

Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
Alexandria, VA
Sermon by Robert Harris
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Jeremiah 32: 1-3a, 6-15, 42-44
Luke 21: 5-19

HOPE IN DANGEROUS TIMES

The nation of Judah was in a crisis, to say the least! The Babylonian army was literally banging at the door!

King Josiah, who had initiated many reforms, was killed in battle. His successor, Zedekiah, a puppet of the Babylonians, mounted a rebellion against the Babylonians, hoping that Egypt would send armies to help, anticipating that God would protect them. But the Babylonians defeated the Egyptians and then laid siege to Jerusalem.

Many people believed that God would protect them, no matter how unfaithful they were. Yahweh's credibility as a god depended on his salvation of these descendants of King David.

Jeremiah would have none of that theology. "God is punishing you for your unfaithfulness to God's covenant with you. Don't fight the Babylonians. Give up. They are agents of Yahweh's punishment!"

Needless to say, that kind of talk branded Jeremiah as a traitor. He was harassed, imprisoned, nearly killed. Yet he didn't stop his condemnation of Judah and prophecies of doom.

The Babylonians built earthen ramps to storm the walls of the city. They were literally banging at the door. Any Judeans who could, got away.

It was at this point that Jeremiah, who was imprisoned in the king's palace, had a vision - and then a visit. Listen to what happened. Jeremiah 32: 6-15.

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. ¹¹ 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.

What an astounding thing for Jeremiah to do! Imagine his cousin, Hanamel, coming to see him. Hanamel was probably preparing to flee his ancestral land, but he was obligated to offer the

land for sale to a relative. Land should be kept in the family. But even Jeremiah wouldn't be crazy enough to want to buy this land. Everything was obviously going to the Babylonians.

Imagine the scene: "Jeremiah...", Hanamel would have begun.

"Come in, Hanamel; I have been expecting you. Of course I want to buy the property."

Jeremiah bought that piece of turf in the face of disaster. Trapped in a hopeless situation, he invested in hope. He enacted a parable of hope.

What a challenge to us: do we invest in hope in dangerous times?

Think of adversities we are facing now. Think of the Babylonians laying siege to us.

Let's start with the economy; we're in big trouble! Are things going to continue to spiral downhill? Are we in a recession or is it going to be worse?

Think of potential environmental catastrophe: air that is unfit to breathe, rising sea levels, increased competition for food, more hurricanes. Environmental catastrophes are banging at our door.

Think about international strife. Millions are dying in the Congo and Sudan. We seem trapped in an Iraqi quagmire with Sunnis and Shias who hate each other and us. The Russian President threatens to aim missiles at NATO countries. We are under siege. The Babylonians are banging at the door!

Think of personal adversities which feel like barbarian hordes! It might be a betrayal by a loved one, someone you trusted with your very life. Or maybe your doctor finds a suspicious spot and tests confirm a malignancy. Maybe you lose your job. The Babylonians are banging at the door! Hope takes a hike!

We face adversities as the church of Christ. Three decades ago the Presbyterian Church looked as solid as the Temple must have looked to Jesus' disciples. How things have changed! We face an increasingly secular society. Many see the church as irrelevant at best, often dangerous. Take a walk around Georgetown on a Friday or Saturday night and you might conclude that the barbarians are already in control!

There are so many daunting challenges! It is easy to lose hope! We might be tempted, like Hanamel, to cash in our chips and head for a tropical island.

But Jeremiah doesn't cut and run. He invests! And then he brings a word of promise from Yahweh. Listen to verses 36-44...

³⁶ Now therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning this city of which you say, "It is being given into the hand of the king of Babylon by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence": ³⁷ See, I am going to gather them from all the lands to which I drove them in my anger and my wrath and in great indignation; I will bring them back to this place, and I will settle them in safety. ³⁸ They shall be my people, and I will be their God. ³⁹ I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear me for all time, for their own good and the good of their children

after them. ⁴⁰ I will make an everlasting covenant with them, never to draw back from doing good to them; and I will put the fear of me in their hearts, so that they may not turn from me. ⁴¹ I will rejoice in doing good to them, and I will plant them in this land in faithfulness, with all my heart and all my soul.

