

Wesley United Methodist Church  
September 15, 2019

Text: Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15  
Title: Buy a Field

I found myself identifying with the prophet Jeremiah a little bit more than normal this week. At the beginning of the week, I was waiting to hear whether the offer I had placed on a condominium would be accepted. By the way, it wasn't. I'm looking at places to live in retirement and especially ones in a very specific area of Smithfield very close to my son and his family. I'm not in any hurry because I don't anticipate retiring for another year or so. But the experience had me thinking about Jeremiah.

In today's scripture reading, Jeremiah purchased a field. Incidentally, he didn't have to worry about his offer being accepted, because with the property laws, he had the first option of purchasing the land in order to keep the property in the family. He wasn't anticipating making use of the field any time in the near future, or maybe even distant future, and for good reason.

Jeremiah was in prison. It was 588 BCE and Jeremiah was a political prisoner under house arrest. For the past 40 years or so, Jeremiah had been telling the king and the people that it was time to turn away from corruption, idolatry, disobedience, and greed. Jeremiah has been telling them to stop assuming that God would protect them no matter what they did and that it was time to repent and turn back to God and start doing the things that God wanted God's people to do. Jerusalem was occupied by Babylonian troops. King Zedekiah, who didn't want to hear anything that contradicted his ideas, had accused of treason for prophesying that Zedekiah himself would be captured and sent to Babylon.

Jeremiah's message had often been one of warning about disaster and destruction, but suddenly something changed. In a time when Jeremiah was in prison, Jerusalem under siege, and people being taken away to Babylon, surprisingly Jeremiah was suddenly instructed to buy a field. It seemed like a bizarre act. From prison, in a time of overwhelming and seemingly never-ending death and destruction, with no assurance that he would ever be free again, Jeremiah bought property.

It was very different than today's real estate market where there are more people looking to buy than there are places for sale. Land was not worth much at that point, since no one knew when, or if, they would get to use it. But still Jeremiah purchased the field, had the deed drawn up and one copy of it sealed and placed in a pottery jar to keep it safe for the long term.

In the CEB Study Bible, the introduction to the Book of Jeremiah includes this paragraph. "The book of Jeremiah is disaster literature, ... but it is also survival literature. It serves as a survival guide for a suffering people, the historic losses of war. When the prophetic text names Judah's disaster and grieves its losses, when it refuses to let death and destruction have the final say, and when it imagines a future beyond destruction, it serves as a map for finding hope in a world crushed with pain, the book imagines God shaping new beginnings from the ruins of fallen worlds."<sup>i</sup>

Jeremiah's action was more than just a transfer of property ownership. It was a symbolic act meant to bear witness to something that the people – and likely Jeremiah – could not yet see. It bore witness to the hope and the promise from God that there would come a day when the people would once again build houses and till the soil rather than being made to live in a foreign land, far from the place they called home.

Serious hope for the future did not make a lot of sense given the circumstances of life right then. Walter Brueggemann, in an article called, “Vanquishing the Kingdom of Despair” points out that “Hope is an act that primarily contradicts the ‘facts on the ground.’”<sup>ii</sup> That’s as true today as it was in Jeremiah’s day.

Real hope is about far more than having a Pollyanna attitude. According to Brueggemann, real hope, in this story, and in our lives consists of two ingredients. “First, hope is grounded in the deep, holy intentional purpose of God.” God’s intention is for there to be peace and a time when fields and vineyards will be planted and harvested. Jeremiah is committed to God’s vision and to this hope.<sup>iii</sup>

Situations like this raise a very basic question that people have always struggled with. What is God’s will and how do we understand it? We may glibly let the words, “it was God’s will” slide off our tongue; but exactly what do we mean by that? How does that fit with the way we cope with the circumstances of life?

The kings of Israel and their advisors believed that God would protect them no matter what they did. We’ve heard people say that devastation from hurricanes, earthquakes, and even 9-11 were God’s punishment on us or others for our behavior. For some it seems like God is the great puppeteer who steps in and manipulates what happens in our lives. Some find this comforting; others find it disturbing or revolting. Others go to the opposite extreme and think that God has nothing to do with us and our lives.

For me, a very tiny book written in 1944 by Leslie D. Weatherhead does a great job of helping me deal with these questions. His book called The Will of God<sup>iv</sup> consists of 5 talks he gave to his congregation during

World War II. He was dealing with questions not unlike what Jeremiah would have been facing. During the bombings of London, the question was often raised, “Where is God?” or “Is this God’s will?”, questions we often still ask today.

Essentially, Weatherhead said that we can understand God’s will in three ways. First there is God’s intentional will – God’s ideal will. God’s ideal will is that humans will live together in peace; that people will follow Jesus, that we will treat each other with respect and honor.

But God also gave us the gift of free-will. That means that not only are we free to make our own decisions, but so is everyone else. God doesn’t stop someone from drinking too much and then driving their car. God doesn’t stop military leaders from deciding to invade another country. God doesn’t make the President or Congress or anyone else decide what the policy and practices on immigration will be.

This free-will thing really has a way of messing with God’s intentional will because there are natural consequences to our behaviors. A car being driven by a drunk driver and hitting a pedestrian is going to cause serious damage. A military invasion is going to have severe consequences. Immigration policies and practices affect the very lives of multitudes of people.

