

Romans 8:31-39 Jeremiah 32:1-15 September 29, 2019
Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

GOD'S REAL ESTATE SPECULATION

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

“Why in the world would those people build their houses there again after what’s happened?”

I was asked that question many times in the aftermath of Hurricane Floyd in 1999 and again last fall following Hurricane Florence. People from other places who had seen pictures of or read stories about Northeast and Chinquapin couldn’t understand why the people would stay in an area that floods. “Why don’t they just move?”

There are lots of answers to that question. Where would they go? They’re living on land that has been in their family for generations. They don’t have the money and resources to move somewhere else. Their jobs and families are here. They farm the land and have for many years. And, honestly, who expected the 500 year flood of 1999 to be surpassed nineteen years later?

And so the rebuilding efforts continue in Duplin County and up and down the southeastern coast of North Carolina. Some folks were still recovering from Hurricane Matthew in 2016 when Florence destroyed their

homes again. In some cases, people did choose to leave following Florence, for many different reasons. In some cases, real estate speculators came in and bought houses with the hope of turning a profit.

We've seen the pictures of the horrific destruction in the Bahamas following Hurricane Dorian. The landscape looks forbidding, to say the least. And yet, some Bahamians have vowed to remain and rebuild. A headline in the Miami Herald newspaper two weeks ago said, "Why some Hurricane Dorian survivors are staying on Abaco: 'We believe in bouncing back.'" To stay and rebuild or to pack up and leave? That is the hard choice facing many people in the paths of so many storms and destruction. Do you invest your money, time, and energy in rebuilding? If you are an investor, do you take the risk of building or rebuilding in the affected areas?

Now, imagine signing the deed of purchase on a building or house or development or piece of land as a massive storm was literally at your door. Many people might question, "Do you really know what you're doing?" From an objective viewpoint, it would be a foolish real estate transaction. But that's exactly the situation the prophet Jeremiah found himself in when he bought a field in his hometown of Anathoth from his cousin. The Babylonian hurricane was knocking at Jerusalem's gates. Soon the pictures of

destruction in Jerusalem would rival the pictures we've seen of the Bahamas after Hurricane Dorian.

Don't take my word for it! Listen to the Word of the Lord in Psalm 137, one of the most heartbreaking pieces of scripture there is. It is titled "A Lament over the Destruction of Jerusalem."

*By the rivers of Babylon —
there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.
On the willows there we hung up our harps.
For there our captors asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
"Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"
How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?
If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither!
Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,
if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy.
Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites
the day of Jerusalem's fall,
how they said, "Tear it down! Tear it down!
Down to its foundations!"
(Psalm 137:1-7)*

Because he told God's people of the coming judgment and destruction at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar's Babylonian army — because he counseled King Zedekiah to lay down arms and surrender to the invading forces — because he refused to preach "Peace, Peace" where there was no peace — Jeremiah was arrested for treason and sedition. It was while he was under guard that the Word of the Lord came to him with a most unusual com-

mand: “Buy a piece of property in Anathoth.” From an objective viewpoint, God’s command made no sense. God’s command opened Jeremiah to even more ridicule among his neighbors. God’s command appears to be a very risky land speculation deal.

If you’ve ever bought a house, you know how involved the process can be, especially on closing day. Sign here . . . and here . . . and here . . . and here . . . and here . . . and on and on and on. Things were no different in Jeremiah’s day. Today’s story is very exact in its description of closing day in the court of the guard: “I bought the field . . . I weighed out the money . . . I signed the deed, sealed it, got witnesses, and weighed the money . . . I took the sealed deed of purchase and gave it to Baruch in the presence of my cousin and 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.”

(Jeremiah 32:9-12)

Can’t you imagine a lot of those witnesses on closing day shaking their heads and saying (or at least thinking), “Old Jeremiah, you’re crazy. Do you realize what you’re doing?” When the Word of the Lord about buying the field first came to Jeremiah, he might have been skeptical himself. After all, the situation was rather absurd: Lord, you want me to invest in real estate when the enemy is literally knocking on the gate? But when his

cousin, Hanamel, came and asked for his help, Jeremiah knew it was, indeed, the Word of the Lord. According to the law of his people, Jeremiah was obliged to help keep the land in his family. But the land transaction that took place on closing day in the court of the guard in Jerusalem was more than just a family matter. That's why the story emphasizes the public spectacle of Jeremiah singing the deed of purchase. The real estate speculation sent a message to God's people, and that message can be summed up in one word: HOPE.

