

The Art of God's Deal  
Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor  
First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee Florida

September 25, 2016

Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15

The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD in the tenth year of King Zedekiah of Judah, which was the eighteenth year of Nebuchadrezzar.

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.

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. <sup>15</sup> For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.

## A POOR INVESTMENT

Remember when housing prices were going through the roof in Central Florida a little over eight years ago? Do you know what I did? I bought a house.

And then the bubble burst, and my investment was under water.

I wasn't alone.

Many people made the same mistake.

Others during that time looked at the high stock prices and the meager returns from their savings account and said, "Now's the time to buy into the stock market."

That didn't work out so well.

We've recovered a bit since then, but I can't help but feel a little foolish about that mistake.

The common wisdom is that we should buy low and sell high, but who knows what is high and what is low?

Any investment and especially real estate can be risky business.

The reason of course is that we don't know the future.

Sometimes when we are burned by a bad real estate deal or a bad investment in the stock market we go the other way and are afraid to invest at all. We are afraid to buy anything.

And of course that just makes things worse.

So this morning I want to suggest that we make an investment together in some downtown property in Detroit.

The location is great and the price is right.  
Who wants to invest with me? No takers?

Most of us know better. Detroit is struggling.  
Buildings in disrepair have been taken down, and in their place are empty lots.  
It's all very sad.

Most of us are not going to invest in a place that doesn't offer any hope for the future. Right?  
It just does not make sense. It would be crazy.

### A BAD TIME TO BUY

But, then we have this story in the Bible about a prophet who decides to invest in a field at Anathoth. Let's look at what was going on when Jeremiah decided to make this purchase.

First, Jeremiah was in jail.

It may have been something like house arrest since he was able to receive visitors, and as we will see, even do some financial transactions. But, King Zedekiah wanted to keep Jeremiah close at hand and make sure that he wouldn't be able to prophesy in public.

Jeremiah was saying some very bad things about their future and about the king. So Jeremiah was under guard in the palace.

Second, Jeremiah was in a city that was under siege. The country was full of enemy troops.

In the past the people and the leaders may have been able to discount and discredit the prophets who said that they would be sent into exile.

But, that wouldn't work any more.  
The Babylonians had already carried off the best and the brightest into captivity ten years earlier.

And now the barbarians, the Babylonians are at the gate again.

If I were Jeremiah I would have said,  
“I told you so.

I told you not to trust in Zedekiah.  
But, no you just had to vote for him as your king.

I told you not to worship those foreign gods.  
But, no you just had to do worship them because everyone else was doing it.

I told you that God wanted you to be compassionate.  
But, no you had to be greedy.

So now you’re going to pay the price.  
It’s your own fault.  
Just remember. I called it!”

I might say something like that.  
But, Jeremiah doesn’t.

Instead, Jeremiah listens for a word from the Lord.  
And the Lord tells Jeremiah to do something crazy.

The Lord says, “Your cousin is going to ask you to buy a field in Anathoth.  
Go ahead and buy it.”

Jeremiah was not so sure that this was the Lord speaking. After all, he knew Anathoth. That’s where he was born.

And the field at Anathoth was currently under occupation by the Babylonian army!

But, when Jeremiah’s cousin comes and makes this offer, the prophet knows that this is the Lord’s will, and he agrees to buy the land.

I bet the cousin thought he had pulled a fast one on Jeremiah. He sold him a worthless piece of property. What a bargain!

Jeremiah bought a field where he would never prune a grapevine.  
Jeremiah bought a field where he would never plant an olive tree.  
Jeremiah bought a field where he would never build a house.

Apparently Jeremiah had not mastered the art of the deal. This seems like the worst investment ever.

## A PROPHETIC ACT

But, notice that Jeremiah does his due diligence when it comes to the purchase of this worthless piece of property. He weighs the seventeen shekels of silver and gives it to his cousin before many witnesses.

He insists that everything be witnessed by many people. He has the best real estate lawyers draw up a contract.

There's a sealed copy of the deed, in case the sale is disputed in the future. And there's an open copy of the deed so that everyone can easily refer to the terms of the sale.

Both copies are placed in the ancient world's version of a safety deposit box, a clay pot.

