

The Jeremiah Real-Estate Faith Test
Jeremiah 32: 1-2; 6-15
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Jeremiah was in jail, a prisoner of conscience. He had dared to tell the king what the king did not want to hear. Such is often the way of prophets and kings.

Babylon's army was knocking on Israel's door. The king's priests were telling him what he did want to hear: Jerusalem is safe. God will not allow his chosen to be defeated. Don't Worry, Be Happy. Something good is going to happen to you!

Kings like preachers around who will bolster their ego and tell them how well things are going. In Israel, as today, the king had his court priests telling him how good he looked in his robes, and if God hadn't put him there, on his throne, why was he *there!*

I remember decades ago there was a President who would not attend church on Sunday, but instead invited his favorite preachers to hold private worship services in the White House. During those years a book came out entitled: *Sermons Not Preached in the White House*. Jeremiah's sermons belonged there.

Prophets dare to tell the truth and to “speak to power”. Jeremiah told the king that Babylon was about to take over the country. The king tossed him in jail.

Flannery O’Connor, the great Southern novelist wrote: “The truth does not change according to our ability to stomach it.” And then she paraphrased Jesus’ words in *John*: “You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you *odd*.” Jeremiah told the king truth, however hard it was to stomach, and now he was the odd man *out*. Thrown into the clink.

The last thing I wanted to be when I was growing up was odd. But sometimes we need to be willing to be odd for Jesus’ sake. A fool for Christ. Sometimes the church needs to be willing to be odd for Jesus’ sake, and the gospel’s.

I

Meanwhile Jeremiah’s cousin Hanamel was getting antsy about his real-estate investment. His farm was directly in the path of the approaching Babylonian army. No dummy, he wanted to unload the property before he lost it. I saw a cartoon once of a huge dam with an ominous crack going down the middle of it. Just below was a small house with a sign in the front yard: For Sale. I don’t think even the most desperate real-estate agent would have wanted to list it.

So cousin Hanamel went to visit Jeremiah in jail and asked him if he wanted to buy the farm. Was he merely exercising the right of first of kin to buy? Was he playing Jeremiah for a fool?

Well, here was Jeremiah's answer. Following the word of the Lord which had come to him, he bought the land *as an acted-out sermon of faith*. He paid a good price too, no bank auction price, seventeen silver shekles. Cousin Hanamel probably dropped his teeth on the jail floor.

Then Jeremiah took the deeds of sale and put them in an earthenware vessel, so they would last for a long time. (The Dead Sea Scrolls were placed in such vessels and were preserved for 2,000 years.) It was a long-term investment of faith. Following God's word, he acted on the faith that no matter what happened God would someday restore the land to the Jews. Thumbing his nose at the morning newspapers he announced these thrilling words:

For thus says the Lord...Houses and fields and vineyards shall once again be bought and sold in this land.

The Jeremiah Real-Estate Faith Test.

He became God's fool, buying a piece of land no banker would touch with a mortgage. Jeremiah was no Pollyanna. He knew bad times were coming, but he

had the faith that one day, even a far-away day, houses and fields and vineyards would be bought and sold in this land. The Jeremiah Real-Estate Faith Test.

II

Sometimes faith is as tangible as a piece of land, as real as real-estate. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, martyred German pastor/theologian, said that the command of Christ always comes in the concrete. Do this, not that, take this road not that. It can be as concrete as buying a piece of land or pouring the foundation of a church.

So, on this All-Saints Sunday when we honor and remember all those who have come before and prepared the way for Grace Baptist to be what it is today, let me tell you about Grace's Jeremiah Real Estate Faith Test.

You began (and when I say you, I mean *us*, for this is our story) in people's homes in the fall of 1970, praying and talking, seeking God's leadership about whether to start a new church in Statesville. On January 10, 1971 you met at the Harrington home to chart the future.

Your first worship service was held at the State Farm Administration building on Meacham Road. You worked hard to renovate it as a place for worship and education. Excitement filled the air.

