

A BAD INVESTMENT

A Sermon

Laura J. Schmidt

*The promise is
an invitation to
participate in the
reality of the
Kingdom of God.*

The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord in the tenth year of King Zedekiah of Judah, which was the eighteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar. 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 . . . Jeremiah said, The word of the LORD came to me: 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." 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. And I bought the field at Anathoth from my cousin Hanamel, and weighed out the money to him, seventeen shekels of silver. I signed the deed, sealed it, got witnesses, and weighed the money on scales. Then I took the sealed deed of purchase, containing the terms and conditions, and the open copy; 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. In their presence I charged Baruch, saying, 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

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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.
Jeremiah 32:1, 2, 6-15

I'm no economist, but you don't have to look any further than the morning paper to see that the current economic climate in California is uncertain. The unemployment rate is high, jobs are difficult to find. The local papers reveal the frustration of those seeking employment. President Clinton deliberated over further military base closures in California, for fear of the economic impact. Corporations are laying off employees. There is still talk of recession. Investors are facing the harsh realities of upside-down equity, that property purchased in the 80s is worth much less today. The future seems uncertain for many, so consumption of durable goods is down. People are not buying houses, computers, appliances. These are things purchased now, with an eye toward the future. But the prevailing concern is for the tenuous present. It would be difficult to understand anyone who talked with confidence of buying up the market in this context. Doesn't he know what the economy is like these days? Can't she see it is a considerable risk, a potentially bad investment? The great irony of the situation is that a weak economy will naturally turn itself around when enough people start spending money again. Economic hope in some sense hangs on enough people making what we would all point to as very bad investments.

Thus, from an economic standpoint it is difficult to understand what is going when the prophet Jeremiah buys the field at Anathoth. Jeremiah is in jail, in a city under siege, in a country fairly full of enemy troops. This is the context in which he decides it is time to buy real estate, to buy family land which has already become enemy-occupied territory. Jeremiah is apparently even less of an economist than I am; even I can see that this is a bad investment.

This crisis in Judah's national life was long in coming. The people of Judah were living out God's promise of land and nationhood as the faithful remnant of the people of God. But Judah kept forgetting who they were, kept forgetting who God was, kept forgetting who was not God. Jeremiah spent over twenty years preaching to these chosen and forgetful people. He preached judgment because of their unfaithfulness to God. He called them to repentance, to the hope of restoration. For years Jeremiah warned them with messages of doom and gloom, messages about losing the land of promise, about losing their status as an independent nation and their identity as a nation of God's people.

But the people didn't hear Jeremiah, or if they heard they didn't believe, or it didn't seem to make a difference. There was no change, thus the crisis. Picture this: The army has already overtaken Anathoth, a few miles outside of Jerusalem and "the army of the king of Babylon was

besieging Jerusalem” (Jer. 32:2). This is the beginning of the end for independent Judah. Soon, perhaps within days, most will be exiled from the land of promise. The end is in sight. The nation has no future. The land has no value. The situation affords absolutely no hope whatsoever.

And in this climactic moment of national crisis, where is the great prophet Jeremiah? In jail! Jeremiah is in jail for saying what he had been saying for years. Jeremiah, sorely lacking any sense of diplomacy, had given Judah’s king Zedekiah his own personal vote of no confidence. He told Zedekiah he was certain to lose the battle and be taken into exile. In response, Zedekiah exercised his royal prerogative and threw the prophet in jail. Unfortunately for Zedekiah, things are happening as Jeremiah said they would. This is no surprise, really. Jeremiah knew, as much as anyone could, how angry God was with Judah, how faithless the nation had been. Jeremiah had spent most of his ministry talking about the coming exile and destruction of this land. He’d spent most of his ministry being abused, beaten, shunned, despised, for his hard words from God.

This dark day in national history seems to be but another dark day in Jeremiah’s personal history. Yet in the middle of all this, we find the prophet concerned with the legal procedures of making a very bad investment. Cousin Hanamel comes to sell Jeremiah the family inheritance. We can see why he would want to be rid of it! And Jeremiah is meticulous in conducting the transaction. He takes the whole thing quite seriously. He makes sure he has all the witnesses, signatures, seals, and copies of the deeds. He makes sure everything is in order. What could he possibly be thinking? Doesn’t he know enemy-occupied land lacks any market value? Jeremiah is careful to follow through on, and record, every necessary detail to insure that the transaction is legal. He seems to think it matters. He even has the deed put in an earthen jar, the ancient version of a safe deposit box. Important documents were put in earthen jars so they would keep “for a long time” (Jer. 32:14). This was good foresight on Jeremiah’s part; he won’t be coming back to pick up the jar any time soon. Jeremiah buys real estate and stores the deed, acting like a person with a future. Surely he, of all people, knows who is losing the war, knows this is the beginning of the end, knows what exile means. Again, what could he possibly be thinking?

