

A Defiant Hope

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. 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, where King Zedekiah of Judah had confined him.

Jeremiah said, The word of the Lord came to me: 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." 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. And I bought the field at Anathoth from my cousin Hanamel, and weighed out the money to him, seventeen shekels of silver. I signed the deed, sealed it, got witnesses, and weighed the money on scales. Then I took the sealed deed of purchase, containing the terms and conditions, and the open copy; 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. In their presence I charged Baruch, saying, 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. For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.

There are a lot of old names and places in this reading, so we can get bogged down and miss what has happened here. The year is 597 BCE. The Babylonian army has surrounded and laid siege to Jerusalem. The Babylonian leader, Nebuchadnezzar, is angry. For the second time in a decade, Judah has revolted against Babylon. This time the Babylonians will show no mercy. They march across Judah to topple Jerusalem, the capital.

The strategy of that era was siege warfare. A walled city was built with a protected water supply and enough food to last through a siege. The goal was to be able to wait out the attackers – who presumably would eventually have to leave to find food and water of their own. Or the soldiers would get bored and desert. It was a good defense – unless the armies were unmatched in size. Jerusalem was a relatively small city in a tiny country. Babylon was an all-encompassing empire with the resources to outlast any walled city. Surrounded by the Babylonian army, suddenly the wall doesn't protect the people. It traps them. It's only a matter of time until they run out of food or the army breaches the wall to make them slaves. This army is undefeated. There is no hope.

In this setting we meet Jeremiah. He is a prophet, and he has had plenty of opportunities to speak to God's people about the conquering Babylonians. Remember, this is not their first encounter. Jeremiah predicted they would be in this dilemma. He warned the people that they were not going to defeat Babylon. Instead of listening to Jeremiah, the people charged him with treason, and he's tossed into jail.

While he's there, his cousin comes to visit. And it's not a social visit. Hanamel (the cousin) wants to sell his property to Jeremiah. It's a nice field located just outside Jerusalem in Anathoth. Under normal circumstances, this would be a deal to consider. But at the moment, the overwhelming Babylonian army is camped out in Anathoth. They have trampled across the land, destroying buildings and livestock in the process. This field is currently a worthless piece of land. Not to mention, since possession is nine-tenths of the law, a Hebrew deed will mean nothing to the Babylonian government.

It would be crazy for anyone to buy this land, but for Jeremiah, it's even stranger. Because he is in jail! There was little chance that he would ever be free again. And even if he were, he was already old and had no children. According to the laws of the Torah, the land he bought from his cousin would simply revert to his cousin. Apart from buying the Brooklyn Bridge, this may be the worst real estate deal in history.

But God told Jeremiah to buy the land, so he does. Now this transaction could basically have taken place within the confines of Jeremiah's jail cell, but if this were a private transaction, it would be nothing but foolishness. When Jeremiah makes his absurd deal public, however, it becomes a way for him to convey God's message to the people.

You see, when Babylon first conquered the land, Jeremiah told them then that it wasn't going to be a short-term exile. God revealed to him that the Babylonians would be in power for

70 years. So Jeremiah gave the people a long-term plan. Although in the short-term everyone wanted to revolt, to overthrow Babylon, to return to Jerusalem, it just wasn't possible. So Jeremiah told them to settle down. Build houses, plant fields, have children – even in Babylon, even in exile. You're going to be there a while, so make yourselves at home.

That previous prophecy makes his actions this morning all the stronger. Jeremiah has told his people to settle down in Babylon, but here he is making plans to settle down in Judah! The deed is not filed away in some registrar's office that will be burned down tomorrow. It is sealed in a clay jar and buried in the ground, meant to survive the siege and the years of conquest. Jeremiah is planning for the very long-term. A future so long-term that Jeremiah knew it wouldn't include him. In fact, Jeremiah was exiled to Egypt, where he died. He never lived to see his people return home. This bizarre real-estate deal was not based on Jeremiah's optimistic view of the future. Things were terrible and they were going to get worse and everybody knew it. Jeremiah did it as a sign of hope for all the people who had given up hope.

Jeremiah embodied a defiant hope based on complete trust in God. And resilient, defiant hopefulness in the midst of disaster has characterized God's people down through the centuries. Not only in Babylonian exile, but also during the days of the Roman persecution. While the Vikings sacked English monasteries and during the persecutions of the Middle Ages. Martin Rinkart was a pastor in a town destroyed by a 30-year war. Refugees poured in, sick and wounded, and 50-100 people were dying every day. Rinkart was the only pastor left, dealing with the funeral and pastoral needs of all those people. Yet he summoned the same kind of defiant hope Jeremiah showed. He sat down and wrote the words:

Now thank we all our God with heart and hands and voices,
Who wondrous things hath done, in whom this world rejoices.

So it turns out that despite all the confusing names, this is a wonderful story about what the people of God do in every generation and in every place. Our calling and our command are to show the hope of God to broken, sick, poor, abused, disregarded, cast aside human beings. Defiant hope is not optimism about the present, but it is an investment in the future. An investment in God's future. It is an extravagant display of trust that God has plans for us, plans for our benefit and not our harm.

This kind of hope is what is required of us – to invest in hope, to invest in the kingdom, to invest in a future with hope. Of course, the real challenge is to make it practical, not just theoretical. How do we invest in hope on a personal basis, or a daily basis? What would you do to invest in hope? I wonder if all our decisions are this decision in a sense. Where will I work and volunteer? How much will I give? With whom will I sit? For whom shall I vote? *Maybe the question isn't WWJD (what would Jesus do?), but WWJI – Where would Jeremiah invest?*

A congregation our size often finds it difficult to truly invest in the future, to buy our own field in Anathoth. We think we just don't have the resources. And so for us, one of the ways we have bought fields is by paying our apportionments in full. Our connectional giving allows us to work with not only a handful of other congregations, but with United Methodists around the world to say that we believe we can change the world.

But if you look at the statistics and trends too long, there is no particular reason to be optimistic about the future of mainstream churches. Among mainstream Protestants, there has been steady decline in influence and numbers, and it might seem foolhardy for a congregation like ours to make an enormous investment in paying our apportionments in full. It would be easy for some cynic to point at us and say, "Look at those ridiculous people who are living in yesterday and do not know that the church is dying." But we know something they do not know.

We know something of the hand and the power of God, and when we invest in apportionments, we buy a field in Anathoth.

But even now, our church council is trying to discern how our congregation can buy our own field in Anathoth. As a congregation, how do we invest in the future? Where do we want to be as a church in 5 years? In 10 years? How do we need to invest our time and money now to make those hopes a reality? Compared to the millions of dollars collected globally through apportionments, what can our small congregation do?

Objectively speaking, very little. Objectively speaking, anything we can do now is a grain of sand against a whole seashore of need. Objectively speaking, there is no reason to do it. But it is buying a hold in Anathoth. It is saying one day, God's kingdom will reign. And we are so confident in our hope, that we are investing in it now. Even if we can't see it. Especially if others can't see it. So for now, we have the chance to get in on the ground level, and we are buying a field in Anathoth. Amen and amen.