

“HARD-HEADED HOPE”

Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15 October 6, 2019

Today is the last in our sermon series on Jeremiah. We've been through three difficult weeks of Jeremiah's laments and prophecies to the people of Israel—all grieving their fall away from God and breaking their covenant with him. It's been destruction and mourning and misery but now we come to HOPE!!! I felt that even though this is Bread for the World Sunday I must conclude this series today with looking forward with God's grace and mercy and words of HOPE!!!

There are few more hopeful passages in the Bible than this strange, yet very compelling, story of land purchased in the midst of an enemy siege. It is decidedly odd, and more than a little sad, that this tale is not better known among those who love the Bible. It is written in such a commonplace manner that it lacks the spit and polish of the great narratives of Genesis, Exodus, and Samuel, the rich insights of the parables of Jesus, and the beautiful poetry of the Psalms. But one would be hard pressed to find in any of those scriptural places a more exciting portrayal of just what hope can mean in the life of a believer.

The setting of the tale is grim. Jeremiah is in prison, confined in the court of the guard in the palace of King Zedekiah of Judah. The year is 587BCE, the tenth year of that hapless monarch's reign. The prophet is in jail, because he has been uttering treasonous comments concerning his king, proclaiming that Zedekiah will watch as Jerusalem is defeated and destroyed by the forces of Nebuchadnezzar, who even now surrounds the city, cutting off supplies of food, awaiting the eventual starvation and surrender of the people. Jeremiah extends his dark prophecy to include Zedekiah himself who will “surely be given into the hands of the king of Babylon, shall speak with him face to face, eye to eye” (Jer 32:4), and shall be exiled to Babylon for as long as YHWH has determined. “Though you fight against the Chaldeans, you will not succeed,” the prophet concludes; little wonder that Jeremiah is clapped in irons, for such words are beyond doubt treason against the king and the state.

Ten years before, Zedekiah had been chosen as puppet king of Judah by Nebuchadnezzar and ordered to keep the populace in line, insuring the regular payment of tribute to the Babylonians, and making certain that no insurrections against the Chaldeans would ensue. However, Zedekiah is apparently convinced by some of the youthful firebrands among his courtiers that a revolt against the mighty armies of Babylon might prove successful. It is a dangerous and foolhardy decision, bringing the full wrath of Nebuchadnezzar down on Judah and Jerusalem, and leading to the strangling siege that now rings the city. Each night, vast watch fires light up the sky, as the Babylonian army calmly and cruelly wait for the city's inevitable surrender. When that capitulation occurs, as it surely will, the enemy soldiers can anticipate looting, rape, and general mayhem as their reward for the assault's delay. Many a soldier must have had reams of wealth and sexual freedom in mind as they gazed languidly at Jerusalem's walls and gates, looking longingly for any signs of surrender.

That is the reason that Zedekiah, the king himself, rants against Jeremiah as he is chained in his royal prison. You can picture the scene: Zedekiah in his royal purple, accompanied by a crowd of fawning courtiers, among them those who urged the king's revolt against Nebuchadnezzar, attending carefully to the king's every word, nodding sagely as he loudly accuses the well-known prophet of traitorous language, fully worthy of death. But Jeremiah, who has been in this prophetic business for forty years and more, appears unfazed by the king's noisily insistent address. In fact, he responds to the king's loud accusations in a most peculiar way. His reply to Zedekiah's furious assault is a calm recitation of a

land deal that his cousin offered him, one that he was only too glad to accept! Just like a prophet of God to discuss buying land in the face of a monarch having a full blown fit!!!

The detail of the purchase of the land is both exquisite and mind-numbing at the same time. Just listen: “Hanamel, son of uncle Shallum, came to me to say, ‘Buy my field at Anathoth, for the right of its purchase is now yours’” (Jer 32:7). Can you catch the tone of the prophet’s speech, uttered in the face of the red-faced Zedekiah, who is not accustomed to any reply to his fury, let alone a calm and seemingly beside the point reply such as this? One might paraphrase something like this: “Say, Zedekiah, I hear from YHWY that Hanamel—do you happen to know him?—a son of Uncle Shallum—surely you have heard of him—he’s my cousin, you see, was asked to come to the prison and offer me a piece of land near my home in Anathoth, just north of here. You been to Anathoth, sire? It has some nice land near there; you ought to look at some for yourself. Could be a nice place for a retreat from the pressures of ruling and all.” I can only imagine how Zedekiah responded to this land deal talk; his red face became closer to purple, I’m sure!!

