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Jeremiah 32: 1-3a, 6-15

“God’s Not Finished with Us Yet”

So, I’m stealing one of the reading spots in today’s service. I’m doing this because I think it’s important to give a little context before we turn to our scripture passage from the prophet Jeremiah.

The prophet Jeremiah. He’s one of the major prophets of the Old Testament with a big old book of prophetic literature named for him. This book is filled with poetry, prophetic statements and acts, and narrative story-telling.

Jeremiah’s often called the Weeping Prophet – a visual representation of which you’ll see on the front of your OOW.

Jeremiah has reason to weep. He is the biblical prophet who witnesses the end of the Kingdom of Judah, the destruction of Jerusalem, and the exile of God’s chosen people to Babylon.

Quick side note – cause I find this confusing, so maybe you did too. When David was king of Israel, the whole kingdom was united under one monarchy. Later, because humans do as humans do, the kingdoms split – into the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah.

The Northern Kingdom was conquered by Assyria hundreds of years before this text from Jeremiah. The Southern Kingdom, where Jerusalem and the Temple are located, have never been conquered.

The significance of Jerusalem and the Temple cannot be overstated – God was always supposed to protect them.

And yet thing that was never supposed to happen – Jeremiah saw happen.

In today’s passage, Jeremiah has already seen Jerusalem under siege once, which resulted in the Kingdom of Judah become a vassal state for Babylon.

But this time? This siege, happening all around Jeremiah, this one is THE foundational moment in history – the conquering of Jerusalem and the exile to Babylon is the hinge around which all of the Old Testament turns.

And Jeremiah knows it, sees it coming. But no one will listen to him. Most especially not King Zedekiah.

And so it is here, on the precipice of Jerusalem’s destruction, that we meet the prophet. I’m reading from:

Jeremiah 32: 1-3a, 6-15 (MSG)

32 1-5The Message Jeremiah received from God in the tenth year of Zedekiah king of Judah. It was the eighteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar. At that time the army of the king of Babylon was holding Jerusalem under siege. Jeremiah was shut up in jail in the royal palace.

6-7Jeremiah said, “God’s Message came to me like this: Prepare yourself! Hanamel, your uncle Shallum’s son, is on his way to see you. He is going to say, ‘Buy my field in Anathoth. You have the legal right to buy it.’

8“And sure enough, just as God had said, my cousin Hanamel came to me while I was in jail and said, ‘Buy my field in Anathoth in the territory of Benjamin, for you have the legal right to keep it in the family. Buy it. Take it over.’ “That did it. I knew it was God’s Message.

9-12“So I bought the field at Anathoth from my cousin Hanamel. I paid him seventeen silver shekels. I followed all the proper procedures: In the presence of witnesses I wrote out the bill of sale, sealed it, and weighed out the money on the scales. Then I took the deed of purchase—the sealed copy that contained the contract and its conditions and also the open copy—and gave them to Baruch son of Neriah, the son of Mahseiah. All this took place in the presence of my cousin Hanamel and the witnesses who had signed the deed, as the Jews who were at the jail that day looked on.

13-15“Then, in front of all of them, I told Baruch, ‘These are orders from God-of-the-Angel-Armies, the God of Israel: Take these documents—both the sealed and the open deeds—and put them for safekeeping in a pottery jar. For God-of-the-Angel-Armies, the God of Israel, says, “Life is going to return to normal. Homes and fields and vineyards are again going to be bought in this country.”’

I love the way one commentary sums up this passage.

“A jailed preacher. A signed contract. Words buried in dirt.”

This is a bizarre moment in Jeremiah’s ministry, no doubt. He’s been imprisoned by King Zedekiah who has accused Jeremiah of treason because of his prophecy that Babylon is going to destroy Jerusalem is this battle – that outcome has been determined. Jeremiah has been urging the king to give up the fight, to trust Jeremiah when he says that the end has come, that God has told him that the end has come.

Walter Brueggemann writes, “God knows, and his prophet knows with him, that it is end times… But the king would have it be like a casino in Las Vegas where there is no clock and no time, no beginning and no end, no time to speak or to answer, but only an enduring and unchanging now.”

Worldly kings are committed to the time of here and now. They have no interest in the future or the past – they are and must be committed to this time, the moment, in which they hold power.

Because anything less would be to admit that they are not all-powerful… to admit they are not God…

Zedekiah cannot admit that the end has come. And so he throws Jeremiah in prison.

And it’s at this moment, as he sits in prison, that Jeremiah turns to the sort of public act of prophetic hope that we haven’t yet seen from him. Mostly Jeremiah has been weeping. Grieving. Screaming about the destruction to come. Not making statements of hope.

