

Betting on the Future

18th Weekend after Pentecost – October 7/8, 2006

Sermon Background Study

Jeremiah 32:6-15 (The Message)

Jeremiah 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.’

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 Ben-jamin, 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.”

“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.

“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.”’

Uncertainties about the future threaten to overwhelm us at times. Are we willing to invest for tomorrow? To bet on the future? Jeremiah placed a bet that the future is God’s. Are we as confident of God and as trusting that, in the end, we are in God’s hands?

A few years ago, *Early Edition* was a popular television series. It told the story of a young man who was visited daily by a yellow cat delivering a copy of tomorrow’s paper, sending the hero on a mission to prevent a pending tragedy that the “early edition” revealed.

I guess as metaphor, Jeremiah is the cat. Both in word and deed, Jeremiah brought God’s message about Jerusalem’s coming destruction. Jeremiah brought this message to God’s people in what he said and, more so than any other prophet, in what he did. But whereas the cat turned the message over to someone ready to do something about it, Jeremiah’s message went unheeded. By the time we get to today’s Scripture passage in Jeremiah, the Babylonian army has besieged the city. By this time, it doesn’t take a magical cat or a prophet of God for everyone to know what comes next – devastation and exile.

Exile!!

God told Jeremiah to buy a plot of land in Judah, even though God has promised that ruin and exile are about to fall on the land and the people.

It is probably difficult for us to grasp the shock of exile. Some time around 800BC, Homer, the Greek epic poet, wrote “for there is nothing dearer to a man than his own country and his parents, and however splendid a home he may have in a foreign country, if it be far from father or mother, he does not care about it.” We live in a very mobile society. Corporate moves are a staple of our lives. Somehow, we must emotionally connect with the ancient Israelites and the depth of their despair.

Just imagine . . . you are a member of the house of Judah, living in Jerusalem. God, the LORD, the creator of everything, has chosen you to be his people! And he has given you the land of Canaan. He has given you a king, having promised centuries before that someone from the house of David would forever sit on the throne of Israel. But now . . . the hated Babylonians are running through the streets of Jerusalem. In the distance, you see the temple burning. In your heart, you know that the most sacred of all objects in Israel, the Ark of the Covenant, is lost. Surely, the pagans will simply carry it off and melt it down. You harbor the hope that God will come riding in at the last minute to save you – again. But not this time . . . instead, soldiers appear at your door ordering you and your family to join the caravans headed into exile in Babylonia. As you leave Jerusalem, you see that only the poorest of families are left behind. The city lies in ruin and death hangs in the air.

It is in the face of such devastation that God tells Jeremiah to buy the plot of land, to make a bet on the future.

The Book of Consolation

We know Jeremiah better than we do any other of the Old Testament prophets. The other prophets' work consisted largely of bringing God's messages to the people. The prophets were speakers of God's words. But with Jeremiah, God went further. Jeremiah not only brought God's messages, he was told to enact God's messages in dramatic demonstrations. For example, God tells Jeremiah to stand in front of the temple and proclaim judgment upon the temple (ch. 7). Jeremiah is told to wear a loincloth and then bury it in some rocks, where it is ruined, symbolizing the relationship between the people and God – once as close as we wear clothing and now in ruins (ch. 13). Jeremiah is not to take a wife, for God has been cheated upon by his “wife,” his people (ch. 16). Jeremiah is sent to a potter's house to see pottery destroyed (ch. 18). He smashes an earthenware jug, just as Judah is about to be smashed (ch. 19).

After all this and more, we are relieved when we get to chapters 30-33, for these are often called Jeremiah's little book of consolation. These four chapters express a message of hope and restoration. That after all the destruction and exile, God will restore the people to their own land and to freedom.¹ In his commentary on Jeremiah, R. E. Clements writes:

“Beyond the judgments which have taken place, therefore, the Book of Jeremiah asserts categorically that hope remained real: After all that had occurred in bringing ruin and devastation to Judah, there would be divine restoration. The twin themes of return and restoration to a full national existence provide the essential content of the prophetic message of hope, and this message is substantially the same in all four of the great prophetic collections. Eventually and certainly Israel would be saved (30:7); and this word of hope contains an implied assumption that salvation would consist of Israel's becoming a nation once again, free from all the restraints and impositions of foreign rule. Israel would become free, prosperous, and honored under the just government of a Davidic king (cf. 33:19-26).”²

*Sure, I'll take that bet*³

In today's passage, Jeremiah is given another symbolic action to accomplish. With the Babylonian army arrayed outside the walls of Jerusalem, God tells Jeremiah to go out and buy a plot of land in his hometown of Anathoth, about three miles northeast of Jerusalem.⁴ Don't you wonder what was going through Jeremiah's mind? This must have seemed as idiotic to him as it would to anyone else. The death of Israel is at hand and Jeremiah is supposed to go make a land investment. Five times in this brief passage, Jeremiah makes it clear that this is God's doing, saying “Thus says the LORD.” Based on all the other stuff God had told him to do, Jeremiah probably figured that the land would be lost, just as the loincloth was ruined and the earthenware jug broken.