Walls falling down . . . foundations being shaken . . . stormy winds blowing . . . floodwaters rising . . . fires threatening. Isn't it interesting that we use these very real physical threats also to describe the dark night of our souls? In those challenging times, God offers us hope, but many times it is a hope that can seem as impossible or as unrealistic or as puzzling as buying a piece of real estate when the enemy is at the door. It's important to note that neither Jeremiah's prophetic words nor his prophetic action kept the Babylonians at bay. God's people didn't heed Jeremiah's warnings. King Zedekiah didn't follow Jeremiah's advice. King Nebuchadnezzar didn't turn his troops around and march back to Babylon. Then again, even during and after the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem and the exile to Babylon, God's people were called to hope in God. In the days and years to

come, maybe they remembered that deed of purchase in that earthenware jar, somewhere in Judah, waiting to be found. The deed of purchase, waiting to be redeemed, offered God's people the hope that "Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land." (Jeremiah 32:15)

You know that I often refer to, cite, quote, and talk about the German pastor and theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was arrested by the Nazis in April 1943 and was hanged in the Flossenbürg concentration camp on April 9, 1945, just days before the camp was liberated. Three months before his arrest, Bonhoeffer wrote the following words about maintaining Christian hope and faith in dark times: "There remains for us only the very narrow way, often extremely difficult to find, of living every day as if it were our last, and yet living in faith and responsibility as though there were to be a great future. It is not easy to be brave and keep that spirit alive, but it is imperative."¹ Bonhoeffer's words in the face of the Nazi threat echo Jeremiah's message when he signed the deed of purchase as the Babylonians beat on the city gates. When he was in prison, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a letter to his fiancée, Maria von Wedemeyer, in which he referred specifically to Jeremiah's story. He wrote, "When Jeremiah said, in his people's hour of direst need, that 'houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land,' it was a token of confidence in the future. Our marriage must

be a 'yes' to God's earth. It must strengthen our resolve to do and accomplish something on earth."²

It's either an anonymous Greek proverb or a saying that originated in a 1951 volume of moral writing by the Quaker theologian Elton Trueblood. Wherever it comes from, the saying, which you may have heard, is similar in outlook to Jeremiah's purchase of the field in Anathoth: "Society grows great when old men plant trees whose shade they know they shall never sit in." Notice that both Jeremiah of the Old Testament and the old men of the proverb *did* something in the present because of their hope for the future.

Hope is not closing our eyes, blowing out a candle, and wishing things might get better, somehow, someday. Hope is not a "Get out of Jail Free" card that delivers us from all of life's storms and challenges. Instead, the hope symbolized by a 6th century B.C. real estate transaction is the same hope we have in Jesus Christ 2,600 years later.

In her blog about Jeremiah's land purchase, Kathryn Matthews Henry writes, "It's in this atmosphere of doom that Jeremiah doesn't just speak but acts, and acts with great care, even great drama, however quiet that drama may appear. He buys his relative's land, and he makes something of a show of it, just to make a statement, we would say today. When it appears that there is no hope for tomorrow, Jeremiah makes a hope-filled, trust-

filled proclamation about God's intentions for Israel and its story, which will, against all appearances, go on. The prophet's "statement" doesn't spring from optimism or even a misplaced confidence in governments, his own king, or Egypt's armies, to pull things out of the fire at the last moment. And it is most certainly not just more denial. Jeremiah's purchase is his way of announcing his hope in the God of Israel here, in the worst of times just as much as in the good ones. Israel's God, no matter what the appearances are, no matter what 'the market' says, is the One in charge.

(Again: God's God, and we're not.)”³

In January 2016, German theologian Jürgen Moltmann delivered a lecture at a conference celebrating the publication of his latest book called *The Living God and the Fullness of Life*. In 1964 he had published his ground-breaking book *Theology of Hope*. In his remarks, Moltmann said this about our Christian hope: “Those who hope in Christ can no longer put up with reality as it is, but begin to suffer under it, to contradict it. Peace with God means conflict with the world, for the goad of the promised future stabs inexorably into the flesh of every unfulfilled present. Such hope makes the Church the source of continual new impulses towards the realization of righteousness, freedom and humanity here in the light of the promised future that is to come.”⁴

Dr. Moltmann tells a story found in the Jewish Talmud, which is a collection of writings that covers Jewish law and tradition. The story is about a rabbi who was thinking about what questions a Jew would have to answer at the Last Judgment. Would it be, “Were you honest in your business?” or “Did you seek wisdom?” or “Did you keep the commandments?” Finally the rabbi thought of one question that would cover all questions: “What did you hope for?”⁵

That’s a good question for us, not just at the Last Judgment, but today: What do we hope for? And there’s another question like the first: How will what we hope for make a difference in how we live right now?

It’s been said that Jeremiah literally put his money where his mouth was. Knowing that nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, let us put our actions now where we say our hope for the future lies — in God’s grace, love, and mercy in Jesus Christ.

Let us pray: Merciful God, teach us not to be anxious about earthly cares. While we live among changes and questions, help us to hold fast to those things that shall endure, that we may have hope in your promises and your Word; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

NOTES

¹Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Enlarged Edition: London: SCM Press, 1971), 14-15.

²Dietrich Bonhoeffer and M. von Wedemeyer, *Love Letters from Cell 92, 1943-1945* (ed. Ruth-Alice von Bismarck and U. Kabitz: London: Harper Collins, 1994), 48-49.

³Kathryn Matthews Huey, "Surprising Investment/New Directions," September 29, 2019, at www.ucc.org.

⁴Stephen Brown, "50 years after Theology of Hope, Jürgen Moltmann's vision continues to inspire," February 3, 2016 at www.oikoumene.org.

⁵From a sermon by Rev. R. Charles Grant, "The Hope of Faith," Bon Air Presbyterian Church, Richmond, VA, April 2, 2000, found at www.bonairpc.org.