(By the way, lest you think that clay pot is not that great a place to store important documents, the Dead Sea Scrolls dating back to around the time of Christ were found in the 20th century in stoneware and were in remarkable shape for something of this age. So maybe sometimes the old ways are not so bad.)

Jeremiah was forbidden by King Zedekiah to speak. But, everyone who is guarding him witnessed this real estate transaction.

And this real estate transaction was an acted out word of the Lord.

Since the prophet was forbidden to speak, his actions spoke for him. When everyone else was selling what they had and heading for the hills, Jeremiah was carefully investing in the future.

His actions spoke louder than words.

Some, perhaps many, thought that the prophet was absolutely crazy. But, there were some who heard the word of the Lord in what the prophet did.

## PRESERVING THE WORD FOR THE FUTURE

Notice that Jeremiah charges Baruch to finish this real estate transaction.

This was not the only thing Baruch did. Baruch was also the scribe who wrote down the words of Jeremiah for future generations.

And when the king threatened Jeremiah's life, Baruch took up the task of reading the prophet's words of warning to the people as they gathered in the Temple on a day of fasting.

The preservation of the prophet's words was very important. It was important to Baruch and to God's people. Why?

Because the prophet Jeremiah spoke the Word of the Lord.

And that Word would be important not only for his day but also for the days to come.

Jeremiah said, "This is what the Lord told me. In the days to come people will once again buy houses and vineyards and fields."

Judah was a bear market in Jeremiah's day. Everyone was shouting, "sell, sell."

But, Jeremiah said through his real estate purchase, "Now is the time to buy."

In this time of tragedy and defeat, God proclaims a bull market. God sees opportunity and hope when everyone else sees only despair.

God invests when we want to divest.  
God offers hope for the future when everyone else offers fear and despair.

Jeremiah's word is not just a word for the people of ancient Judah. Jeremiah's word is God's Word, and it speaks to us even today.

## A DOWN PAYMENT ON THE FUTURE

So what does this mean to us?

What does Jeremiah's real estate deal teach us?

First, it teaches us that though we may have given up on the world, God is not finished with us yet. Christians are very realistic about the presence of evil and injustice in the world.

But, Christians cannot be pessimistic about the future. We believe the future is in God's hands.

And that means that one day our broken world will be restored.

The down payment for this future hope has already been paid.

We see it in the symbolic actions of the prophet, Jeremiah. We see it in the return of God's people to the Promised Land.

And we see it most of all in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

The Bible tells us that the resurrection of Jesus is the first fruits of many more who will be raised to life eternal in God's future. (1 Corinthians 15:20)

And in the meantime we have received another down payment on that eternal promise, the work of the Spirit. The Spirit of God is at work in our lives. The kingdom of God comes in us and through us.

Now don't misunderstand.

This kingdom doesn't come because we are such good boys and girls.

This kingdom comes because God's promise is sure.

And the work of God's Spirit in our lives and in the lives of others is also described as the "first fruits" of that kingdom. (See for example 2 Thessalonians 2:13)

The Babylonian exile was not the final chapter in the story of God's people. And the cross was not the final chapter in Jesus' story.

And, Paul tells us,  
 “Death will not have the final word in our life.  
 There is more to come.”

## THE CALL TO INVEST IN TOUGH TIMES

So what do we do while we wait for that more to come? We invest.

We don't invest based upon the signs of the times.  
 We invest according to the promise of God's Word.

Nobody would have ever remembered Jeremiah's strange real estate transaction if the fortunes of God's people had not been restored.  
 Jeremiah's action only makes sense if the hope of restoration is real.

And it was.

There did indeed come a time when God's people returned to the Promised Land.

There did indeed come a time when people bought and sold land again.

And God's people learned the lesson again.

God keeps His word.  
 God is faithful.  
 The promises of God can be trusted.

That's the lesson we must learn too.  
 The promises of God are sure.  
 Our God is the God of Jeremiah.

One day we may find ourselves in a situation that looks hopeless.  
 Some of you may be in a situation that seems hopeless situation this very day.

## BARBARIANS AT THE GATE TODAY

A sense of despair can also be amplified but the culture in which we live.  
 For example ...

Many of us had hoped that the worst aspects of racism were behind us.  
The events of this past week suggest that's not true.

