

A Crazy Investment Strategy Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15

Today's scripture could easily be adapted into a script for Game of Thrones or House of Cards - any show, really, where the worst of politics and human betrayal combines with cataclysmic violence and total destruction. The Prophet Jeremiah, having been doing his job, calling the King and the political elite to do justice and love mercy, is now under the watchful eye of the King's guards right in the palace. Jeremiah has been warning King Zedekiah that God will bring terrible destruction to Judah if they do not change their ways. While this internal conflict has been simmering, Jerusalem has been surrounded and put under siege by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. So things are not good, in fact I think it is fair to say this is one of the most dire moments in scripture for God's children.

The people are desperate, they know that destruction of the Temple and exile to Babylon are imminent. This is true for the wealthy and the powerful. Nebuchadnezzar has no need to pay for the relocation of peasants, he has enough of them all over his kingdom. It is the leaders and the wealthy who will be stripped of all they have and sent packing. As in all such times of danger, there are moments of human courage, and moments when the worst of human betrayal and greed are evident. So to make Jeremiah's action as dramatic and clear a message as possible, Jeremiah's own family provides the Prophet with the "opportunity" to perform a powerful prophetic action of faith and hope. His cousin, Hanamel son of his uncle Shallum, comes to him on the eve of total destruction, and offers to sell Jeremiah a nice little piece of property.

I am no real estate expert, but buying property right before an ancient king comes in and claims all the land for his servants; making any deed null and void, seems a little crazy doesn't it... especially considering Jeremiah pays the full asking price? It is so powerful that this prophet, who himself has told the leaders that the destruction of the nation imminent, this servant of God who the leaders had tried to murder, now gives them a message of hope in the most hopeless of circumstances. It is this transition from judgment to instilling hope that reveals the true nature of a prophet, and of God's mercy and love.

Were I Jeremiah, I would have said, "told you so... but would you listen to me... Nooooo." But instead Jeremiah reflects to the people God's mercy and the promise that today's

destruction is not the end of the story. “No,” says Jeremiah, “God promises the people will return and will buy and sell this land to one another and I make this purchase now knowing my family will reclaim this land one day.” Having the luxury of living thousands of years later we know Jeremiah’s crazy investment paid off, but no-one in his time, surrounded as they were by the great army of Babylon, would have thought it possible that day.

God seems to be making it clear to me lately that such instilling of hope is an important part of our job as people of faith. There are a couple of reasons for this, for one, hope is a much better guide to decisions and direction in life than fear and despair. Some of the worst human decisions in history have been made driven by the dual engines of fear and despair. Second, in spite of our having lived in a relatively peaceful and prosperous time for this nation, much of human history is filled with great upheaval and violence. Every day around the world, war rips families apart and destroys centuries of endeavor. Every day in our city, even in our congregation, people are facing illness, grief, loss of jobs, loss of hope. Hope is constantly needed, and we must not give in to the temptation of denial - to think that things are ok, as long as we don’t personally see it or make sure we don't hear about it.

Hope, like prayer, is powerful in its ability to change us, even if it doesn’t change the circumstances. Jude and I recently watched the movie, *A Royal Night Out*, a delightful dramatization of then Princesses Elizabeth and Margaret going out unrecognized on V.E. (Victory in Europe) Day. It is a delightful movie, but one of the most powerful images from that movie was a couple who lived in a partially bombed out building in London. We saw them from Princess Elizabeth's perspective, up on the third floor having their evening meal. We saw them, because one entire wall of their apartment was gone from bomb damage and it was clear they had been having that meal there every day since the bomb had taken their wall. Their action was the victory of hope over terror and fear. The oft quoted or adapted English phrase “Keep Calm and Carry On” was actually created as a poster in 1939 to help the English face the terror of being bombed. And so that couple on the third floor as they quietly toasted VE day were just following directions. Hope can overcome fear.

Like Jeremiah, we are to be purveyors of hope, even when there appears to be none. We believe in a God who constantly renews and changes us and the world - an eternal presence of

Grace that perseveres no matter what temporary human tragedy is imposed on us. This is the story of the Exodus, and Christmas, and most assuredly Easter. “Keep Calm and Carry On” is not a phrase for pleasant or neutral times, oh no.. quite the contrary. It is for when you are being chased by an army or deep in a time of subjugation by an oppressive foreign power, or even when you are being crucified. I believe it is the depth of the many faiths of the British Empire, Christianity being the most dominant in the United Kingdom, which allowed its people to persevere even in the midst of being bombed so mercilessly.

A recent news story was talking about the higher visibility of racist groups in our nation and the world. As I listened my heart sank, - I was tempted to despair - until one of the guests said, “Yes, it is discouraging, but a recent survey shows that the millennial generation (those born between 1980 and 2000) shows that over half have dated a person of another race and that they are much more accepting of inter-racial relationships. Progress can be very slow and only in specific places but God continues to work. Do we wish it was faster, that things would magically change overnight. Yes, but that is not the way of the world. There is a reason for that old adage: “The millstones of the gods grind slow, but they grind fine” which is traced to an unknown Roman Poet. Change happens slowly, but it happens nevertheless. Change happens subtly, so much so we may not even see it with our limited human sight, but it still happens. This is the message of the Christian faith.

Like Jeremiah, we are called to be the hope bringers to a world tempted by despair. We are to join with mystic Julian of Norwich in believing that “all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.” And we cling to that not because things are ok, but quite the contrary - that is what faith means. We cling to this belief in the midst of too many deaths of African-American men at the hands of law enforcement, in the midst of bombs going off in New York and New Jersey, in the midst of ISIL and Zika and poverty and violence, Crazy, irrational, faith-filled hope is the only way to truly live in a world like ours.

Like Jeremiah we are called to act on that hope. Like the little boy who threw the sea star we must do what we can when we come upon a sea star on the beach of life. American writer Maxine Hong Kingston wrote “In a time of destruction create something.” Artist Henri Matisse tells us that our perception - at what we choose to look - has the power to change us

when he says "There are always flowers for those who want to see them." Finally, our soon to be leaving President writes "The best way to not feel hopeless is to get up and do something. Don't wait for good things to happen to you. If you go out and make some good things happen, you will fill the world with hope, you will fill yourself with hope."

Where are you tempted by despair? What situation fills you with fear and anxiety? What army has laid siege to your heart and soul? Whatever threatens you, remember the message of the Angels, "Be not afraid." Whatever it is, it may be time to act "as if" - time to perform a radical act of defiant hope, like Jeremiah buying a piece of land, like the couple having dinner in a bombed out 3rd story London flat on VE Day. Sometimes acting on hope is the only thing that can save us. God help us discern when and how we need to perform an insane act of hope. AMEN

Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15

The word of God to Jeremiah in the tenth year of King Zedekiah and the eighteenth year of Nebuchadrezzar.

At that time the army of Babylon was besieging Jerusalem, and the prophet Jeremiah was under guard in the palace where King Zedekiah had confined him. Jeremiah said, The word of God came to me: the son of your uncle is going to come to you and say, "Buy my field for the right of redemption by purchase is yours."

Then my cousin came to me in the court of the guard, in accordance with the word of the LORD. And I bought the field from my cousin, 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 gave the deed of purchase to Baruch in the presence of my cousin and the witnesses who signed the deed of purchase, and all the Judeans who were sitting in the court of the guard.

In their presence I charged Baruch, saying, Thus says the God of Israel: "Take this deed, , and put it in an earthenware jar, in order that it may last for a long time. For thus says the LORD of hosts: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land."