⁴² For thus says the LORD: Just as I have brought all this great disaster upon this people, so I will bring upon them all the good fortune that I now promise them. ⁴³ Fields shall be bought in this land of which you are saying, It is a desolation, without human beings or animals; it has been given into the hands of the Chaldeans. ⁴⁴ Fields shall be bought for money, and deeds shall be signed and sealed and witnessed, in the land of Benjamin, in the places around Jerusalem, and in the cities of Judah, of the hill country, of the Shephelah, and of the Negeb; for I will restore their fortunes, says the LORD.

God will punish Judah for its sin, but there is hope. There is a tomorrow, a new day for God's mostly unfaithful people. God keeps covenant over the long haul.

So Jeremiah invests in hope — for the long term.

Now, let's think about this. Might we invest in hope? What might we do that is somewhat equivalent to Jeremiah's buying that chunk of turf? How are we already investing in hope?

I was a poll watcher on Tuesday morning. There were so many who came through who told us it was their first time to vote. How excited they were! They — and each of us who voted — were investing in hope.

Just by being here on a Sunday morning you are investing in hope. We have other options - soccer games, golf, a trip to the shore, sleeping in. But you're here!

As we build up our own faith, as we tell others about this congregation and about Christ, we invest in hope. You demonstrate with your actions and your commitment that God is neither dead nor on a vacation. God is alive and well and invites us to receive life and hope and then share it with others.

Think how you have invested in faith and hope:

- teaching three generations about God's love in Jesus
- nurturing those who are ill and comforting the bereaved
- praising God Sunday after Sunday
- sending so many to the Gulf coast after Hurricane Katrina - (150 members from BHPC and many dollars!)
- Supporting the Todee Mission in Liberia with time and contributions
- Work camps, Koinonia ministries, RPJ Housing - I could go on and on!

The point is that as you sense God's leading you and as you respond in faith - both through this church and wherever you are during the week, you invest in hope!

In the mid-80's I led a Presbytery level "Global Village" event out at Camp Glenkirk. We had a terrific assortment of homegrown Americans and also a number of Christians from other countries. Early in the weekend I asked people to put their hope on the line. "How hopeful are

you about the world?" I asked. "If you are quite hopeful, walk to that side of the room. If you are very pessimistic, go to the other side. Or you can stand somewhere between." Do you know who was the most hopeful? A graduate student from South Africa! A *black* South African was the most hopeful person! Most of us expected his nation was going to erupt in terrible revolution and oppression. He planned to return to South Africa following his education and invest in hope.

Jeremiah bought a piece of turf when the Babylonians were crashing at the walls. Against all odds, he enacted a parable of hope.

As 21st century adversaries are crashing at our doors, Jeremiah challenges us: how will we invest in hope? How will *you* of Bush Hill Presbyterian invest in God's hope?

Invitation to Consecration

Now I invite you to consecrate yourselves and your money and prepare to present your Estimate of Giving Card. When we give, we are telling God "thank you for blessing us so abundantly - here is a sign of my gratitude." It's also saying: "we're in this with you, Lord! Use us!"

After the ushers distribute the Estimate of Giving cards, I want you to spend some 5 minutes quietly reflecting on what God is leading you to plan to give this coming year. Feel free to talk with family members about what the right number is. After these five minutes, Pastor Carl and other leaders will come forward, placing their pledges on the communion table. Please follow and then go to the fellowship hall for brunch.

Sometimes leaders urge their followers to "give till it hurts." I don't do that. I want you to decide on a level of giving that gives you *joy*! You know about how much you earn. You know what percentage of your income you are giving this year. God invites us to show our commitment by giving 10% of our income. If you aren't giving that, might you jump at least 1% - maybe 2-3%? What level would raise your sense that you are really offering what God yearns for you to offer?

Friends, just as Jeremiah promised that God would save the people of Israel and give them new life there in Jerusalem, so that promise is for us. Whatever the dangers, whatever the adversities - and ours pale in comparison with what the Jews faced - God is with us.

God is still doing new things. God is creating a new heaven and a new earth!

You — and I — and Christians all over the world — are part of this great movement! We are helping change the world and usher in God's new day.

Friends, God invites us to cast away fear and cynicism. God calls us to have faith in the risen Christ Jesus and give ourselves. God invites us to invest in hope and faith.

Amen.