

A Sermon for DaySpring
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The Treasure of Hope
 Jeremiah 32
 September 25, 2022

This is the second Sunday in the Season of Creation. If you're sort of new to some of this, this is how the church tells time—by seasons throughout the year. There's Advent and Christmas, Lent and Easter, there's the long stretch of ordinary time. In the midst of that, for 3 weeks, we, with churches all around the world, celebrate the Season of Creation, where we turn our attention intentionally to listening to the voice of Creation, listening to God's Words speak to us considering how to love God more fully, how to be attentive and care for all that God entrusts to us more completely. So we come to the second Sunday in the Season of Creation like we did last week with the prophet Jeremiah.

Jeremiah is not explicitly discussing creation-oriented themes the way we might think about them, but I think we have something to learn here.

The prophet Jeremiah was a truth-teller whose truth telling didn't make him very many friends. For most of the 1st half of the book Jeremiah, he is warning the people of Jerusalem in whatever way he can that they are in trouble. You have been unfaithful to God, unjust to one another, disrespectful of the gift of the land on which you have made a selfish life. And now, we will suffer the consequences which will come in the form of an invading army who will take us from our land, our home, our precious Jerusalem. Exile is coming.

To that, everyone said: "Nah. We're good. You go on. And while you're at it, you should preach peace like the other prophets. Just preach peace and they'll listen to you. Just say all's ok, and the king's favor will be on you. Just be nice, and all shall be nice." But Jeremiah refused to listen.

By the time we get to chapter 32, he's in jail in the city of Jerusalem, which is itself imprisoned, under siege by the Babylonians who have arrived. The year is 588 BC or so, and the whole city is now in chaos, hung in the balance between what was and what will be. It is, according to verse 1, the 10th year of Zedekiah king of Judah, who represents the life that was and the 18th year of Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon who represents what will be. In this moment, they are caught between two kings and two kingdoms, two eras, two ways of experiencing and making sense of the world. The era that is ending is an era of relative stability, of prosperity, and security. It doesn't mean there weren't problems in society, but at least a son of David sat on the throne; at least God was still in the Temple, which still stood in Jerusalem. The era coming on them means the loss of all of that—it means the king in captivity, the temple destroyed, the land decimated. They are in the balance between the was and the will be.

Everyone who didn't listen to Jeremiah before now see the inconceivable reality for themselves as they see the smoke rise from Babylonian soldier camps off in the distance and hear the

thunder of their war cries and feel the pangs of hunger and thirst being incapable as they were of accessing the fields, and herds, and springs outside the city walls.

Into this chaos, enter Hanamel, Jeremiah's cousin, who owns a field about 3 miles north of Jerusalem, but it might as well be on the moon, now behind Babylonian army lines. It's gone, that land and its vineyard and its house and its memories. Hanamel says, "Hey Jeremiah, buy my land. You're next in line in the family with a right to buy it. I'll make you a deal."

This is the third time in the book Jeremiah has been told to buy something. This seems to be a theme with him. First, it was a loin cloth. "Buy this cloth," God says, and he does. God says, "hide it under a rock." He does. "Now go back and get it," and he sees that the cloth is ruined. And God says, "That's what I'm going to do to Israel."

The second time, God says, "Buy a pot," and he does. "Take it to the city gate and smash it on the ground. And tell the people, that's what's going to happen to them." And he does all this.

Jeremiah did both of these things. Like we said, he wasn't a popular fellow.

Now, the word comes to him, "Buy this land." It was a word from his cousin and a word from God. So he does. And is utterly methodical the way it describes the purchase transaction. This is going to be by the book. It's like reading an expense report. It's so methodical and boring.

I want us to try to feel the cognitive dissonance between the chaos and fear in everyone's eyes and hearts and the way this transaction is described. It has all the drama of sitting in a mortgage office, signing your name on all those papers. Or doing your taxes at the dining room table late at night in early April, or editing footnotes on your thesis, or sanding mud in nail holes on a wall of drywall for a closet that no one will ever see. Total minutiae, boring, relentlessly boring. Maybe like listening to a sermon on this part of the story—exhaustingly boring.

