

**“The Nature of Hope and Our Calling To Act upon It”**

**Jeremiah 32:1–3a, 6–15**

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I was fortunate to have several great groups of friends when I was in high school — one at church, one in the track and field community, and one in the honors program. In this last group there were Jewish twins named Kari and Kim who participated joyfully in a Christmas gifting project we designed, beginning with letters written to Santa Claus. In those days, the post office was willing to share letters that hadn't made it to the North Pole yet. In one letter, a child wrote about a bug and then said, “Here it is,” and there it was, taped to the card for Santa to see.

Anyway, I still have a mug the twins made for me. They were good friends, but their parents were odd. After we all went to college, they moved to California, not for work, and not because they knew anyone there. They bought property and a home just east of the fault line so that when the big earthquake comes, and everything west of the line falls into the Pacific Ocean, they or their descendants will have ocean-front property! There were crazy, or perhaps prescient, only time will tell.

But they were a bit like the prophet Jeremiah. In today's reading, he buys a field at Anathoth, his hometown, just outside Jerusalem. This doesn't immediately sound crazy until we realize it is the tenth year of King Zedekiah of Judah and the eighteenth year of Nebuchadrezzar, that is, 588/587, the year the Babylonians besiege Jerusalem. Jeremiah has been imprisoned by Zedekiah because he has prophesied that God will deliver the nation into the hands of the Babylonians, and that is about to happen. Jeremiah says they will be in exile for seventy years (29:10).

So, why in the world would he invest in real estate now? He will never live on the land. Well, Hanamel, son of his Uncle Shallum, says the right of redemption by purchase is his. It's a kind of inheritance or means of saving family property (Leviticus 25:25-28). But so what? He won't ever live on the land.

Jeremiah even goes so far as to have his scribe Baruch make two copies of the deed, one sealed and one open, and put them in an earthenware jar so that the record of the sale will last a long time. There are numerous accounts of land transactions in the scripture, none as detailed as this one, but why bother to do all this at this moment?

Well, because God tells him to do so, as a sign of the reality that there will come a day, after the exile, no matter how long it takes, when the people will dwell in the land again. “Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel:” Jeremiah says, “Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.” It is a prophetic symbolic act which speaks volumes. When it comes time to speak a word of hope, after all his predictions of doom and gloom, Jeremiah does more than speak, he puts his money where his mouth is, he buys land as an act of faith.

This may seem odd for this doomsday preacher, but he is only speaking for God all along, and God’s message is always about the truth, whether it is good news or bad. Part of the truth is that the people have been unfaithful to God and thus there will be consequences, if they do not repent. They do not. So, there are consequences.

But this does not mean God has given up on the people. Another part of the truth is that God is gracious and kind, God’s love is unending. There will come a day when the people will again live in the land that is sacred to them, truly home for them. There is hope beyond the suffering of the present time. This is the message of not just this passage but an entire section of the book of Jeremiah known as the Book of Consolation (Jeremiah 30-33). There is hope.

So, what is message for us? First and foremost, it is a message about the nature of hope, its source, and its persistence in the face of all that happens in life. We are talking about hope, not optimism. We’re talking about relentless trust in God, no matter what, to make something good of our lives and world. As such, hope is not dependent on our capacity to see a path toward something better, though the development of such vision is wise. But there are times when, despite our best efforts to see a better path, we come up empty. God does not, even for a nation being taken into exile and a prophet whose heart breaks for his people.

On a personal level, we might think of recovering the will to live after a painful loss or significant disappointment. Sometimes we can will ourselves back to investing in life after a loved one has died, a relationship has ended, or a vocational dream has to be abandoned. We find someone to listen to our pain, we chart new paths of spending our time, we don't fill the hole, but we rebuild our lives. Other times, it just doesn't seem possible or worth the effort. We experience a deeper level of grief that seems intractable.

Yet even when we cannot see a way forward, all hope is not lost because it is not entirely up to us. God still has a say. The opening words of a hymn read, "Sometimes a light surprises the Christian while he sings; it is the Lord who rises with healing in his wings." They were written by William Cowper after a period of depression in which he nearly committed suicide. Only because of the stirring of God's Spirit within him was he able to step back from that precipice and allow time for healing to take place.

