



Worship Series: “A Prophet’s Witness: From Grief to Hope”

“Staking a Claim”—Sermon Text: Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15

FUMC Arlington, Texas 76011

19th Sunday after Pentecost: 25 September 2016

“Patriotism is often an arbitrary veneration of real estate above principles”

(--George Jean Nathan).

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Hear God’s word and listen for what the Spirit is saying to the church:

1 The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord in the tenth year of King Zedekiah of Judah, which was the eighteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar. 2 At that time the army of the king of Babylon was besieging Jerusalem, and the prophet Jeremiah was confined in the court of the guard that was in the palace of the king of Judah, 3 where King Zedekiah of Judah had confined him....

6 Jeremiah said, The word of the Lord came to me: 7 Hanamel son of your uncle Shallum is going to come to you and say, “Buy my field that is at Anathoth, for the right of redemption by purchase is yours.” 8 Then my cousin Hanamel came to me in the court of the guard, in accordance with the word of the Lord, and said to me, “Buy my field that is at Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, for the right of possession and redemption is yours; buy it for yourself. “Then I knew that this was the word of the Lord.

9 And I bought the field at Anathoth from my cousin Hanamel, and weighed out the money to him, seventeen shekels of silver. 10 I signed the deed, sealed it, got witnesses, and weighed the money on scales. “Then I took the sealed deed of purchase, containing the terms and conditions, and the open copy; 12 and I gave the deed of purchase to Baruch son of Neriah son of Mahseiah, in the presence of my cousin Hanamel, 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. 13 In their presence I charged Baruch, saying, 14 Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Take these deeds, both this sealed deed of purchase and this open deed, and put them in an earthenware jar, in order that they may last for a long time. 15 For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land (Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15).

I rarely, if ever, begin a sermon with a joke, but for reasons that I hope will become clear, I want to tell two brief “accountant’s joke.” I mean no more disrespect to the accounting profession than do the people who tell preacher’s jokes—about which I have heard them all!

Please don’t tell me anymore—please!

A guy in a bar leans over to the guy next to him and says, “Want to hear an accountant joke?” The guy next to him replies, “Well, before you tell that joke, you should know that I’m 6 feet tall, 200 pounds, and I’m an accountant. And the guy sitting next to me is 6’2” tall, 225 pounds, and he’s an accountant. Now, do you still want to tell that joke?” The first guy says, “No, I don’t want to have to explain it two times.”

What’s an actuary? An accountant without the sense of humor.

So given people's general stereotyping of accountants—and one of our church members was recently voted by *the Star Telegram* as best accountant in Arlington—one could hardly imagine a swashbuckling accountant. Yet a new film titled, of all things, *The Accountant* depicts the hero as a number cruncher and a hit-man. We have many accountants in our church. I cannot image a hit-man among them. Our lesson from Jeremiah today is about as likely as accountant doubling as hit-man!

The context of our lesson is a land purchase. God forewarns Jeremiah that his cousin Hanamel will ask him to make a land purchase—and Hanamel asks. The two elements of the story remind us that “this thing” is of God. The cousin cannot sustain the land because it occupied by enemy troops from Babylon. This text's circumstances concern the “right or law of redemption”—which is similar to Levirate marriage. This levirate law addresses family life when the main breadwinner died by war, hunting, or disease. To provide for widow/children the faith community invoked levirate marriage—a cousin to the law of redemption. Levirate marriage is the obligation of the brother of a dead husband to marry his brother's widow—it also extends to the widow to marry her deceased husband's brother. The word is a derivative of the Latin word *levir* meaning “husband's brother.” Most Near Eastern cultures, including Israel, followed some form of the levirate law of marriage (see: Deuteronomy 25:5–6).

Similarly the law of redemption pertains to family land in jeopardy of confiscation. It was a big deal for Israelites to keep family property in the family. Thus when Ahab wished to purchase Naboth's vineyard which was adjacent to his residence in Jezreel, the king made a fair offer. Naboth refused because the property was his “ancestral inheritance” (see: 1 Kings 21). This is the crucial aspect of the narrative (Leviticus 25:23): a family could not transfer land holdings permanently because the land belonged to God, not the “landholder.” Jezebel's assassins (not accountants) murder Naboth for his fidelity; Naboth refused to sell. Jeremiah used the occasion of the selling and buying of the land to illustrate his prophetic word concerning what Yahweh

would do with the people.

Nevertheless the people refused to listen to Jeremiah—no change and consequently the crisis. The army from Babylon overpowered Anathoth, just outside of Jerusalem where “the army of the king of Babylon was besieging Jerusalem” (Jer. 32:2). This is the beginning of the end for independent Judah. Within a short time Babylon exiles Judah from the land of promise. Judah has no future and the land is without value. The circumstance offers no hope whatsoever.

During this grave national calamity, where is Jeremiah? In jail! Jeremiah is in jail for prophesying what he had been prophesying all along. Jeremiah, lacking the diplomacy necessary to save his cheese, delivered a vote of no confidence to Judah’s King Zedekiah. Jeremiah prophesied that Babylon was about to exile Zedekiah. As expected, like any king, Zedekiah threw Jeremiah into prison. Regrettably for Zedekiah the king, Jeremiah prophesied accurately the way things turned out.

Now this is the part about the unlikeliness of “accountant as hit-man.” Jeremiah now focused on making a what looks to be a bad real estate deal. Cousin Hanamel comes to peddle Jeremiah the family inheritance—he cannot afford it as it is unworkable land. The text gives us meticulous details concerning the transaction—witnesses, signatures, seals, and copies of the deeds. They record everything, every detail noted to guarantee the legality of the business deal. Jeremiah even puts the deed in an earthen jar, (like the Dead Sea Scrolls). Jeremiah acts like a person with a future.

Certainly Jeremiah, of all people, knows who is losing the war, knows this is the beginning of the end, and knows what exile means. Again, what could he possibly be thinking? If he was on our nightly news he would say: “It’s not about the money.”

Jeremiah reveals to us that the future alters our perspective of how we live and act and exist today. With a healthy hope in the future we can invest in our present reality. God’s grace and hope call us to faith now—even when it looks like there is no way. With God, Jeremiah seems to announce—there is always a way. It may be anything but obvious to us. It may seem like

“THE END.” We may not see the outcome on earth, but God works in many places and in many ways. Sometimes I think God is giving North America a rest from church because we are so self-satisfied. But I remind us all—God is at work somewhere right now!

My friend Michael Duduit wrote what follows this week. It encouraged me greatly. The Church has seen dramatic and explosive growth in Asia, Africa, and South America. The growth of the African Church in particular is jaw-dropping. In 1900 there were fewer than 9 million Christians in Africa. Now there are more than 541 million. In the last 15 years alone, the Church in Africa has seen a 51 percent increase, which works out on average at around 33,000 people either becoming Christians or being born into Christian families each day in Africa alone.

It is a reminder that even when we may not see growth close to home, God is still at work in God’s world. And it is a reminder that we Western Christians have much to learn from our brothers and sisters elsewhere in the world (PreachingNOW@preachingmagazine).

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