

Sermon: A down payment on God's plan

The headlines are wild!
Shrinking economy imperils national prosperity!
Unemployment misery grows!
The war that will not go away!
Price of gold hits new record high!
Experts say Economy in a funk!
Officials debate "Recession or depression"!
Just who is in charge of this mess and what are they doing about it?
Wheat and rice and other staples reach new record prices!
Consumer confidence plummets to new record low!
Overseas investors express their concern over the future!
Credit crunch hits Main Street!
Housing market bubble bursts!
Foreclosure signs are everywhere!

All this and more has been going on in America!

All this and more has been going on in Judah during the reign of King Zedekiah!

There is war and alarm and fear and uncertainty – things are so bad that Israel's scriptures even record this year of fear and siege not in terms of the 10th year of the reign of their current King, Zedekiah, but as the 18th year of the reign of their sworn enemy, the Babylonian King, Nebuchadnezzar who is laying siege to Jerusalem! Such a detail is a sure sign of who is winning and who will win the war! What is on everyone's mind is what terrifying consequences will follow when the inevitable happens, when the military-industrial-media complex that is Babylon captures Jerusalem... as surely they must...and they will!

The defeat of Israel at the hands of the Babylonians has been the keynote message of the prophet Jeremiah. This has been his constant refrain for several years; this has been Jeremiah's message to everyone and anyone who would listen. It is because the King and others in power in Israel did not like this message of doom and destruction that we encounter Jeremiah locked away in the Camp Gitmo of his day! Jeremiah, the prophet of Yahweh, is imprisoned, confined in the court of the guard inside the King's Palace. The King anointed by Yahweh to his role and purpose as guardian of God's people, has seen fit to silence the prophet of Yahweh by confining him in the prison from which no one ever seems to be released.

Jeremiah is locked up to shut him up. Jeremiah is locked away to keep him away from the people who might just listen to him now that they are in fear of their lives, under siege by the Babylonian hordes – the very message that Jeremiah has made his own! Jeremiah is in chains where the King can keep his eye on him – so ol' Jerry can't ferment any additional problems!

Zedekiah also wants and needs to keep Jeremiah close just in case God sends a new and different and more hopeful message through the prophet, a message that may yet save the king. By confining the prophet in his own inner palace King Zedekiah wants to ensure that if Jeremiah has a new, better, improved message that he will be the first to hear it!

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Jeremiah is in solitary confinement, tucked away, locked away, hidden away by Homeland Security and yet the Word of the Lord still comes to Jeremiah. The word that comes to the imprisoned prophet despite all the barriers concerns a seemingly strange and wild and amazingly foolish land deal, a completely crazy, cuckoo, crackpot property transaction!

Jeremiah is locked away in the king's closet, inside the King's Palace! He is under close guard, inside a city under siege – Jerusalem being completely surrounded by their nation's enemies who are bent on destroying Israel. Israel has no allies, no friends to send a relief column, no 7th Cavalry to bring relief, no hope of someone coming to rescue or redeem them, they are unable to go anywhere, and yet still the word of God comes to Jeremiah!

I think there is a truth here that we should allow to take us and shake us and shape us! No matter where we are, no matter what is going on around us, in us or to us, God has a way of getting God's word to us... if we will just keep looking and listening and trusting and expecting! Even sometimes when we are not even looking or listening or trusting or expecting – sometimes even then the word of Yahweh, the word of God will find us and overwhelm us and change us and convert us and challenge us and comfort us.

If you can talk about some difficult, tragic, painful, locked away time in your life and experience where still God sought you and found you, you have a gift to share that might and will encourage your sisters and brothers when they face their time of hurt or loss or shame! Please never be shy to speak of what you know and what you have seen and heard! Of the ways in which God intervened in your life or experience against all odds, ways in which God offered you strength and hope, forgiveness or reassurance, the chance to start over, a call to move in a new direction and embrace new opportunities. Such talk is godly talk and will bring healing and wholeness to those with whom you speak.

It is important that we notice from the scriptures exactly what it was that Jeremiah heard from God and how it worked out, because we have a tendency to conflate the whole story! Jeremiah is told by God that his cousin, Hanamel will come to him and ask him to buy a field out in the old family plot around Anathoth in the land of Benjamin! That's the totality of the message Jeremiah is given by God – your cousin will come and ask you to buy some old family land! God does not tell Jeremiah what to do and how to respond, God does not say to Jeremiah, "buy the land." He is merely told that his cousin will come offering this deal! And sure enough this is then what happens, with clanking of doors, the buzzing of buzzers, with the rattling of chains and the gruff voice of the jailers, Jeremiah's cousin, Hanamel is ushered into the Maximum Security wing and makes his sales pitch!

Jeremiah sees his cousin's presence and his odd request as a sign that this is indeed the Lord's message and that in light of all this there is only course of action he can take – he needs to buy the land, he needs to redeem the family plot. This purchase will need to be "sight unseen" or at least "from earlier memories" since because of his chains and his guards and his king and the city walls, and the Babylonian siege lines there is no way he can go visit the old family plot, the prophet in his prison is completely cut off from his proposed purchase!

In making this purchase, Jeremiah uses every maneuver he could think of, every trick in the book, to make sure that as many people as possible got to hear of his purchase! That is why there is all this talk about Baruch, his scribe, and multiple copies of the deeds and earthenware jars– it is Jeremiah publicly

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enacting the action he had taken in buying the land. No photocopier, no internet, to announce the sale, just Baruch the scribe, writing out by hand multiple copies of this land deed.

