

Posture of Hope
Jeremiah 3 (selected verses)
September 10, 2023
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So, there's this story about the prophet Jeremiah who lived in the final days of Jerusalem. It's in Jeremiah 32, but it's also 1200 words, so I'm going to summarize it.

Jeremiah was not a cheerful guy. He was a realist. He consistently told people what they didn't want to hear. And the reality at the time was that Jerusalem was going to be invaded and destroyed by the mighty Babylonian empire. There was no changing it. Catastrophe was certain. The only choice was how to live in the face of it.

When this story takes place, the Babylonians are at the gates, and Jeremiah hears from God that his cousin is going to come and try to sell him a field. He should buy it. Now, this not a booming real estate market.

But then his cousin shows up, and really does want to sell him a field. So, Jeremiah buys the it. Even though it doesn't make any sense. Even though it's a terrible investment. Only a fool would buy land that the Babylonians are getting ready to burn. But Jeremiah buys the field.

Then we get this long description of the transaction. Turns out that closing on real estate wasn't any less tedious then. Detail by detail Jeremiah buys the land. And I wonder if it was in the doing that the meaning began to emerge. As the tasks added up, one after another, as the money was counted out, as the papers lined up neatly on the desk, as signatures were witnessed, as the deeds were put in clay containers so that they'd last a long time, was that when he began to see what it might mean?

That's often how it is. In the doing, we discover what we believe.

Jeremiah is investing in this land. Literally. Even as it is about to be destroyed. He's investing in it. An investment is an expectation of a future return. An investment presumes there is a future.

God's been promising a future—after Babylon. Pain and suffering are coming. The pain is unavoidable. It's unavoidable for all of us. But, says God, it won't get the last word. Even though they mostly brought it on themselves. Even though their whole world is ending. Even so. There will be life after Babylon. That's the promise.

And as Jeremiah buys this field, something changes. He's no longer just talking about a promised future. He's participating in it. He's part of it.

We could shake our heads at it, say it's meaningless. I mean, it's just a symbol. It doesn't change anything. The Babylonians are still coming. They're going to come over the walls and destroy everyone and everything in their path. Jeremiah's never going to live on this land he just bought. Everything he and his people have ever known is vanishing. We could shake our heads and say, that's useless. It's just a symbol.

And yet, it was more than that. Because they remembered. The people there that day, they carried the memory of crazy old Jeremiah buying land while the world was burning. They carried that memory of him literally investing in a future that was impossible to see.

“Put this deed in clay jars so that it might last a long time,” Jeremiah said. And it did. It lasted long enough for some of them to come back. It lasted long enough for them to rebuild. It lasted long enough that we still tell the story of the day crazy, old Jeremiah bought that field.

He acted as if there would be life after Babylon.

That must have been so hard to believe. The world was ending.

Our world is ending. That is not overstating it. You know as well as I do: the hottest days ever on record, temperatures that are incompatible with life, oceans like bathwater, aquifers and rivers drying up... we could go on, but I won't. You know.

I struggle with despair. Things are going away that will not come back. No matter what we do. So much of the world humans have always known is already gone or is dying and cannot be saved. This passage from Jeremiah, and hopefully this sermon, aren't finger-waving accusations, declarations of sin, an endless list of things we *should* be doing. There's plenty of that. But this is not that.

This passage from Jeremiah is something else. It points to a way to live meaningfully *in* the despair. To maintain some remnant of sanity, even, maybe, some hope.

There is no reason in the world for Jeremiah to buy land that is going to be destroyed. But he does it anyway. It's nothing more than symbolic action. But it turns out that that's not nothing.

Believing in the promises of God, trusting in the kingdom of Jesus, feeling the wind of the Spirit, requires our participation. It doesn't just happen. It takes some doing. We have to buy the field. Even if it's just symbolic.

There's power in those kinds of symbolic actions.

We do them all the time, but we often don't give them their due.

Like, what we do here in worship. On one level it's almost all just symbols. Every week we act out a symbolic drama of praise, confession, forgiveness, peace, illumination, community, and renewed commitment. We read words in unison. We sing. We move our bodies in ritual ways and look around and say prayers that have been said for generations. Every bit of it is as symbolic as Jeremiah buying that land.

We could say it's as pointless as what he did. We could say it's as essential.

Because what we're doing here is enacting, with our bodies, a different sort of reality—a reality where gratitude and praise get the first word, where honest confession comes easily, where peace prevails, and grace goes all the way around. We participate in the promise. Then we go back out into the everyday world. And our participation changes us. Bit by bit, the way water changes stone, it changes us. It takes some doing to believe that there's life beyond Babylon.

Jeremiah cannot change what's coming. But he can choose what he does in the face of it, and he chooses to act as if there will be a future and to invest in that hope.

The story is told that Martin Luther was once asked what he would do if he knew the world was ending the next day. He is said to have answered, “I would plant a tree.” He'd buy the field.

We can plant the tree, buy the field in countless ways: we fill our land with plants that pollinators love and that can grow without watering, we walk back to the car to grab the reusable bags, we choose the glass communion cups over the plastic, we cut meat from our diets.

We do all that, and we also know with a sinking feeling that none of it is likely to save the pygmy three-toed sloths, or the Sumatran elephant, or the very last white northern rhino. It will probably not be enough for the monarch butterflies, or the lemur leaf frog, or the Antarctic silverfish.

We know slowing what's happening will take profound changes at the macro level. Multinational corporations and wealthy governments around the world will have to act. It is far beyond what we can do ourselves.

In the face of that we could slide into a fatalist despair. That would not be unreasonable.

But do you remember—that one time crazy old Jeremiah bought a field?

Ultimately, we choose how we will live. We choose. Do we buy the land? Plant the tree?

We choose where we stake our claim. We can choose hope. We can choose actions that testify to life, that participate in the promise, that embody a faith in a future we cannot yet see.

And those choices, slight as they may seem, are a way to believe with our bodies that life does endure. They are ways to buy land in God's kingdom. The promise still stands: There is life beyond Babylon. So, buy the field.

~ Sarah W. Wiles, 2023