

Scripture and Sermon for Sunday, 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 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, where King Zedekiah of Judah had confined him.

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 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.

Luke 16:19-31

[Jesus said:] "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.' But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.' He said, 'Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house—for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.' Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.' He said, 'No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'"

Let us pray...Amen.

For nearly 30 chapters, the prophet Jeremiah had written dire warnings to the people of Israel: keep behaving as you are, he said, and there will be serious consequences. Of course, nobody wanted to listen to him, and so, here, in the 32nd chapter, Jeremiah's message comes to the people of Israel,

and us, as the Babylonians are laying their ramps upon the walls of the city. The consequences of the people's unfaithful behavior will be a 70 year occupation by one of the most brutal occupying forces in history.

Israel had hoped that Egypt, a sworn and mortal enemy of the Babylonians, would intervene, but alas, Egypt elected to stay out of the conflict.

So on the eve of destruction, so to speak, Jeremiah writes this story. A story about God telling him to buy a worthless piece of property from his cousin. Israel is about to be occupied by a ruthless military force for 3 generations, and God is telling Jeremiah to go out and buy some worthless land.

The story is both history and metaphor: we know that freedom and life were restored to the people of Israel, that they emerged from the occupation to conduct their lives, their business, their worship as faithful children of God. Jeremiah's deeds, one sealed in a jar, and the other his story preserved in scripture, tell us that even as God's punishment was at hand, God was making plans to restore Israel's freedom, making plans to restore Israel's relationship with God.

This scripture stands as a reminder that even as God changed the way God responds to unfaithful behavior, there are consequences to the way we live our lives.

We have Jeremiah's prophetic voice, and some historical evidence that God indeed lifted the Babylonian occupation, and that commerce, community life, and faith life continued when the behavior of the children of God changed for the good.

To do the opposite, to those who pursue wealth to the exclusion of all else means we might fall into temptation and be trapped by the many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the

love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in our eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains. Although there are many examples, I can't help but note the number of lottery winners, who, after years of playing and wishing and pursuing a big win, get one. And then promptly lose it all in drug schemes, squandered spending, or ill-advised purchases.

Money in and of itself is not evil. Having money, even having a lot of it, isn't inherently evil. It's the love of money, the pursuit of riches to the exclusion of the faith life that is evil. And there are consequences for those who choose that path.

If Jeremiah was predicting a time of hope and prosperity on the eve of destruction, Luke was predicting the consequences of a life dedicated to the pursuit of riches. Riches will come and go, but God's faithful love is here to stay. A life based on humility, honesty and faith is taking hold of a life that really is life.

Now, our gospel lesson gives us some advice on how we are to live our faithful lives. Luke records a story Jesus told about a rich man who lived his life ignoring the most vulnerable around him. We can surmise that the rich man had to go past, maybe even step over Lazarus, the sick beggar in order to come and go from his home.

Jesus tells a compelling story about the beggar going to heaven and the rich man going to Hades. The vivid imagery of the rich man writhing in the heat, thirsting for just a drop of water from the former beggar is striking: consequences and eternal rewards stem from the way we live our lives. But it gets better! The rich man wants to warn his brothers that they are in danger of a similar fate, and Jesus is pretty clear that the only warning we are going to get comes from the prophets like Jeremiah. If those warnings don't convince us to pattern our lives in a faithful way, nothing will.

So are you convinced? Have Jeremiah and Luke convinced you to make some changes in your life? On such short notice, probably not. So how do we let these words of hope and faith sink in?

I'd like to suggest that in the week coming up, we each set aside 15 minutes. Out of 112 waking hours, I'd like us to find 15 minutes in which we can reflect whether the lives we are living seem to be lives in pursuit of riches to the exclusion of the neediest neighbors on our doorstep, or are we living the life that really is life. How will we know? How do we share the gifts that God has given us? Who are the people outside our gate today? How do we treat them? Do we even see them?

If we were to be recalled by our maker today, which place are we most likely to go?

Now, I am almost certainly preaching to a choir of God's faithful: If you've pledged to our church's budget, if you've volunteered to help the church raise money for our ministries, if you've prayed for the church to find its ministry within the community, if you've put a penny into the children's offering, then you have already decided to live the life that really is life.

But can we, sitting here worshiping, giving to the causes that touch our hearts, really change a world that aches for the riches? That pines for excess? That judges a person's worth based on a number in their bank account?

Everything I read in the Jeremiah passage and the gospel reading today tells me that yes, we can in fact make a significant change in the world's wider approach to riches when we choose to live our lives faithfully.

God keeps God's promises to those who live faithfully, those who attend to the people outside our gate. We won't get warnings from beyond the grave from those who have gone before us, we already have the prophets

and the faithful writers of the bible to tell us what we already know: living our lives faithfully, with God's intent in our hearts wins over the blind pursuit of riches any day, and may have eternal consequences we cannot predict or imagine.

We need not worry about those who would mean us harm, or who live their lives outside of God's covenant, it's not for us to judge. Our only task is to pattern our lives and our living after those who guide us through scripture and faith.

Giving a blanket to someone in need can change their whole world.

Giving a dollar to someone, and looking them in the eye so they know *you know* they even exist can change their whole world.

Seeing the people who are outside our gate is the first step. Helping the people outside our gate, understanding the people outside our gate, not judging the people outside our gate, loving the people outside our gate has major implications for the future of our church.

What difference does sharing with our needy neighbors make? All the difference in the world. Amen.