I bought the field at Anathoth from Hanamel, my cousin. I weighed out the money to Hanamel, 17 shekels of silver. I signed the deed (ok). Sealed it (got it). Got witnesses (sure). Weighed the money, on scales (Jeremiah, this is like being at the DMV). Then . . . I took the sealed deed of purchase containing the terms and conditions and the open copy (this is so boring). And I gave the deed of purchase to Baruch (yes), son of Neriah (yes), son of Mahseiah (great, got his genealogy), in the presence of Hanamel my cousin (yeah, we already know he's your cousin), 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. (groan).

All of this while they are actively under siege. They're living in imminent danger. This is not the way to tell a dramatic story. In dramatic action stories—we know this well—characters never use the restroom, they never eat, they go days without sleep. In *Mission Impossible*, Tom Cruise never opens a Little Debbie to get energy. You just go on with the action. When you're telling that kind of story, you don't slow down with the details of life, and you certainly don't spend a whole paragraph on the details of a real estate transaction.

But It's only at this point, after all this, that Jeremiah reveals what he's up to. In the past 2 times, he bought something good, and he ruined it. Now he's bought something ruined and is enacting a prophetic sign that it will be restored. The details are everything; the drama is always in the details.

"Take these deeds, both this sealed deed of purchase and this open deed, and put them in an earthenware vessel, that they may last a long time. Because the Lord says houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land."

When everyone else denied there was trouble, God's prophet told the truth. When everyone else believed all was doomed, God's prophet said, "There will be trouble, but God's not done with you yet." Contrarians are exhausting, but they also show us that there's a future and a hope.

This story shows us something very important for this season of creation and anytime Christians attend to our relationship with creation. Several things translate from that context to ours, speaking to us about this moment in time and our challenges.

We, too, are in a moment between two eras: the was and the will be. We are on the precipice between an era of climate stability and rapid changes in the environment due to climate change. We will lose almost all coral wreaths in the ocean in the next century; we'll lose a foot or more of elevation in shorelines as seas rise; we'll lose habitats for animals, trees, and grasses in vulnerable environments. We'll have hotter, longer summers, even here, and we'll have more extreme storms. All of this is coming. We're on the knife's edge between what was and what will be. Human populations will be on the move. Mass migrations will be the future of the world's geopolitics. People will literally lose their homes and lands and will have to make a new life in a new place.

That's the will be. That and so much, much more as global temperatures rise past the 1C we're at now to 1.5C which is inevitable and beyond to 2C, which will happen if we don't make changes. And beyond. If we can draw on this biblical image from Jeremiah 32, life on earth is under siege by the army of consequences we've made in our own image. Life on earth is facing exile from the life it has known to an uncertain life in a world that is very different from the one we've known.

The truth is that most people, most of the time, feel utterly at a loss as to what can be done about it. And when people feel utterly at a loss, some people feel despair or suffer debilitating anxiety, but most people most of the time just go apathetic. There are plenty of things to worry about; if I can't fix that one, it is not going to make it to the top of my worry list. I think this is just human nature. But it's human nature amplified by theologies which suggest that it doesn't actually, eternally matter to the Gospel anyway. But doesn't it?

Where did we get the idea that we have the option of our relationship with the earth not mattering to our faith? Nobody who eats food or breathes air has that option. Where did that idea come from? Not from Genesis and the creation stories or Exodus and Moses at the burning bush or from the covenant which was a three legged relationship of God, humans, and the land. It didn't come from the Psalms, or from the prophets. It didn't come from Jesus, God incarnate, who died not to escape this earth and body, but who was bodily resurrected and is with us even now, manifestly present to us in the giving and receiving of the signs of his body and blood. It didn't come from the epistles who declare Christ to be in all things, the first born of creation, or from Revelation which pictures our eschatological hope as a new heavens and new earth.

So where did the idea come from? Not from Christian theology at the heart of which is the eucharist as a sacramental sign of God's grace given and received through material things. It didn't come from Baptist church life, which believes the highest form of grace is a homemade casserole dish.

