

Sermon – 9/29/19  
Jeremiah 32:1-3 a, 6-15  
Psalm 91

Hanamel must have thought he was the luckiest man in Anathoth. Not only did he manage to unload what was essentially a worthless piece of property, he was able to sell it to his own cousin Jeremiah, who just happened to be locked up at the time.

The time is 588 B.C. in our Bible reading for today. Jerusalem is under siege by the troops of Babylonia. Jeremiah is imprisoned in the court of the palace guard. He is a traitor to the government of King Zedekiah, because he has been preaching that it is the will of God that Judah surrender to the Babylonians. When King Zedekiah, whom he had tutored and cared for as a child, asked him for advice, Jeremiah consulted with God and then advised the king to surrender: "Put your trust not in the strength of your army or in the thickness of the city's wall. Trust, instead, in the word of the Lord."

If one reads of the conditions in Jerusalem during the siege, the situation is appalling. The water was running out, disease was running rampant, the food was going bad. Material property was of no value. Silver and gold were worthless, because there was nothing to buy. All commercial enterprises collapsed because there was nothing to sell. Property values plummeted, as they always do in war, because everyone was trying to sell property and to flee the city. Who wanted any land when the Babylonians were knocking at the gates?

It is in this situation that the Word of the Lord comes to Jeremiah. "Buy the field which is at Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, for the right of possession and redemption is yours. Buy it for yourself. Then I knew," declares the prophet, "that this was the word of the Lord."

What follows is a detailed account of the transaction, including where the deed was signed, who witnessed the signing, and where the deed was stored. Such a mundane narrative puts the reader to sleep until suddenly there is news: "For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land" (Jer. 32.15).

This divine declaration must have struck hearers as sheer folly; the land was overrun, and soon both the temple and the palace would lie in ruins. Yet against all evidence and human reason, Jeremiah acted in faith. God called him to buy a field; Jeremiah had no choice but to

obey, "Then I knew that the message I had heard was from the LORD" (v. 8).

What first strikes the reader as a strangely detailed account of a real estate transaction is really a tangible demonstration of Jeremiah's faith in God. The command to buy that field is totally incomprehensible to Jeremiah, as we read in verses 24-25. Jeremiah knows that Jerusalem is going to fall because of its rebellion against God. And yet Jeremiah is told, send and buy a field. When everything looks hopeless! When fields and farms are not worth a penny. When there seems to be no hope, because the world is crumbling about us, and the only thing worth doing seems to be to survive by any means here and now, and never mind the consequences. When our terrible, weak, blind human failures have got us into this mess, and we can no longer stand to analyze the guilty past or to look forward to the awful future that we have determined for ourselves. When we try to shut out memory, shut out hope, and just try to stay alive.

But the word is not, "Guard what you have, Jeremiah. Hide your scraps of bread and your cup of water from those who peer hungrily into your courtyard. Never mind what's happening outside in the street. Look out for yourself." No. The word is: "Buy a field." And the reason for that command to the prophet is given in verse 15. "For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land."

Two weeks ago, we celebrated a "high" in the life of the Church: the 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary Reunion weekend. Coming down from the mountain can be tough and last week seemed like a low Sunday for me. Then, as I have been working on preparations for our upcoming Church Conference with the challenges of budget, Nominations, Membership and just trying to keep all the reports in order, two roofing companies came in to begin estimates for repair of the Sanctuary roof. I have no doubt that work will be expensive.

The roof over the fireplace room has been leaking and that will need to be repaired or replaced. Without estimates of cost, how do we know in what direction the Church should go? Is it worth reroofing and repainting the current Sanctuary? What other hidden costs will be revealed? How do we prepare and what do we do now to ensure the next 175 years for the Waupun United Methodist Church?

And those are big ticket items that may or may not affect day-to-day life. What are the actions in our personal lives that we can take when we are feeling stuck in our jobs, our schools, our communities, our social

circles, our relationships? Each of us is going to feel trapped from time to time, put on hold by some omnipotent operator, but that doesn't mean that we cannot make a move toward a better future. A great deal of good can be done while we are staring into the unknowns of the future.

One possibility is that we **make a down payment on the future**, as Jeremiah does when he buys the field in Anathoth. There are times when our faithfulness to God doesn't appear to be a good investment, but it always is. Despite the fact that Anathoth is about to be burnt and destroyed, Jeremiah puts his hard-earned money into it. He trusts that God will restore the fortunes of his chosen people, and will make their land valuable once again.

For us, this down payment could mean working with integrity in a dead-end job, trusting that God will channel our best efforts to a positive end. It could mean being generous in our charitable giving, trusting that God will use our gifts to accomplish good that we cannot see ... or even imagine.

We can also trust God to **turn impossibilities into possibilities**, and wait with patience for God to work his purposes out. After buying the field, Jeremiah prays to the Lord, saying: "Ah Lord GOD! It is you who made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm! Nothing is too hard for you" (v. 17).

Finally, we can remember that the LORD is always **working to turn evil into good**, and death into new life. Over the course of our lives, we will certainly experience pain and suffering, but punishment and defeat are never the last words in our story. "I will rejoice in doing good to them," God promises, as he looks to the future, "and I will plant them in this land in faithfulness, with all my heart and all my soul" (v. 41).

That is the Word of God that comes to us from this passage in Jeremiah. When everything is hopeless on our human scene, God still has a plan for the future.

When we stand beside the grave of a loved one, and all the pain floods over us; when we realize that we can never more say what we wanted to say and can never more do what we wanted to do for that loved one, God has a plan.

When everything lovely and gracious and pure in our world seems to fall victim to corruption and evil; when no good work seems to endure, and no project of love seems to bear lasting fruit; when everything we do is tainted by selfishness, God has a plan.

When the meek, the peacemakers, the pure in heart get trampled into the dirt; when the weak constantly are sacrificed on the altars of power, and the tongues of the proud and mighty strut through the earth, God has a plan.

When there seems to lie ahead of us nothing but a crucifixion; when the Gethsemane of prayer is darkened by the shadow of a looming Golgotha; when we would rather do any other thing than obey the will of the Father, and we cry out to him to remove this cup from us, God has a plan.

Now we are getting ourselves back to the garden, "a plentiful land" where we can "eat its fruits and its good things" (2:7). We may be broken and scarred for our experience, yet also remade by the potter-God who broke down the clay in order to refashion it into a pot "as it seemed good to him" (18:4). Being led back to the land God promised, we are going home.

In addition to welcoming the faithful, God is also renewing the whole earth. This balm of God is greater than what one would find in Gilead. This balm heals the community of the faithful as well as the rest of creation.

Psalm 91, which the Choir sang for us today, reinforces this reason for hope. Speaking for God, the psalmist says, "Those who love me, I will deliver; I will protect those who know my name. When they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble, I will rescue them and honor them. With long life I will satisfy them, and show them my salvation" (91:14-16).

Psalm 91 encourages us to "dwell in the shelter of the LORD."

One's life journey is not exempt from peril and evil. There will be times of danger, illness, extreme weather, and bad people. In our complex world to survive the times we build bomb shelters, purchase weapons, hire financial advisors, and install security systems. None of these can ultimately protect us from our world of inflexible natural laws. There are just too many things beyond our control. The only way to survive is to trust that God will be with us.

Jeremiah 32:15 declares, "houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land." "And God will raise you up on eagles' wings," the Psalm declares. We can trust in the hope of a new future with and in God. God promises renewal: for us, our community, our church and for our world.