

16th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 9.25.22

Jeremiah 32:1-3a, [4-5], 6-15

The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord in the tenth year of King Zedekiah of Judah, which was the eighteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar. At that time the army of the king of Babylon was besieging Jerusalem, and the prophet Jeremiah was confined in the court of the guard that was in the palace of the king of Judah, where King Zedekiah of Judah had confined him.

[Zedekiah had said, “Why do you prophesy and say: Thus says the Lord: I am going to give this city into the hand of the king of Babylon, and he shall take it; King Zedekiah of Judah shall not escape out of the hands of the Chaldeans, but shall surely be given into the hands of the king of Babylon, and shall speak with him face to face and see him eye to eye; and he shall take Zedekiah to Babylon, and there he shall remain until I attend to him, says the Lord; though you fight against the Chaldeans, you shall not succeed?”]

Jeremiah said, The word of the Lord came to me: Hanamel son of your uncle Shallum is going to come to you and say, “Buy my field that is at Anathoth, for the right of redemption by purchase is yours.” Then my cousin Hanamel came to me in the court of the guard, in accordance with the word of the Lord, and said to me, “Buy my field that is at Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, for the right of possession and redemption is yours; buy it for yourself.” Then I knew that this was the word of the Lord.

And I bought the field at Anathoth from my cousin Hanamel, and weighed out the money to him, seventeen shekels of silver. I signed the deed, sealed it, got witnesses, and weighed the money on scales. Then I took the sealed deed of purchase, containing the terms and conditions, and the open copy; and I gave the deed of purchase to Baruch son of Neriah son of Mahseiah, in the presence of my cousin Hanamel, in the presence of the witnesses who signed the deed of purchase, and in the presence of all the Judeans who were sitting in the court of the guard. In their presence I charged Baruch, saying, Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Take these deeds, both this sealed deed of purchase and this open deed, and put them in an earthenware jar, in order that they may last for a long time. For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land. (451)

The kingdom of Judah had little hope at this point.

It had once been great—it along with Israel, this once United Kingdom.

But that was a long time ago now. It was 500 years since David had ruled, the glory days, when Israel and Judah were gathered under one, independent rule. It was 450 years since Solomon had succeeded him, and built the Temple and settled the city, making it rich with gardens and public spaces.

The land and the Temple: by these, it was clear that the Lord was with them, would remain with them for the rest of time.

And so it was, for a long time anyway.

But now the kingdom of Judah had little hope, Jerusalem under siege.

Israel had long since fallen—to the Assyrian Empire; and now Judah had been pressed between two empires as well, passed as a pawn between Egypt to the south and Chaldea, Babylon to the northwest—until eventually Judah aligned with Egypt, Pharaoh.

The Judeans back under the rule of Pharaoh: that hadn't been an easy pill to swallow.

But it was harder still when the Chaldeans, the Babylonians overtook Egypt, and Judah also fell. The Babylonian emperor, Nebuchadnezzar, placed a puppet king on the throne in Jerusalem—King Zedekiah, who the emperor likely assumed would do his will.

Zedekiah would be obedient to the emperor, his patron.

But neighboring nations pressed their proximal advantage. They'd join together in revolt against Babylon, against Nebuchadnezzar.

It wouldn't go well, in the long run. The empire would win. Of course it would, which Jeremiah had been saying all along. This would go badly. This would go very badly. They couldn't win. They couldn't possibly win. So, what they should do instead is simply live. Accept Babylonian rule, and live. Accept even the possibility that this was the will of God. Perhaps God was with Babylon, somehow, somehow. Maybe this was the way of grace into the future, this painful humiliation, this perhaps gracious humility? Because what means humiliation went it also means at least you'd live? Let go your pride and live your life, live *righteously* as they were supposed to do.

No. And it would go badly, not least for Zedekiah, who would be made to watch as imperial soldiers slaughtered his two sons before blinding him and taking him into exile, forced agony.

Before it came to that, though, rebellion. It first faltered, and then found its footing.

Now all they had to do was fight. And fight.

The prophet Jeremiah was one lone voice against all this. All the other prophets and policy advisors: they stoked the king's vanity, pumped up his pride. But according to Jeremiah, there was no reason to think Judah would be able to fend off Babylon, not for good, not even with neighboring help. This was doomed to fail. People would die. People would *die*. Jeremiah would rage, would wail. He'd warn of sacked cities and desolate countryside, and people hated to hear him, the king hated to hear him, but this truth of cause and consequence was lodged in him as if the Lord himself had put it there—which, of course, he had. When truth arrives to you, you can thank the Lord. When inconvenient truth arrives to you, you can thank the Lord.