God breathes hope into our personal lives in many ways. God also breathes hope into the life of the church. This a difficult time for the church in our culture, with the percentage of people attending worship on any given Sunday drifting rapidly toward single digits, and the loudest voices claiming to speak for Christ doing so in ways Jesus would not recognize. Many churches in our city, like other cities, are close to closing their doors. The truth is some churches should die and the Church as a whole in our culture needs a rebirth to become relevant.

But is it time to sing, "Gloom, despair, and agony on me; deep, dark depression, excessive misery," (to quote the old "Hee-Haw" song)? Is everything lost for the church? One of my mentors, Glenn Hinson, told a story about a seminary student bemoaning the state of the church years ago to a professor. The professor listened for a long time before finally saying, "Son, if it were up to people, the church would have died long ago." But it's not up to people, not alone. Even if there has to be some kind of death of the church as we know it before resurrection, the church will live. There is hope as long as God has a purpose for us.

We can say the same for our nation in this time of turmoil which some see as renewal and others view as a threat to everything we have valued for nearly 250 years. No matter how many freedoms are lost, no matter how far back we turn the clock on civil rights and other justice concerns, no matter

how much power is given to how few wealthy people, all hope is not lost. The people will have a say in all this. More importantly, God will have a say. America is not God's only instrument in this world, and there is no guarantee that we will exist indefinitely, but if we serve some purpose in God's eyes, perhaps we will.

Jeremiah's symbolic prophetic act of buying land at an ominous time tells us something about the nature of hope. It also tells us something about taking action in a hopeful way, whether symbolic or not. As we have noted, Jeremiah doesn't just talk about hope, he puts his money where his mouth is. What actions might we take if we genuinely believe in a different and better future? We are people of the empty tomb, after all, people who believe in the resurrection. We don't just claim to trust in God, we claim to trust in a God who can bring life out of death. How might we act if we truly trust in God?

If we believe that God intends abundant life for everyone, we will help people in need and fight for their ability to help themselves. We will not shrug our shoulders in self-justifying resignation, noting that even Jesus said the poor will be with us always. He was quoting the first half of Deuteronomy 15:11, the second half of which says, "Reach out your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land."

We will not give up the fight for racial justice because it seems to have become more difficult again but continue doing the right thing whether we see immediate results or not. We know Dr. King's quote of Theodore Parker, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." U2's lead singer Bono updated this insight. "I used to believe this, I no longer do," he said, "we have to bend it." The arc does not bend itself. We have to take action. Jeremiah would agree.

There is one other thing to note here. Jeremiah's purchase of a field at Anathoth tells us something about the nature of hope and our calling to act in hopeful ways. Baruch's role in all of this tells us something too. He is Jeremiah's scribe, and what he does may seem peripheral. All these details about how the sale is recorded and the records are preserved may seem trivial, but they are not.

On one level, documenting property transactions is important. It is easy to say this in a church with many homeowners, attorneys, and realtors, but it just is. We know this if we have ever had a sale go wrong or be held up. When we bought and sold our home in Danville, Virginia, the attorneys doing the title and deed searches failed to realize there were three separate plots of land. So, they didn't search all three, and as a result, the closings were delayed. We told the realtor the second time around, but the attorney still forgot. Fortunately, we bought the house from a church member and sold it to another church member.

Documenting property transactions matters for legal purposes, but the recording of this particular sale has even greater significance. It is a kind of witness to hope, and Baruch plays a role in this witness. It suggests another role for us in regard to hope — we are not only called to action; we are called to give witness.

Sometimes our actions are our witness. Other times we give witness with words or indirect or supportive action. It may simply be the way we carry ourselves or talk about any given part of life. Being honest about a struggle is often warranted. Being hopeless about the future sells God short. We give witness to our trust in God by remaining hopeful, no matter what.

But there are some who give witness to hope in a different way — journalists, at least the best of them. They document horrific warfare, often at great risk, natural disasters, and our own political turmoil, holding up truth, whatever it is, good or bad, and lifting up stories of courage and compassion. It may not seem obvious how this work is an act of hope, but the records are preserved for future generations, trusting that there will be future generations. That is a witness to hope.

There is an old saying that goes like this. “Two men looked out from prison bars — one saw mud, the other saw stars.” Jeremiah saw both from behind his prison bars. With God's help, he saw the worst that was happening but still envisioned a future beyond the struggle filled with possibility. He still saw the stars. That is our calling too.