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Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15

PERSONAL INVESTMENTS

You all know, I'm sure, the Golden Rule of real estate. Location, location, location. Knowing this Golden Rule of real estate is what makes the prophet Jeremiah's real estate transaction perhaps the craziest possible investment of all time. Because Jeremiah buys a field that is in the worst possible location. The field lies right in the middle of a war zone. The land lies in enemy hands where Jeremiah can't even get to it, let alone farm it. Imagine if you will, a Ukrainian buying property that lies within the Russian occupied territory. It would quite frankly be a terrible investment.

Now why would the Bible record something as boring as a real estate transaction, and a foolish one at that? Why would the lectionary cycle include such an odd story for us to read in our churches all these thousands of years later? I think this story is remembered and recorded because it is more than a real estate transaction. It is a sacramental moment. A sacrament is a ritual that points to God. Jeremiah uses his crazy real estate investment to point to God's presence with the people in a time when things seemed pretty hopeless.

The prophet Jeremiah had for years been proclaiming a message of doom and gloom to his people, calling them to repent from their selfish ways, and warning them of impending catastrophe if they didn't change their behavior. We might think of him as something of the precursor to today's climate activists--preaching a message few people wanted to hear, a message of urgency and a call to change, and a prediction of disaster should the people ignore him.

And now, his predictions have come to pass. Jerusalem is completely surrounded by the Babylonian army. It's only a matter of time until the walls are breached and the city is sacked

and its people carted off as prisoners to live in exile in a faraway land. Disaster is imminent. It's a hopeless situation. Everyone knows this. Even the king, King Zedekiah, knows this. Maybe because he felt so helpless to do anything about the grand army encamped outside his walls, King Zedekiah lashed out at the only person he could. Zedekiah is sick of hearing Jeremiah speak his unpleasant words of truth—an “inconvenient truth”—about the impending disaster, so he puts Jeremiah under a kind of house arrest.

It is at this moment, at this moment when the Babylonians are encamped around Jerusalem and Jeremiah is locked up, when Jeremiah's cousin Hanamel comes to him and asks him to buy his field in Anathoth—a field which lies outside the city walls. Now, this land is clearly worthless property. It lies outside the city walls, in the hands of the Babylonians, the very people who are about to conquer them and take away all their land and then take them all *from* their land. It makes no sense to make this purchase. It would be like buying stocks right at the moment that the market is crashing. Or like buying a house that lies directly in the path of an oncoming Category 5 hurricane. It is a foolish investment.

But Jeremiah goes ahead and buys the land. And he makes a big show of buying this land, making sure that there are all kinds of witnesses and going through a very public ritual of signing the deed. And he takes the final deed and places it in an earthen jar so that it will be preserved for years to come. And then he makes this very public declaration about how this purchase points to God. He says, "Thus says the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land."

It's a sacramental action. It's a gesture of hope that points to the God of life. God will again bring about a promising future. Jeremiah buys this land, makes this ridiculous purchase in order that the people might have hope in the God of life.

Let's be clear, however. This ritual activity of hope does not stop the disaster from happening. The Babylonians will indeed conquer them and haul them off to live in exile. The people will still have to face their time of hardship, pain, and loss. And since the Babylonian exile lasted around 60 years, it's unlikely Jeremiah was even alive to return home and claim his land.

No, this crazy land investment was never really about the land. It was about hope. Jeremiah was investing in hope. He was trying to help his people invest themselves in the God of life, the God of love, the God of hope.

Some years back my mother's sister, my aunt, was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. It was clear that she didn't have a lot of time left to live. So I was completely surprised when, soon after this diagnosis, my mother told me that my aunt had decided to renovate her kitchen. To be sure, the kitchen in my aunt's home needed a radical upgrade. It was cramped and outdated. The cupboards were old, the appliances outdated, the counters littered with items that could not find a home in the inadequate cupboard space. From that sorry little kitchen my aunt had raised and fed six children, and hosted countless baby showers, birthday parties, graduation parties, and Thanksgiving dinners for extended family. The kitchen definitely could use renovating, but what kind of sense did it make for a woman dying from cancer to undertake such a project? As some of you surely know from your own experiences, kitchen renovations are daunting even in the best of circumstances. I couldn't believe my aunt would want to tackle this project now, when she was so sick and dying. But she pressed on, hiring a contractor, planning for where and how things should go, imagining how she could get around the kitchen now that she was limited to a wheelchair.

The day after Christmas, my aunt's health declined and she was forced to leave her home and enter a hospice facility. The final work on her kitchen was completed while she lay dying in hospice. My cousins hoped she might be allowed to be driven back home to see the completed kitchen but it was just not physically possible for her to go. And a few days later, she died.

After the funeral, a large contingent of family members gathered back at her house and we brought our food into that brand spanking new kitchen, a kitchen so beautiful it looked like something right out of a magazine, a kitchen my aunt had never cooked in, a kitchen she had never even seen completed. And we laid the food on the table and gathered in a circle. And we christened my aunt's kitchen with prayer and a meal. And in that moment I thought I could hear the prophet Jeremiah saying, "Houses and fields and vineyards . . . and kitchens and hope will again be built in this land."

Jeremiah teaches us the value of investing in God's gift of life, in God's gift of hope, even in the face of death and despair and hardship, even when we ourselves may never see a return on our investment. His elaborate public ritual of his personal investment pointed beyond himself to the life-giving God who has post-Babylonian intensions for us all.

Each Sunday we gather in worship to perform a similar public ritual, where we make a personal and collective investment in the life-giving God of hope and love. Some would regard what we do here and what we commit to do with our lives as a crazy investment or a useless investment of time and energy. But we believe that making this investment reaps great value—not the promise of a problem free life, but the gift of a meaningful life lived in harmony with goodness, lived in harmony with God. And so we invest in such crazy things as loving our enemies, and going the extra mile, in forgiving seventy times seven, in serving others, in honoring the vulnerable and the despised, in giving away our money and our time. We invest in

climate action and prison reform and working against racism and in ensuring food security even when we may never see the results of our investment. We do this because we believe that through God, “houses and fields and vineyards will again be bought in this land.”

Do you remember what the prophet Jeremiah did with the deeds of purchase? He placed the deeds inside an earthen vessel for preservation, trusting that one day, the God of life would bring about houses and vineyards and fields from those bits of paper tucked away in an earthen jar.

Centuries later, God used another earthen vessel to house evidence of hope. In Jesus Christ, God placed the message of love, hope, and transformation for you and for me in the midst of all life’s chaos.

And Jesus placed that message of good news and hope inside yet more earthen vessels: you and me. We earthen vessels house the evidence of a God who brings life out of chaos. God has made a personal investment in you and in me. And our lives, our ordinary yet extraordinary lives, become the holy sacrament pointing to God.