I suspect the witnesses Jeremiah had gathered were asking these kinds of questions, trying to make sense of what he was doing. Jeremiah had always been a little odd—having visions, hearing voices, wearing yokes, breaking pottery—perhaps he’d finally snapped. Jeremiah, with a big prophetic “Thus says the LORD,” gives his rationale in 32:15. “For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards will again be bought in this land.” This land, which is under enemy troops. This land, which is trampled and scarred by war. This land, which they are

only now losing. This land will again be inhabited and tilled. The land had been part of the reality of God's promise to his people, part of the sign of God's presence with them. It looked incredibly foolish, but Jeremiah did perhaps the most hopeful thing imaginable. He invested in the land. He bought in to God's promise.

This act declared that there would be life after Babylon, and life in Babylon hadn't even begun for many of them. This action belies a future hope. The deeds for the land are put into a jar "in order that they may last for a long time" (32:14). It is a future hope, but it somehow makes a difference now, it somehow calls for action now. Jeremiah's action is concrete, public, economic. It shows where the future and present meet for him. The future broke into the present in a real way for Jeremiah. It broke into his bank account. It was present enough to cost him seventeen bucks and a legal headache. But Jeremiah's action only makes sense if the hope of restoration is real. Jeremiah's action only makes sense if the future is actually connected to the present, if the future is more than just wishful thinking.

The word of hope, as the nation begins the bleakest chapter in its history, is this hope of restoration. Jeremiah's hope hangs, really, on whether the word of the LORD is true. Hope hangs on the promise of restoration, the promise that means the continuation of rather than the end of Judah's relationship with God. Does the God of this promise keep his word? Hope hangs on whether or not God is faithful, on whether or not God keeps the future promises. The stories of Israel and Judah in scripture answer a resounding "Yes, God is faithful."

The good news is that our God is the God of Jeremiah. This faithful God, this God of hope, is our God. It doesn't always seem to be so—you can't always tell by looking. We, like Judah and Jeremiah, find ourselves in situations where it is hard to see any hope. We may not be in jail or in exile or an outcast like the prophet, but we know what it is like to be in places where hope for the future is hard to see, let alone act upon.

These situations are different, as we are different people. Maybe you're worried about getting a job, or keeping your job, or making ends meet. Perhaps you're prepared for pastoral ministry and you aren't seeing any open doors for a call. It might be that you're struggling through a divorce, or learning difficult things about yourself. Maybe you look at the political arena, as the talk of election and re-election begins, and wonder whether voting for change is really possible. Perhaps the ongoing turmoil in places like Bosnia and the former Soviet Union is discouraging to you. Maybe, like me, you're overwhelmed by the violence and poverty that can be seen in Los Angeles, Pasadena, and in my home town, Fresno.

What we see around us or our own personal experiences can make us

feel terribly hopeless, that whatever we would do in anticipation of the future makes no difference. But there is a difference for us. As Christians we stand up in church and sing “My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness.” We have a hope. Our hope is in Christ, the word of God to us, the word incarnate who is our salvation. We, like Judah and Jeremiah, have a future hope, regardless of circumstance. We have a hope for final restoration. In the broadest sense our hope is for the future coming of our Lord. Our hope is for the full establishment and realization of the kingdom of God, a realm of justice and peace, of righteousness and mercy. Future hopes.

But Jeremiah shows us that the future changes how we live today. We live in light of and in hope of the future. With the incarnation and the cross, future hope broke in to present reality. Christ will come again, but Christ has already come the first time, preaching the gospel, saying the kingdom of God is at hand. The kingdom of God is at hand, it is now, it is now and not yet. The future kingdom become present reality is the realm of hope. The vision of the future kingdom in its fullness draws us on. The dream of seeing God face to face, the hope of knowing God as God is. Future hopes.

But God’s grace and hope call us to faith now. The gift of salvation calls us to proclamation now. The presence of the kingdom calls us to action now. The kingdom is also now. Actions of justice and peace, of righteousness and mercy, are actions for now. We are called to participate in the kingdom now, as difficult as it may be to see at times. In the depths of our own imprisonment and exile the Word of the LORD comes to us and says it’s not a bad investment. Buy land. Buy in to the promise. Act on the hope in concrete, real, tangible ways. It is not easy to act on hope; most of the immediate evidence is against it. It requires faith and risk and investment. It often entails disappointment. But it is an invitation to participate in the reality of the kingdom of God. The reality under construction. The reality which first exists on God’s lips.

This is what we, as God’s people, have to offer each other and this broken world. The hope of God in Christ. The hope of the kingdom now. A chance to act on the future in the present. We must offer this hope to the world. We must find ways to buy the land and speak the promise of restoration to all within earshot. May we live today in light of and in the hope of our salvation, risking the investment of our faith and our selves, assured that God’s faithfulness is from everlasting to everlasting. Amen.

The above is adapted from a sermon given for the weekly chapel at Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California, in the spring of 1993.

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