So from where? Wherever the idea came from, the sad truth is that we've bought it and lived from it and in the process, lost touch with so much that is essential to the goodness of life. We're in this really strange place of already being in exile and not even knowing it because we forgot what home is like.

Which in a backhanded way is good news because it means that when we feel disconnected, discombobulated, like we don't belong and we don't fit, when we feel out of sorts in our communities, our bodies, from the goodness of life, from God. . . when we feel that, we're supposed to feel that. It's a physiological or emotional revelation of something deeply true.

But what are we to do about it, when it seems like nothing can be done about it? There are lots of answers, just look up "fight climate change," and you'll see many suggestions. But, after reading Jeremiah, I want to suggest a more fundamental reframing in our language, and how we tell this story of our lives between these two eras. Why are we "fighting" climate change? Why is that our verb? It seems like in our culture, that's the only verb we know how to use anymore. We fight everything. We declare a war on everything, which says a lot about our culture, and it sounds heroic—to believe you are going out to fight rouses something primal in us. Fighters are heroes who lead the charge to vanquish the enemy.

But really now, what are you going to do to fight climate change, when climate change is not an enemy you can shoot or stab? A changing climate is simply the earth's adaptation to human activities. We aren't enemies with the earth. The earth is our sister, in St. Francis' terms. She doesn't need to be fought; she needs to be loved. She needs to be cared for, which means we need to have hope and love and tell our story that way.

Jeremiah didn't rise up and say let me fight the Babylonians. He was no coward, but fighting wasn't the go-to verb. You know what the verbs were: bought, weighed, signed, sealed, took, gave, said, charge. In the mundane actions inspired by his hope, he showed a way forward when no one else could see it.

When you do mundane things in care for creation, you are Jeremiah, buying conquered land in the face of exile. When you eat what you buy and compost what you can't . . . you aren't being ridiculous; you are embodying a sign of hope. When you use a little less electricity or use renewable sources or make other changes you can make, you aren't being foolish. You are being hopeful. When you find yourself thinking through big decisions, with care for the earth, for the air, for your neighbor, you aren't being naïve. You're taking part in a revolution. When you find yourself living differently little by little, you aren't a hypocrite for everything you're not doing. You're growing, learning, being formed by a new vision. When you experience wonder in a beautiful place and you stop and pay attention; when you slow down to see the details in the bark of a tree or the petals of a wildflower or even smell the soil, you are being a Christian, praising God for God's manifold creatures and your place with them all.

And when you find yourself believing that every little thing makes a contribution that matters, no matter how small, and you feel good about it, you're rediscovering the treasure of hope hidden in the field of your soul that was almost lost.

Under siege as we are now, we won't fight the ecological catastrophe of climate change and vanquish it. Instead, how about this: let's mundane it. We'll simplify it. We'll quotidian it. We'll make a thousand, a million, 6 billion changes in the way we eat and live and grow food and return goodness to the earth and practice justice. And all of this won't mean that the problems will be solved, but it means we are participating in a future that is still God's. From the benefits and ashes of the industrial revolution that rifted human life from the land, a sustainable revolution is beginning that will return us to the land and to one another and to life.

Hard to believe? Sure. But if an imprisoned man in a city besieged by the army of the most powerful empire the world had ever known can believe it about a plot of land behind enemy lines, we can believe it, too. If we can receive a small piece of bread and dip it in juice and believe we are in the presence of the living Christ, if we are baptized by being submerged in the waters that cover us and then birth us to new life . . . Of all people in the world Christians bring the kind of hope in God's provision and eternal and ultimate goodness that the world needs and is going to need as we put our faith in action.

Our verbs will be: *wonder, celebrate, share, renew, tend and keep, repent, plant, experiment, taste and see, compost, recycle, reduce, bake, break, share, pray, keep silence, nurture, love, hope*. Of course we can have hope, and we can do all the verbs that spring from hope.

We believe in Jesus who endured the cross and was buried. All looked lost until on the third day he rose again. He wore the scars of his suffering. But life prevailed over death. And it shall again. By God, it shall again in the name and the power of the one who reigns over life and death, over this world and the world to come. And who is present with us, even now as we come to give and receive communion, the signs of our salvation.