

Sermon: Field of Hope

September 25, 2022

Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15

Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16

by Eric Anderson

You may recall that I introduced Jeremiah last week as a gloomy prophet. It's a well-deserved reputation. In chapter 32 of his book, Jeremiah was being held in the royal palace at the order of the king. Why?

Well. The nation of Judah and its capital city of Jerusalem were under attack by the dominant empire of the Fertile Crescent at the time: Babylon. Just forty years before, the Assyrians had dominated the Tigris and Euphrates valleys as they had for three hundred years. In just around fifteen years, Assyria collapsed and Babylon ruled. Emperor Nebuchadnezzar II set out to extend his empire, which included adding the small nations along the coast of the eastern Mediterranean as client states. One of these was the nation of Judah, which had no ability to resist. The city surrendered, Nebuchadnezzar installed a monarch of his own choice from the royal family – an uncle to the king – and went back home with a lot of treasure and some selected local leaders. One of those leaders, by the way, was a priest named Ezekiel. You might recognize his name. He wrote a book.

That should be all the background you need for today's reading, but... that was ten years before this story took place. The king that imprisoned Jeremiah was Zedekiah, the personal choice of Emperor Nebuchadnezzar, and Zedekiah had decided to experiment with, well, rebellion. It did not require Divine inspiration to envision the outcome. Ten years before, the Babylonians had besieged Jerusalem, and Jerusalem had fallen. At this moment in Jeremiah's life, the Babylonians stood outside his city once again, and the outcome was not going to be any different.

He said so.

That made him a Troubling Influence, didn't it? What else can you do with such unpatriotic individuals but... lock them up?

So there was Jeremiah, locked up in the palace which was, itself, locked up in a besieged city, when he heard a message from God that he would receive a visit from his cousin Hanamel.

As Anthea Portier-Young writes at Working Preacher, "Hanamel will instruct Jeremiah to purchase a field in Anathoth that Hanamel has been forced to sell, risking the loss of their

family's inheritance and stake in the land (Jeremiah 32:7). As next of kin to Hanamel, Jeremiah has the right and responsibility of go'el, 'redeemer' or protector, a role anticipated in the legislation of Leviticus (Leviticus 25:24-25). There, the right of redemption is grounded in the claim that the land is God's, and therefore inalienable."

If it seems like a peculiar moment for land transactions, I'm sure it seemed even more absurd to Jeremiah. Not only was the country invaded, the field under discussion was probably underneath the boots of the Babylonian invaders – it was certainly outside the city walls. But Jeremiah went through with the transaction and recorded it in all its fussy legal detail – one deed signed and sealed, an unsealed copy, proper weighing of the money, and all the paperwork preserved in clay jars for posterity.

The field was not a field of grain. It had become a field of hope. "For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: 'Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.'"

Cheryl Lindsay writes at ucc.org, "The command paints a vision, but it is not one of victory over an enemy. It's an assurance of existence."

King Zedekiah had been looking for promises of victory. The military, civic, and religious leadership of Jerusalem were looking for the same thing, and so, I am sure, were the ordinary people who endured the siege and properly dreaded its conclusion. Jeremiah had no such promises to give. Zedekiah's foolish rebellion would suffer the results of folly. All Jeremiah had for anyone was a field of hope.

Jeremiah had not been shy throughout his career about telling people things they didn't want to hear. He had earned his reputation for being a Troubling Influence. I have to wonder, though, if this moment wasn't one of the hardest in his life as a human being, as a prophet, as a person of faith. In that moment Jeremiah was invited into hope, that hardest thing, and invited into it in a way that he could not really expect to see his hope fulfilled. It's kind of like the "wish sandwich" that the Blues Brothers sang about years ago:

"Well a wish sandwich is the kind of a sandwich
Where you have two slices of bread and you
Wish you had some meat"

Jeremiah's easiest course, imprisoned there in the palace in a city under siege, was despair. It wasn't his first time in disfavor with a king – not even close – but familiarity could not have made it easier or more endurable. Throughout his life Jeremiah had used his words and voice and his scribe's pen to urge reform on the people of Judah and on its leaders. He had been an utter failure. His warnings of consequences had not just gone unheeded, they'd been actively contradicted. The nation had continued the practices that oppressed its own people, had disregarded the state of its most vulnerable, and had disastrously engaged in international politics and military adventurism they simply did not have the resources for.

Yet Jeremiah, laying out the silver and signing the deed and packing it carefully away, chose hope.

I am not a wildly optimistic person. Many years ago a friend told me that I'm a cynic, and on balance I think she was right. I tend to expect people's self-interest to take control of their decisions. I do like to be wrong about that.

A field of hope is, therefore, a challenging thing. I have to deliberately, purposefully, lay aside the cynical assumptions and choose the hopeful expectations. That is, I have to look ahead to a future in which people – including me – do well, despite a past in which people – including me – have been doing rather badly. That's a lot of internal conflict. My emotions have some Things to Say about it all.

Worse than the emotional upheaval of hope, however, is that it brings obligations. It brings commitments. It brings work.

Despair feels awful, but it doesn't require anything of me. In despair, I can just let things happen. Despair tells me I can't influence them, so trying to influence them is off the agenda. Despair makes me a spectator, a social and spiritual couch potato.

Hope for the future means I believe the future can be better than the present, and if it can be better, then there are things I can do to make it better, or at least give it a chance of being better. If I were Jeremiah – and a 21st century pastor's work has some similarities to a 6th century prophet's – I'd be writing and speaking and teaching and demonstrating about the better path, the better road, the better way of life. I'd be telling stories and writing songs and taking pictures and trying to use those to point desperately at God's summons to righteousness. I'd be calling out lies and urging compassion and demonstrating generosity of my own. I might even do it over the Internet.

I hope you recognize in that list that I've chosen the work of hope. Jeremiah bought a field.

What is your field of hope? What is the action you can or might or (this is an awkward word) should take to demonstrate your hope for a better future to those around you? What is your field of hope that takes a step toward a better future? What work do you do to see that tomorrow's promise is not drowned by yesterday's ills? How can you make sure that next year is better than last year?

May each of your fields of hope sprout, grow, and bear fruit.

Amen.