But Jeremiah is far from through. He goes right on to describe in painful detail what happened. Hanamel came to the prison and offered the deal for the land. Chained in the prison, Jeremiah decides to do the deal!! One or more of the courtiers probably laughed out loud at this point, imagining that the clever prophet has just taken his less than clever cousin with this deal. After all, they reason, since the Babylonians are at the gates, quite literally, the price of land must be at rock bottom, so any land deal will clearly be in favor of the buyer. But, some others may have said, any land purchase now is ridiculous, because very soon the Babylonians will own all the land and will take it from whoever thinks they are owners. So, Jeremiah’s offer of any money is money thrown down a rat hole. The whole transaction is just absurd in the extreme, and all those listening must have had a jolly good time howling at the shenanigans.

The loud laughter does not keep Jeremiah in the least from telling his story. In precise detail he describes how he weighed out the purchase price, exactly seventeen shekels of silver, perhaps on the scale that Hanamel has brought for that very purpose. Jeremiah then signed the deed, along with its authorized copy, asking the proper number of witnesses to sign as well in the very presence of the chuckling courtiers, prison guards, and incredulous king. He then handed the signed and sealed deed to his faithful secretary, Baruch, and commanded him to put both the deed and its copy in an earthenware jar, “in order that they may last for a long time” (Jer 32:14). Those of us who are reading this 2600-year-old account smile knowingly, because the 20th century discovery of clay jars at the Dead Sea filled with manuscripts, some more than 200 years old, indicate that the old prophet knew a thing or two about keeping deeds safe for lengthy periods.

Finally, after the laughter has died down, and King Zedekiah has calmed his rage a bit, the prophet announces what this land deal has been about from the very beginning. It has nothing whatever to do with buy low/sell high transactions, but it has everything to do with hard headed hope. Surrounded by scornful courtiers, an enraged king, curious and watchful guards, not to mention the army of Babylonian forces waiting to enter the city and destroy it, Jeremiah proclaims the unalterable hope of YHWH. “Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land” (Jer 32:15). The inevitable defeat of Judah and the destruction of Jerusalem will not by any means be the last word of YHWH, the almighty Jehovah, the God of hope.

What is the most ludicrous business deal you ever got into (or *out of*) just in time?

In the tiny town of Flushing, Ohio, amidst the coalfields of Belmont County, stands a brick building which used to house the Citizens’ National Bank. Like a lot of community financial institutions of its day, this bank specialized in small loans made to local farmers, shepherders, and working-class

folks in the nearby area and harbored the hard-earned dollars of their working-class neighbors. Their capital was fortified with investments of some local coal tycoons and a congressman from the area; and for nearly two generations, it served the community well until it was swallowed up by a much larger financial institution from a much larger city. Instead of the local farmers and businessmen who originally constituted the board of directors, financiers who have likely never set foot in the town, and probably couldn't even find it on the map, now operate the bank.

The story of this little bank is not much different from a lot of community banks in lots of small towns across the country that have similarly been bought by larger financial corporations. But what is most noticeable about this bank was its founding date---smack in the middle of the Great Depression!!

One has to ask—who would invest money in a financial institution at a time when banks were going belly up and in a place where cash money was so scarce? Yet, that is precisely what this group of farmers, shepherds, and small-business operators did. And, for nearly two generations they succeeded in providing the capital that built homes, purchased equipment, expanded businesses, and paid college tuition for folks in that tiny town. But you have to wonder—in 1931 was it optimism or insanity that inspired the investors?

Now I don't know the whole history of the Texas Trail Market but I would imagine that it was local investors who saw the need for a grocery store here in Pine Bluffs. It turned out to be a group of investors who created a co-op market that has met that need for years now. Optimism or insanity or hard-headed hope that the grocery store would empower a small town in South Eastern Wyoming to continue to keep residents and attract new ones to live in this great town?!?!? We as citizens of this city have a responsibility to its founders and all the residents to continue with that hope and commitment and keep on supporting our market!

For the founders of that little bank in that little town, investing their hard-earned cash money in the future of their community proved to be a good deal despite the economic climate of the Great Depression. But God offers us so much more. In Christ, we are given the strength to stand on hope when others are bailing out. In faith, we sign the deed to our lives over to him in full view of a skeptical public just as Jeremiah did so long ago. In confidence, we lay his claim on us out for all to see, even as he takes us unto himself to preserve us safe and secure for all eternity.

God promises hope in the face of perceived disaster. God offers hope when it appears hope is gone. This is no short-term promise. Whatever we humans can devise to destroy ourselves and our fellow humans, God pronounces hope. We live in that hope, not in the hope of new technologies, new exploration, new ideas that promise to save us. If all that we know disappears, God has other plans. “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” (Jer 29:11) This is the God of all the cosmos, and hope transcends all our imaginings. That is real hope. That is hard headed hope. It is that hope in which we can live and strive to be the people that God hopes for us to be.