of hope – regardless of the current situation, all was not lost. The people of Israel would return to the land that God promised them. Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land, said Jeremiah. That was a bold statement. Everything about Jeremiah’s and Jerusalem’s situation pointed to disaster and destruction. Jeremiah instead demonstrated hope.

As I was pondering this whole concept of actions that run counter to popular perception, reclaiming land and promise, and doing something tangible to create and communicate hope I experienced one of those odd co-incidences that are just too perfect to be called co-incidence.

We all know the state of our downtown. I suspect that many folks here this morning don’t care to come downtown very often. Perhaps it’s the many empty storefronts, the general lack of services and shops. The opioid crisis is certainly felt in the core – the clinics and clients make some uncomfortable. There can be an air of desperation and despair – a feeling of capitulation, maybe even abdication – some have simply given up on downtown.

But there are signs of growth. In the past couple of years Joy Café, the Viking Café, and most recently Sabor have opened up. The Arts Project, a new laundromat, and a collaborative business co-operative that supplies workspace to entrepreneurs have opened their doors.

But one project in particular drew my attention on Friday. A little while ago Suzanne Coverett Earls opened Pieceful Arts down on Robinson. They offer various classes and workshops; my understanding is that mosaic glasswork and painting are the primary focii.

On Friday as I walked by I spoke with a young lady named Robyn who was painting a mural in the alleyway adjoining the building. As we spoke she directed me to wander deeper in, and as I rounded the corner behind the building I encountered more artists, including Suzanne, who were also painting.

As I walked about the connected alleyways I was amazed at how clean everything was – spacious and bright. Suzanne had hung strings of lights that gave the area a cozy café kind of feel. If you wander back in there instead of encountering the dismal, dark, urine-soaked pit of desolation that you might expect you will find a quiet peaceful atmosphere – a sanctuary.

I don't know Suzanne well; I've dropped by a few times to say hello and that's all. I know nothing about her spiritual or religious beliefs. But her actions speak loudly indeed. What she has done, with the help of her community, is to reclaim and redeem land that had been considered forsaken. What she has done is to make a public proclamation that the forces of destruction, apathy, and entropy will not prevail; that good and beauty will have the last word.

Suzanne's declaration of hope is similar in many ways to Jeremiah's. It's inspiring. We are called to do the same thing – not merely to speak words of hope but to publicly perform acts of hope. To be counter-cultural; a positive force in a world that tends to the negative.

I suspect that there are people among us who feel like those trapped in Jerusalem while the Babylonians encircled them. Many feel under siege; there is an existential threat present. In the west the church is declining both in terms of numbers and in influence. Elsewhere in the world, more Christians are being killed now for their faith than during the days of Roman persecution. There is a sense among some that we are surrounded by those who are seeking our destruction.

Within the church we have conflict as well; some seek to survive by appeasing the forces that would oppose our faith, others become militant and entrenched. Conflict without, conflict within – turmoil all around.

In the midst of this we are called to perform courageous acts that demonstrate our great hope. The question is 'what does that look like at St. Paul's?' What is our bold action? What do we do in the community that declares hope and confidence in defiance of the forces of chaos and destruction?

Much of what we have been taught through Jesus' words falls exactly under this umbrella of a counter-cultural action-based prophecy of hope and a better way: love your enemy, pray for those who persecute you, give to anyone who asks of you, don't judge others. Our actions speak volumes; are our actions intentional, and are we giving a consistent message?

One thing I would like to leave you with. A challenge.

Like Jeremiah, listen for God's voice. It's not hard to do, we merely need to still our own voices for a spell. Maybe go and spend some quiet time in Suzanne's alley sanctuary.

If you set aside the time, God will surely let you know several ways in which you can demonstrate hope to the hopeless, joy to the joyless, love to the loveless. Perhaps individually, perhaps together as the body of Christ. The ideas will come, even if they have to come through a misfit cousin Hanamel.

The story of Jeremiah's field teaches us that even things that seem incidental or inconsequential can be rich with meaning and purpose when done in obedience to Divine prompting. Everything counts.

So let your light shine. Be the salt that seasons, the yeast that causes the whole loaf to rise, and be witnesses in Norfolk to the transforming love of Jesus.

I speak to you this morning in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.