We spent a lot of time in Old Testament class talking about the Prophets. What they aren’t and what they are.

What they aren’t is fortune-tellers. They don’t necessarily predict the future.

But they are truth-tellers. They are poets, they are preachers, they are political.

Prophets are trying to shatter our human indifference. Our numbness. Our intent to live only in the here and now when the practices of our here and now are bringing a future of destruction.

They are screaming, literally screaming sometimes, at the rest of us to wake up and face our reality.

Prophets don’t always have a lot of friends.

But we would do well to heed their words.

Because while prophets bring words of judgment, they also, amazingly, speak words of hope.

And this strange passage, this signing of a land contract in the middle of a prison cell, land that Jeremiah will never build a house on – this is Jeremiah’s public and defiant act of hope.

After 31 chapters of destruction and grief, of uprooting and overthrowing – that’s what the book of Jeremiah has mostly been thus far by the way – we suddenly receive a message from God that promises new life. Eventually.

Buy the land of your cousin Hanamel.

Now it’s a little hard to imagine this our context of the Columbia Gorge, but this land of Hanamel’s in Anathoth? It’s worthless.

Not only is it worthless, but it can only be sold to another member of the family. For Jeremiah to recoup his losses, someone else in the family will need to want to buy it from him.

Jeremiah is buying land in the midst of a war – while others are fleeing – he’s staking a claim, making an investment, taking his silver and choosing to trust God when God says, “Life is going to return to normal. Homes and fields and vineyards are again going to be bought in this country.”

When God says home and fields and vineyards will again be bought – it’s important to note that God doesn’t just say they will be built and grow again. They will be bought. Meaning, according to Jewish law, they will be bought again by Jewish people.

In a historical moment just before the forced exile of Jewish people to Babylon, the claim that Jewish people will again buy land in Judah, is an outrageously hopeful one.

It’s improbable to say the least.

And yet, it is the claim Jeremiah, the weeping prophet makes.

And he makes it in front of quite a few witnesses too. The other prisoners, Hanamel, the scribe Baruch – ALL of the other Jewish people at the prison that day.

After all the destruction Jeremiah has seen and predicted, after all the weeping he’s done, at the moment when you’d most expect him to crack – when he’s imprisoned in the royal palace – he does what I least expect.

He chooses hope.

Jeremiah takes those newly signed deeds and puts them in a clay jar for safekeeping. A jar that will outlast the siege of Jerusalem, that will outlast the exile to Babylon, that will outlast even Jeremiah’s human life.

His claim will still be there on the other side of destruction. His stake in the land will be there when new life comes, when it is time again to build and to plant, and to trust in the promises of God that the seeds we plant will in fact one day grow into fruit.

In the words of Wendell Berry, we hear this promise. We must work for there to be a harvest – we know by the aching of our hands and the sweat of our faces that work is required for the harvest to be reaped.

But it is not all that is required. The Grace of God – the work done as we sleep, the healing brought to a hurting world, the new life that sprouts from the most desolate of places – this is the work and the grace of God.

And too, perhaps in the more difficult words of Wislawa Szymborska – we know too that the hopes of the last century have not yet come to pass.

Human progress isn’t enough to heal the world. Human good intentions are not enough to end war and hunger and helplessness. History has taught us that over and over again.

For healing, for new life, for abundant harvest, for peace – we will need the kingdom of God. We will need the grace of God.

And we will need to be ready to do seemingly foolish things for God.

It is foolish to buy land when it’s worthless and destruction is on the doorstep. But it is an act of prophetic, biblical hope.

Out of death comes life.

Again, from Walter Brueggemann, I read, “The riddle and insight of biblical faith is the awareness that only anguish leads to life, only grieving leads to joy, and only embraced endings permit new beginnings.”

Jeremiah, our weeping prophet, knew this perhaps better than anyone. Out of anguish, out of grief, out of the acknowledgment that all is not right in this world and that it may in fact get worse before it gets better – out of all of that comes new life.

Only when we embrace our endings, can the new life God is envisioning for us begin to grow.

God is not finished with us yet, my friends. Perhaps God is finished with the kingdoms of our time and with institutions that serve themselves instead of God’s people. But I trust and believe that God is NOT finished with this world, God is not finished with us, and God is not finished with you.

Amen.

Jeremiah asked if there was a balm in Gilead – he had no answer. Our next hymn – whose origins lie with enslaved African-Americans – enslaved by many of our ancestors in this land in the not so distant past – resoundingly reminds us that yes, there is a balm in Gilead.

I invite you to remain seated and raise your voice in song. Hymn #553.