Weatherhead says that in these situations, the question to be asked then is, “what is God’s plan within these circumstances?” He calls this “God’s Circumstantial Will”. What does God want us to do when we find ourselves in the middle of circumstances over which we have little or no control? What is a faithful Christian response to these situations? Some have responded to tragedies by beginning organizations like MADD. Some

respond by writing letters, taking part in protests, and sometimes by acts of civil disobedience.

But this hope that contradicts the “facts on the ground” is found most frequently in the third part of God’s will, what Weatherhead calls “God’s Ultimate Will”. God’s ultimate will that humans will be at one with God can be achieved in many different ways. On Good Friday, the darkest night of the world’s history, when Jesus was crucified, it seemed that evil had won. But with God, Love wins and on Sunday morning, Jesus had risen from the dead. On Friday, it looked like God had been defeated, but on Sunday we discovered that God and love had won.

Weatherhead suggests that God’s intentional will was that people would follow Jesus, but when they didn’t, God’s circumstantial will required or allowed Jesus to be crucified. This allowed God’s ultimate will – love winning – to be achieved. Weatherhead believes that God’s will can be achieved in spite of what people do and may even be achieved by using some of the things we did. God used Jesus’ crucifixion to bring something good out of something that was horrible.

In the circumstances of prison and invasion, Jeremiah bought a field, looking to the ultimate will of God when there would be peace – the place of hope. This is what serious hope for the future is grounded on – not the “facts on the ground” but the “deep, holy intentional purposes of God” that cannot be defeated by the circumstances of life.

The second important ingredient upon which this hope is based according to Brueggemann is that this hope is not simply a “passive reliance upon God. Hope is a human act of commitment to and investment in the future. Hope is an act of human courage that refuses to cherish the present too much or be reduced to despair by present

circumstances. Hope is the capacity to relinquish the present for the sake of what is imagined to be a reachable future. In the end, hope is a practice that bets on a vision of the future that is judged to be well beyond present circumstance, even if one does not know how to get from here to there.”<sup>v</sup>

It seems that the more things change the more they stay the same. We are not in the same situation as Jeremiah, but we definitely live in a world where there is a great deal of fear; and where a message of hope is needed. As Christians, we are those who bring a word of hope to a world filled with darkness. However, that hope is not just an assurance that things will somehow, someday be better. It is a call, a summons to us to act – like Jeremiah did and buy a field.

More than likely we are not going out to literally buy a field, but we are called to invest in the future, to take actions that might even seem foolish at first glance. Even if we think it won't help, we can write letters to our congressional representatives; we can gather with others to demonstrate against injustice. Even though we think that providing someone with one meal won't make a big difference, we can provide that meal, those school supplies, the clothes that might make a difference, the listening ear, the friendly smile. We can act in ways that show hope.

But the call to us may be to do something that seems bigger. Part of our future possibility study may lead us to ways of sharing God's love and hope that we haven't even thought about; things that initially we might think don't make sense, but in God's vision they may be exactly what is needed in this time and this place.

Brueggemann says that this is a time “for yielding justice, for foolish forgiveness, for outrageous generosity, for elaborate hospitality.” He reminds us that “none of these acts can come from fear, anxiety, or

despair. But that they are all acts that evoke new futures that the fearful think are impossible.”<sup>vi</sup>

In the end, hope may contradict what people tell us is the reality; or what people see. “It subverts the dominant version of fear, anxiety, despair and violence.” The capacity to do this does not come from ourselves, but from the heart of Christian faith. It is inspired and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Let me share with you the words of someone who lived that hope in the face of what could have driven him to despair and great fear. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German Pastor and part of the resistance against Hitler. A few months before his arrest in 1942, he wrote: “... there remains for us only the very narrow way, often extremely difficult to find, of living every day as if it were our last” (a very real possibility for him), “and yet living in faith and responsibility as though there were to be a great future: ‘Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be built in this land,’ proclaims Jeremiah (32:15) in paradoxical contrast to his prophecies of woe, just before the destruction of the Holy City. It is a sign from God and a pledge of a fresh start and a great future just when all seems hopeless.

“Thinking and acting for the sake of the coming generation but being ready to go any day without fear or anxiety – that, in practice is the spirit in which we are forced to live. It is not easy to be brave and keep that spirit alive, but it is imperative.”<sup>vii</sup>

Like Jeremiah, like Bonhoeffer, like many others in the past and today, we are called to live with hope, to buy a field, to proclaim that despair will not win but that hope, and love will prevail because ours is an awesome God.

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<sup>i</sup> CEB Study Bible. Introduction to Jeremiah. P.1206.

<sup>ii</sup> Brueggemann, Walter. "Vanquishing the Kingdom of Despair" in Preaching the Word, Sojourner's subscription

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid

<sup>iv</sup> Weatherhead, Leslie. The Will of God. Note, what follows is my understanding of what Weatherhead writes.

<sup>v</sup> Brueggemann

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid

<sup>vii</sup> Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. Quotes in "The President & The Prophets" by Yehezkel Landau, in Sojourners June-July 1984. This appeared in "Preaching the Word" on Sojourner's subscription service.