So, not that it pleased him. No, in fact he hated it, too—that he'd been given so pressing an understanding, so pressing a thing to say, which no one wanted to hear. "I have become a laughing-stock all day long," he wailed at the heavens. "Everyone mocks me. For whenever I speak, I must cry out, I must shout, 'Violence and destruction!' For the word of the Lord has become for me a reproach and derision all day long. If I say, 'I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name', then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot."

So, Zedekiah would force him to hold it in. He would imprison him. "I am going to give this city into the hand of the king of Babylon," Zedekiah resented Jeremiah for saying, "and he shall take it; King Zedekiah of Judah shall not escape out of the hands of the Chaldeans, but shall surely be given into the hands of the king of Babylon, and shall speak with him face to face and see him eye to eye; and he shall take Zedekiah to Babylon, and there he shall remain until I attend to him, says the Lord; though you fight against the Chaldeans, you shall not succeed!"

Because kings never like hearing inconvenient truths.

He would imprison Jeremiah—as if this would stop what Jeremiah had said was coming and not just stop Jeremiah from saying it was coming. And the siege would come and would continue, and people would indeed die.

And then, a strange calm, a strange season of calm. This story of Jeremiah's cousin and his field now for sale drops into the prophecy of Jeremiah like a weird intermission, an eye of a hurricane. More storm would come, but for now, for now...

To hear Jeremiah tell of it after the fact, he'd sense his cousin Hanamel would come to him, would say to him, "Buy my field that is at Anathoth for the right of redemption is yours."

And redemption is exactly the right word for it because it was, rather suddenly, now a worthless field. For it being in a war zone, for it having fallen under attack, and maybe the soil salted or blood-soaked, and the whole scene laden with the stench of death, it was worthless as a field and Hanamel was heading into exile (for what was here anymore for anyone?) and the right of redemption for this whole hopeless situation fell to Jeremiah as next of kin, Jeremiah who had as much use for a field (from prison) as I'd have use for property on the moon.

Redemption. The right of redemption. A re-deeming of something, a re-evaluating something as to its worth: this is what redemption is. It had been deemed worthless, but now redeemed as worthy. It had been deemed a lost cause, but now redeemed as not entirely bereft, not entirely beyond hope. Redemption is when something that seems altogether lost or totally laid to

waste or wholly without hope or utterly worthy of but condemnation is imbued with new value, new usefulness, new hope.

Jeremiah and this blood-soaked, war-pocked field. Christ and this sin-soaked, war-weary world.

So how 'bout it? Would you buy such a field, in the middle of warzone? Would you buy such a field that, to its credit, was for a moment at least fallow of the killing, but which killing would come back to it, such that nothing could possibly grow? Would you buy land that was sure soon to belong to another power, an enemy power? It would be Babylon's soon enough. Everything would be Babylon's.

That said, not even empires stand forever. Everything, eventually, would return to itself, would return to its creator.

Everything *will* return to its creator.

So, say you do buy it, would you do so legally, in absolute accordance with the letter of the law? Would you weigh out the money, so you were sure to pay its asking price? Would you sign the deed and seal it, having gotten witnesses to testify to the lawfulness of every detail of the transaction? There'd be no need to. There'd be no one to enforce such propriety, so there'd be no need to adhere to such propriety. Now is when you could get a good deal, after all. Fire sale on fields, as it were.

As we know, as the story is careful to tell us, Jeremiah did—weigh the coins, pay the true price, rally witnesses to see to the rightness of it all. He even put the deed of sale in an earthenware jar so it would withstand the calamity everyone knew would soon resume.

And it was all quite absurd. The law had no bearing as everything was in ruin, the whole known world was on the verge of collapse. It was all quite absurd. What would all this matter? What could it possibly matter?

What hopeless causes might come to you for redemption? Or are you perhaps the hopeless cause? Reliant on only the good grace of someone else? Reliant at this point on but God?

It comes to that sometimes. We run out of options and come to the end of our capacity and have nothing left to hope for but grace from entirely outside ourselves, outside the known world. And maybe it won't come. And maybe it will. And maybe it won't come in time. But who's to say it won't come beyond time?

I say it will, because Jesus did say it will—Jesus come from beyond time back to us in time to say this terrible, lovely world is for now, and God's gracious, loving realm is forever. And you can

either believe that, or not. You can either live by that, or not. But either way, you're living by faith. So, look to its fruits.

How do you want to live? Among whom do you want to live? I want to live by redemption among people who decide to live redemption, because a lot of this seems utterly lost, and yet so painfully beautiful, so fragile and yet so durable, so unworthy of being totally given up on.

Let's not give up.

Look for hopeless causes, and be hope, for the right of redemption might just be yours. Lay bare your hopelessness and see you're not alone. You've come, at least, to the right place.

Thanks be to God.