Then came a crushing blow. The city fire code ordinance would not allow you to continue in the building. But you persevered! You found another place to rent, the old Naval Reserve Building on west Front Street, a modest cement block building. And here came *another* renovation project. You found old chairs from a school auditorium, steel and wood, and screwed them in the concrete floor. Who knows how long it took to get the chewing gum off the bottom of the chairs!!

But even though you were relatively homeless yourself you turned your eyes to your neighbor. Frankie Martin helped you help the Willie Strickland family move into a safe place for them to live. Here was a core value of Grace from the beginning: a commitment to missions, to care for those beyond your rented cinder block walls. That was your way.

That year, 1971, you took another leap of faith. You called a young minister with longish hair and what some might have called “an irregular theology”. Whatever shortcomings he had, his wife Janice redeemed. They would help you dream your dream of a new kind of Baptist Church in Statesville. The local Baptist Association would not give you their blessing. “We don’t need another Baptist Church”, they said. But you were not to become just another Baptist church. Something new was afoot. I imagine that to some you looked as foolish as Jeremiah buying that doomed piece of land.

You stayed in that concrete building for 10 years. Your commitment to missions kept you frugal and about the physical space for your church. As Susan Rawls wrote in her history of those early years: “As little as possible was spent on the building.”

You’ve heard of Freud’s “Oedipal Complex”? A lot of churches and especially preachers, have what could be called an “Edifice Complex”, measuring success by how big and grand the buildings are. Not Grace. Twenty percent of your annual budget was dedicated for missions. No money for fancy chandeliers.

In 1974 you bought a mobile home and placed it next to the new church building to use as a pre-school building. You were growing! And you believed in the education of children and youth.

Then in 1975 a committee was formed to look into buying a piece of property and building a new church. You could no longer “spend as little as possible on a building.”

So here came another Jeremiah Real-Estate Faith Test. You began to dream, plan and look around. You began to set aside funds for the future building. You lived the definition of faith in the book of Hebrews: “Now faith is the assurance of things *hoped for*, the conviction of things *not seen*.” (Hebrews 11:1)

Five years later, after a bagillion meetings and conversations, you found the right piece of land, owned by the Mormon church. You bought it and began to design a church building built to serve, serve the church and serve the community, a multi-use space for worship and other ministries. You started a Capital Campaign were people pledged what they could to build the new church.

A Jeremiah Real-Estate Faith Test. You built this structure in the faith that people would come, and worship, education and missions would happen. And it was built not just for the ones there, but for ones who would come after, new generations of people who needed a place like Grace, a place *of* grace, God's grace. You! Here today.

It is so important to tell and keep telling the story. We are, think about it, the last generation to have known the first.

III

Today we have called the names of those who have founded and built this church, a roll-call of faith. As we called their names how many stories about them were called to your mind? Stories about who they were and what they contributed to our community of faith—and to your own life.

Donn Wardo's dad leading the music. Mary Ruth Godfrey teaching young people. Sally Haddix cultivating the faith of young adult women. And the "three

musketees”, Wayne Rodgers, Gerard Grant and Grady Lippard who rolled up their sleeves and took out their tools and practiced what Habitat for Humanity calls “The Theology of the hammer”, fixing things, building things and repairing things for our church and its members and for Fifth Street Ministries. (I see a new version today in Tom Wiberg, John Munson and Eddie Lippard.). And to speak of the living, Janice Comer told me of those who helped in those early days in the education of our children: Brenda Joiner and Sarah Adams. And guess who our first treasurer was, and is today, 48 years later: Clara Rogers.

At some point in Hebrews 11 in his great roll-call of faith, the writer says, “And what more shall I say? For time fails me to mention all I’d want to remember.”

As it does me as well today. So help me finish the roll call and this sermon by continuing to think of the saints of this church who with all their varied gifts made us a better people of God. Sometime today think of *one*, and offer thanks to God for him, for her, and if they are still around, call them or write them a note.

Therefore, concludes the writer of Hebrews after his roll call of faith,

...since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and the sin which clings so closely, and let us run with

perseverance (and joy, I would add) the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

And hear the thrilling words of Paul at the end of his chapter on the Resurrection:

Therefore, my beloved brother and sisters, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not [and will never be], in vain. (I Corinthians 15:58)