Given the current situation, the fear and the looming defeat, seemingly a fulfillment of Jeremiah's preaching, it is no surprise that the King made sure that Jeremiah's actions got maximum publicity, that he received saturation coverage for this very public act of faith in the nation's future! No surprise that Jeremiah's redemption of the family land was the lead story on Radio Jerusalem, no surprise that it was the headline in every news bulletin.

This news, the news that Jeremiah, the very prophet who had for years been promising gloom and doom and defeat for Israel, was buying property was surely good news for the king and the people and their future!

Of course this redemption of the land would have to wait, because indeed Jerusalem will fall to the Babylonians, the city will be sacked, the Temple destroyed, the nation's elite forcibly removed to Babylon. Likely Jeremiah never saw or took possession of the family plot he had redeemed... But by acting in this way Jeremiah announced that one day, one day, someday, one day, in God's time, houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought and sold in the land!

I call upon all of you listening this morning or by means of our TV broadcast to receive and live into this story...

This is a story we need to live into in response to those voices inside and beyond the church that talk only about the problems, the pressures, the fears that face us and surround us and besiege us, the story of Jeremiah's purchase frees us and nerves us to invest in and for the future, to put a stake in the ground, "way out there", for the future good and well-being of church and community, as a marker that we trust in God and in the coming of God's Kingdom of justice and peace. Like Jeremiah we need to offer not just words but deeds that declare that we as the Church of the crucified One, that we are not giving up, that we are not going away, that we are not writing anyone or anything off, that we are not giving up on people because God is not giving up on anyone. That we really do trust and believe that God has a persistent, stubborn love for this old family plot that we call planet earth and that we intend to get with this plan, because it is God's plan!

This is a story we need to live into as we unpack every implication of the affirmation we make that God has a plan and a purpose, a calling for all of us who live as followers of Jesus Christ. God is always asking all of us to "get with God's program", to live and act and be out of our concern for God's plan and ready to express God's love affair for all God's creation without any claim to know it all or triumphalism, but only out of faithfulness. My friends I hope you see yourself in this story. I hope that you see your life, the possibility that is you in this story! I hope you see this church, our community, your and our future in this story!

This is a story we need to live into as we accept the joy and the challenge of giving and serving fully and faithfully. Just as God asked Jeremiah to make what seems at so many levels to be a foolish investment, so God asks you and I to dig deep, to pour ourselves, our resources into the meaning and mission of our faith and this church in order that others, many others, across town and across the world will know that here at Oakland Avenue we trust in the loving, forgiving, tender, justice-seeking God.

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By our sacrificial commitment, by the generosity of our giving we provide the means by which we can in God's name comfort the afflicted even as we afflict the comfortable.

In a church with the extent of the heritage of ours we sometimes imagine that things have always been as we see them and experience them today – but that is not so. Sometimes we find it difficult to imagine that there is a call to a new future. It can sometimes seem as if the best days are all behind us. We look around and we imagine that things have always been this way. We console ourselves that when people in the past put their stake in the ground, when they invested for the future that everything was just about perfect yet that is rarely true. And so as we look to God's future, the future of God's Kingdom to which we are called to bear witness we need to hear and respond to the call that God has for us to live into.

Across the ministries of our church we are meeting needs, offering hope, prompting faith, seeking justice, inspiring faith, sharing care, inviting renewal. God has a call for you to follow and obey, a purchase to complete, a promise to fulfill, an investment to make, a gift to share, a challenge to offer, a declaration to state, a partnership to embrace, a focus to keep. In this troubled and uncertain world Jeremiah listened, watched, waited and acted... in this same troubled and uncertain world... God speaks still, and so people of Oakland Avenue Presbyterian Church listen, listen for the Word of the Lord who wants to sweep us forward and outward, onward and upward as we live renewed lives – fully committing ourselves to God's ministry in us and through us.

Living as God's people, living as God's committed people we do and can offer each other and this broken world, the hope of God in Christ, the hope of the kingdom now and forever. It is always the case that today and every day, you and I have the opportunity to act in ways that will change the present and the future.

My friends, you are called to offer God's hope to the world. You, we, need to find ways “to buy the land”, to make a down payment, our down payment on God's plan. In the light and hope of God's salvation, now is the time to risk the fullest investment of our faith, our lives, our hearts, our minds, our time, our talent and yes our treasure. For where our treasure is, there is our heart also.

Jeremiah spent his treasure to redeem the family plot, to place a stake in the ground, acting even when there seemed no hope, at a time when God's people were assailed and surrounded, and in doing so he was declaring his conviction that God's faithfulness is from everlasting to everlasting. Now it is our turn, so long as we have life, we have the need, the God-given need, to spend who we are and what we have in ways that reflect the truth and the hope of our conviction that God's faithfulness, God's faithfulness to us and to the world, is from everlasting to everlasting. How we give, how much we give, the attitude with which we give, the gladness and faithfulness of our giving, the resources we allow God to bless and multiply as we give, all this is our down payment on God's plan – to love and cherish the world and all of creation!

People of Oakland no matter who you are, where you are, God has a word and a message for you all, God has a place for you to be and a way for you to make a difference, God has need of you and the life resources with which you are blessed. This is the day that the Lord has made. Be listening! Be ready! Live into who God asks you to be and to become and discover what it means to live a blessed life
Amen.