But instead, v. 15 makes clear that this time, the action is not an enactment of loss but of hope. God is having Jeremiah buy the land for the future, the day when the Israelites would return to Judah. Jeremiah was going to make a profit on this field of hope.

Notice also the care that is paid to the details in this story. There are witnesses, the money is weighed, the deed carefully preserved. This is a symbolic act, but it is also quite real. Jeremiah is putting real money on the line. He is not just standing on the promises of God, he is betting on them!

Jeremiah is investing in the future, but it is not merely educated guesswork. Jeremiah's bet is an act of trust and hope. There is risk to it. Jeremiah may be God's prophet, but he is still a man, still one of us, subject to the same fears and uncertainties as all humans. If you doubt this, just picture Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Even our Lord and Savior was not immune to fear.

But regardless of how risky this investment might have seemed to him, Jeremiah lays out the money because his hope rests on his confidence in the promises of God. His hope and our own is not a matter of mere wishes or carefully calculated probabilities. Our hope lies in our confidence that God is faithful.

¹It is promises such as these that create so much tension by Jesus' day. For by then, the Jews, though back on the land, would have spent centuries trading one foreign oppressor after another. Thus, many first-century Jews asked when God would finally keep all these promises. When would the true exile end? For Christians, Jesus is the fulfillment of these promises and the bringer of the new covenant promised by God in Jeremiah 31:31-33. This is a covenant written on the heart, not on tablets of stone.

²From his commentary in the *Interpretation* series, John Knox Press, 1998.

³Anthony Saldarini's reflections on this passage are very helpful. His commentary is part of *The New Interpreter's Bible*, the twelve volume set that is part of the St. Andrew library.

⁴Since Anathoth was a few miles from Jerusalem, Jeremiah would have had to go and buy the land during one of the occasional respites from the lengthy siege warfare of Nebuchadnezzar.

Thru the Bible Daily Bible Readings

October 8 - 14

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help.

Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Sunday Jeremiah 31-33; Isaiah 21 The restoration of Israel is promised and described; Chapter 31 contains the famous passage about God's new covenant</p>	<p>Monday Jeremiah 34-36; Isaiah 22 Jeremiah returns to the fall of Jerusalem, bringing words of judgment; the king burns the scroll of Jeremiah's messages</p>
<p>Tuesday Jeremiah 37-39; Isaiah 23 Jeremiah is imprisoned and Jerusalem falls to Nebuchadnezzar</p>	<p>Wednesday Jeremiah 40-42; Isaiah 24 Jeremiah is freed from prison; we get an accounting of events immediately after the Babylonian conquest; Jeremiah and some of the exiles head for Egypt, despite Jeremiah's warnings that God will be displeased</p>
<p>Thursday Jeremiah 43-46; Isaiah 25 The sin of idolatry is committed by the exiles in Egypt</p>	<p>Friday Jeremiah 47-49; Isaiah 26 Messages about the Philistines, the Moabites, and the Ammonites</p>
<p>Saturday A day for reflection and catching up</p>	

Sermon Notes

Scott's class, *Something More*, meets in Wesley Hall at 9:30 every Sunday.

If you are not a part of a Sunday morning class, we hope that you'll visit our class. It is open to adults of all ages. We have Fellowship Groups meeting now and will be adding more this fall. There are also a growing number of opportunities to meet other members of the St. Andrew community. If you are new to St. Andrew or just visiting, the class is a great way to begin getting connected. If you have questions, you are welcome to call Scott Engle at 214-291-8009 or e-mail him at sengle@standrewccl.org.

Scott's October Book Recommendation

Prayer, by Philip Yancey

This is the first time I've recommended a book that I've only begun to read myself. Yancey's new book on prayer has just been published and, based on what I've read so far, it is just as thoughtful and thought-provoking as the rest of his books. In his latest, Yancey asks the questions about prayer that we all ask. Does prayer work? Does it work the way we think it should? What can we really expect from prayer? I've been excited about this book since I first learned that it was coming and I'm confident we'll all get a lot out of it.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

As the cliché goes, Jeremiah put his money where his mouth is. Akin to buying a plot in Florida's swampland, any of Jeremiah's friends would have seen his land purchase as a waste of money. Betting on the future? What future they would have asked.

What bets do we make on the future, God's future? What risks do we take that non-Christians might find foolish? Any? How about in the use of time or our money? Tithing certainly seems risky to many Christians. How about in our relationships or with our children?

What sorts of risks do you think God asks us to take? What does it really mean to trust God in all things? Jeremiah's choice to use his money to buy the plot of land was surely a smart one - he could trust God's promises of restoration. But still, Jeremiah never reaped any financial gain from his investment. When exiles began returning to Jerusalem, they found it in the same shape as when they left, a ruined, burned out mess. It would take them many decades to scrape enough money together to being rebuilding the city walls and the temple. How do you think Jeremiah would have characterized his "investment." Perhaps this is the question - is there gain in doing as God hopes we will do, even if we have difficulty seeing the payoff we expected?