

Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15
September 26, 2010

South Plains

Houses Shall Again Be Bought

Jeremiah is justly famous for his rants against corruption and sin. In fact he gave his name to angry, long harangues over the sad state of the world. My dictionary says that a jeremiad laments immorality and corruption and promises the judgment of the Almighty as bitter payment for sin. The prophet's reputation is well-deserved. For almost 52 chapters, the book of Jeremiah gives a tongue-lashing to Israel, followed by five more chapters in the book of Lamentations. The count is almost 52 chapters because in the middle of Jeremiah, where our reading for today appears, a ray of sunshine breaks through the clouds of gloom.

Jeremiah 32 is part of the Little Book of Consolation, a few chapters that prophesy better days for Israel despite God's present judgment. The Little Book of Consolation continues to offer powerful hope to Jews and Christians alike, hope as welcome today as ever. Jeremiah lived in terrible times for the people of God. When he looked around him he saw a society running headlong toward disaster, crumbling under the weight of its own sin, and ignoring every caution. "Run to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem," the Lord tells his prophet. "Search its squares and see if you can find one person who acts justly and seeks the truth (5:1)."

This is not the power of positive thinking, nor was it popular thinking. When Israel went to war and Jeremiah kept up his critique of social injustice and declared that God was punishing Israel with this war, the king had had enough. He placed Jeremiah under house arrest, just like totalitarian societies do today with critics they do not like. If you are a dictator, it's an understandable precaution. Jerusalem is besieged by a steamroller army from Babylon conquering much of the Middle East. The country cannot afford to have naysayers damaging morale and giving comfort to the enemy, even if he is right. So at the beginning of chapter 32, Jeremiah is locked up in the palace of the king.

There he has a vision, a word from the Lord. He is told to expect his cousin Hanamel who will visit him with a real estate proposition. It seems some of the family land is for sale. Since Jeremiah is the closest kin, he has first right of refusal. Despite warfare and economic uncertainty, the Lord tells the prophet, "Buy this land." When the vision is over, in fact, Hanamel does visit Jeremiah with an offer of the very piece of real estate named in the dream. Jeremiah decides that this was not a dream; this is a command from the Lord.

Economically, buying real estate in a country losing a war makes no sense. Jeremiah knows better than most that Jerusalem will fall to the Babylonians, the country will be ruined and land prices will be in the toilet for who knows how long. So this is what the prophet does. He buys the land, makes two copies of the deed

on vellum, seals the deed in a jar, and buries the jar for safe-keeping. If that sounds primitive, consider that we are still finding legible documents that were stored that way 2000 years ago. The point of this exercise in front of witnesses was to affirm that the present destruction of the land was not permanent. One day, the people of God would again occupy the Promised Land so that “houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land (32:15).” The prophesy is more than words. Jeremiah literally puts his money where his mouth is.

Warning; print in capital letters: Nothing in this ray of hopeful sunshine will dispel the darkness of God’s judgment against the people. The siege of Jerusalem will destroy it. The war has already laid waste to the countryside. The Babylonian exile will decimate the economy for generations. And, never again will the nation enjoy the prosperity and prestige of the good old days.

I am not a prophet and I have no jeremiad to preach against our nation, although the greed of easy credit does seem to have produced the judgment of a recession. Nevertheless, the hopeful promise of Jeremiah in the midst of war and distress can speak directly to us today. The promises of God cannot be erased by our foolishness. The presence of God has not been withdrawn just because the good times have disappeared for many in our society. The providence of God still guides and sustains our destiny.

One piece of evidence for God’s faithfulness is your continued support of the ministry of this church. God remains invested, heavily invested, in the mission of Jesus Christ in this place at this time. If you drive along Route 250, you will see two new churches built in our community. The economy is recovering much too slowly for optimism. But, the long term faithfulness of God remains sure. That’s the difference between optimism and hope. Optimism reads the economic indicators and says the glass is half full. Hope can see the glass more than half empty and still believe that God will rain blessings once again. Hope rests on the solid foundation of God’s character. The Lord does not let his people go, even if we bring hard times on ourselves. Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.