Many of us had hoped that the cold war was over and that we could build  
more constructive relationships with our former enemies.  
The events of the past week suggest this is not true.

Many of us had hoped that the threat of terrorism would lessen for a few  
weeks.  
But, each week there is a new attack.

Some even wonder if the barbarians are at our gates.

People are afraid and frustrated, and that's reflected in our politics, in our  
home life and in our health. Some people are so angry that they have  
given up on the future altogether.

God has a word for us.  
Now is the time for us to invest in the land.  
Now is the time to speak a word of hope in a world that is filled with de-  
spair.

Now is the time for us to act.  
And our actions are not based upon what we see in the world or upon what  
is going on in our life.

Our actions are based upon the promises of God.

## PREACHING HOPE BY WHAT WE DO

The world still needs prophets who preach a sermon by example.

That's why we feed the hungry each week.  
That's why we counsel those who are sick and discouraged.  
That's why we give money to those who carry the gospel around the world.

Is what we do enough? No.  
Our efforts on all fronts are small and often ineffective compared to the  
need.

Then why do we do it?  
It's a sign, a symbol of what we believe about the future.

We invest in the future because we know who holds the future.

And so while others look toward the future with fear, we dream of a time when all God's starving children will eat together, fed by the hope of God's grace.

We dream of time when all God's hurting children will be healed.  
We dream of a time when tears will be wiped away.

We dream of a time when the lion will lie down with the lamb.  
We dream of a time when we will beat our swords into plowshares.

We dream of a time when God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

Now there may be precious few signs that these dreams are real.

Our lives and our world certainly offer plenty of evidence to the contrary.  
The barbarians and the Babylonians are always going to be at the gate.

But, we believe that the promises of God are sure.  
We believe that our God is faithful.  
In the face of bad news we stand up in church and sing,

"My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness."  
We force a day when sins are forgiven and we return to the Garden, our relationship with our maker restored.

Like Jeremiah we preach hope.  
We preach hope not because of circumstances.  
We preach hope because God was in Christ.

And through the ministry of Christ we know that God is with us and for us.  
His Spirit is in us and guides us every step of the way.

The kingdom comes.

And it will be a kingdom of justice and righteousness and peace and grace.

## INVESTMENTS TODAY

Now that's what we hope for in the future.  
But, what we hope for informs how we live today.

I mentioned earlier that it might be foolish to invest in downtown Detroit.  
That's a place where hope is in short supply.

But, you know what?  
Some people are doing exactly that.  
They made a risky investment.

They are bringing new kinds of businesses back to a community that looks like it was on the way out. There's a long way to go, but there may come a time when they once again buy and sell land in Detroit.

My home state of West Virginia has been devastated because coal is on the way out as an energy resource. And even if coal were to come back, the mechanization of the industry means that there won't be many new jobs.

My birthplace, my Anathoth, Bluefield looks like a shadow of it's previous self. Some coal towns look like ghost towns.

But, I read recently where someone has come into West Virginia and has taught a group of unemployed miners how to "code," that is program computers.

They're quite good at it, and the company is starting to make a profit.

Who would have thought that miners would make good computer programmers?

Of course this is just one bright spot in a very dark picture, but for me that is a sign of hope.

I believe God is at work and God's word is being proclaimed wherever investments are made to help people that are under attack. If we believe in God's future, we must work for justice and peace today.

And the good news is that God will do the heavy lifting.

We just have to do something out of faith.  
We just have to make that one small investment in response to a Word  
from the Lord.  
We just have to plant that one seed.

For Jeremiah, that investment was a plot of land occupied by the Babylo-  
nian army.  
For us, who knows?

But, God knows.  
And I believe God's word will help us.  
He will give us ears to hear and eyes to see.

A wise man once told me,  
"We don't have to everything.  
We just have to do the next thing."

So what is the next thing that we are called to do?  
Where would God have us invest our lives and our resources as a sign of  
faith and hope in the kingdom that comes?

What can we do to show the world that we believe in the Promise more  
than the threat?  
What one candle can we light instead of cursing the darkness?

We my give up.  
But, God has not given up on us.  
Now is the time to invest in the kingdom.

Amen.