

Have We Ever Got a Deal For You!

Jeremiah 32: 1-3a, 6-15

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Those were the days, weren't they? Those days in roughly the 1950's through the early eighties when our churches seemed to be exploding in numbers, and there was hardly enough room in the church school classrooms for all the children who were attending? I remember that the Pilgrim Fellowship group I belonged to in high school had 150 members! Most of us adults, middle aged and older, who were raised in any of the major religious traditions in this country, have memories of there being just *tons* of kids and youth in our churches in those "good old days." There has been much talk over the past fifteen or twenty years of decline in our mainline churches. Will the days ever come again when we will see enough kids in our sanctuary to help us trust that the church will survive into a new generation?

Some might have said that the prophet Jeremiah was throwing good money after bad in making the land purchase he made just before his country was about to collapse into the hands of the Babylonians. Yet, in the scripture reading for this morning, we have a detailed account of that very transaction...interestingly, the most detailed account of its kind in all of scripture. The sale of the land to Jeremiah from his cousin Hanamel was carefully handled according to law and tradition, following the custom of trying to keep land in a family. Now, up until that point in early 587 B.C., Jeremiah had relentlessly brought a message of judgment to the people of Judah and its capital, Jerusalem, for all the ways that they had not been faithful to their God. He had done this so much so that he was confined in the "court of the guard;" his pronouncements were thought to be bringing the morale of the people down. One might have expected Jeremiah to send his cousin Hanamel away, laughing at the absurdity of the idea of purchasing land that was about to come under the control of a foreign power, its people sure to be exiled away.

Jeremiah, however, was a prophet of the Lord, and, as such, he was very trusting of God's instincts. Jeremiah had perceived that the the Lord had instructed him to buy this land. It made no sense at all by human standards, but he did it, and he took care to do it in a very public manner—precisely to offer hope to the people. It was more or less as if someone had bought the Titanic just after it struck the iceberg! Before many witnesses—"all the Jews who were sitting in the court of the guard," Jeremiah proclaimed: "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 vessel, that they may last for a long time. For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land." What a wildly hopeful statement this is! The city of Jerusalem was about to fall; foreign occupiers were besieging the land, but God saw fit to send a powerful word of hope: *Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.*

All this goes to show that our God is a God who wants us to know that the very best time to give in to hope is the time when it makes no earthly sense at all to *have* any hope! It makes no earthly sense for us to do the CROP walk today hoping that we will end hunger, yet this is precisely why we must have hope and go ahead and walk. It made no earthly sense for Gandhi to hope to resist the British rule of his land by peaceful, non-violent means, yet this is precisely why Gandhi had to do what he did. It made no earthly sense for Mother Teresa to hope to stop human suffering by caring for the poor and dying of Calcutta, but that is precisely why she had the vision to do the work she did. Jeremiah accepted the impossibly hopeful, bold vision of the Lord, and as people who love God and seek to carry God's love into the world, so must we.

“Imagining a New Old Church”—that is the subtitle of a book by Diana Butler Bass entitled The Practicing Congregation. Ms. Bass, who is a church historian and researcher, has exhaustively studied the history of mainline Protestantism in this country. In her book, she does indeed imagine a “new old church,” and, quite thrillingly, finds through her research that there are currently signs of new vitality in many of the mainline churches in our country. She points out that these churches are willing to do what she calls “retraditioning.” She finds that churches that appreciate the beauty and strength of their true theological and spiritual traditions...not the so-called traditions such as “only the men’s group can use the hall closet” and “the church fair always falls on the third Saturday in April and we can’t change it” and “we have never allowed the children help the minister with communion”...not those kinds of things...but the churches that are willing to reclaim their *true spiritual and theological traditions* and explore and express and open them up in new and deepening ways...these are the churches that are sprouting new life. Thriving churches are exploring things like spiritual deepening, service to the surrounding community, and the practice of exuberant hospitality. Moving beyond the liberal-conservative divide, going deeper into spirituality, these churches are unifying places of prayer, service and learning that are very intentional in their practice. Intention is a key ingredient, as opposed to “this is the way it has always been done, so let’s keep doing it.” Intentional dialogue about what God is calling this church to be and do in this time and in this place is at the heart of all new church vitality. Intentional sharing of ideas, dreams, and visions will sustain and enlarge a congregation’s hopes, presence, and effectiveness in the world.

We have voted into being this year a deficit budget; our spending projections are larger than our projected income at this point. While some might frown upon this, we might defend our action by pointing out that a deficit budget, in our case, is a very Jeremiah-like expression of hope. To robustly share the gift that is this church in the world, to wonder and talk and marvel at the question of who God is calling us to be now, to have the vision and the hope to accomplish great things: this is what we need to be about. After Jeremiah bought the land from his cousin, he prayed. Mentioning the calamities that had fallen upon the people, Jeremiah then essentially said, “Well, Lord, despite all that is going wrong, you still had me buy that land.” God’s response was this: “Behold, I am the Lord, the God of all flesh; is anything too hard for me?”

God, for whom nothing is too hard, has set us free to pray, to dream, to talk, and to plan, even though obstacles are out there. Jeremiah’s purchase of that land so long ago sets a precedent for us to envision a bright present and a robust future for our church, making the investment of hopeful intention and bold vision, even though our bottom line income and output numbers don’t quite match up yet. Wild hope may not make any earthly sense right now, but maybe that is just the very reason we are called to house it in our hearts. If our hopes are rooted in God’s economics, maybe our budget numbers are actually a sign of a great financial deal: one that is alive with hope, alive with the intention of being the church that God is calling us to be. Amen.