I do not believe in random proof-texts from scripture that tell us what to do. Please don’t buy real estate tomorrow because the Bible said so. What does this ray of sunshine tell us? It says we can trust God for the future. God’s blessings are much more than material things and prosperity. God has promised us lives full of purpose and meaning, lives filled with the presence of the Holy Spirit, lives forgiven and freed so that we enjoy the love of God in Jesus Christ and the love of one another.

Those are promises we can bank on in at least two ways, inside the church and outside. First, we celebrate these promises within the church community. Every time we worship together or learn about God or enjoy our Christian friends or work together in service, we

ingrain those promises in our character. We discover ways that God is keeping his word to us. We delight in the gifts the Holy Spirit is bringing to the fore in other people. We support our neighbors, practicing love even as God loves and supports us. We find purpose as we take up our role in the drama of Christ's mission.

The baptism of a child works to affirm the promises of faith and to build on those promises. Jeremiah did not try to predict the future with some timeline of coming events. What he did was to place the future of his land firmly in God's hands. He believed that one day his earthenware jar would be dug up, opened and the contents read. When that day happened, the real estate he bought would belong to his descendants. When we baptize Meredith Leigh, we are affirming the faith of her parents and the promise of God's presence in her life forever. The baptism of every child, and every adult for that matter, is not a guarantee of good behavior or prosperity. It's a guarantee of God's behavior: God's hand rests on us. God's blessing belongs to us despite adversity. God's joy is waiting and ready. Baptism commits our future to God's keeping. That's one critical way we bank on God's promises inside the church.

We also bank on those promises outside these walls when we tell other people what God is doing. Whether we call it witness or evangelism or outreach or mission, when we give outsiders just a taste, a hint of divine blessing, we are banking on and investing in God's future just like Jeremiah. The real challenges of Kirk Hall

will be the wonderful joy of sharing these buildings with others. Most challenging is the work of mission, the witness of evangelism, the willing participation in taking Christ's gospel to the ends of the earth starting with Keswick.

It's appropriate that we are baptizing a child today on Evangelism Sunday because the promises that parents and congregation make at a baptism are the seeds of evangelism. We have joined with God in the commitment to tell the good news of Jesus Christ to another person. But it's not enough to confine our telling to those who are baptized here. Maybe in the later Middle Ages when most Europeans were baptized after birth, the task of evangelizing those who were baptized was enough. This is not the Middle Ages, thank God.

Because we live in the twenty-first century, our task is to tell the gospel to those outside these walls, to demonstrate the love of God on the street where we live, to invite our friends to share this love and to add to the praise of our Creator. I have a very practical request for each of you this morning. Anyone who opens our Sunday bulletin sees that we are a church that prays. I want to ask each of us to pray for someone who is not active in a church. Give it some thought this week. Pick out someone you know well enough to suspect that he or she needs faith in Christ, and might welcome the support of a community of faith. Make a commitment to pray for that person for the next three months. That's taking the gospel outside the walls of the church.

The shape these prayers will take is up to you. If you know this person, you will know how to pray for them. Finally, invite that person to come to church with you during the Advent Christmas season. Let them see for themselves if they like what God is offering. This is not a hard sell. It's making good news available to someone who is open to good news.

Baptizing a child and sharing God with our neighbors follow the same routine. When a child is welcomed into the church with this sacrament, we pray for that whole family. We continue those prayers as each child grows up. We worry a little when they fail to show up in worship or Sunday School. We know what problems they face in elementary and middle and high school. We encourage them to come to church.

We should not abandon that routine of prayer and encouragement just because someone becomes an adult. It's especially important to pray for and encourage friends who do not appear to have the advantage of the Christian community. Jeremiah worried because the people around him did not act like godly people. But, he did not give up on them. Indeed, the Little Book of Consolation represents his finest attempt to lure them back to the God of their ancestors, back to the only solid hope on which to build their lives. We need to also offer that same hope to our friends and neighbors. Pick someone to pray for this week.