

Sermon for October 25, 2020
“God’s Economy, Part Two—Investing in God’s Future”
Thirtieth Sunday in OT, Year A—Texts: Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15

If you’ve been listening to my sermons for the last few years, you’ve heard me quote Dietrich Bonhoeffer on more than one occasion. If not—or if you needed a reminder--Bonhoeffer was a German Lutheran pastor and theologian and was a founding member of the Confessing Church. His writings on Christianity’s role in the secular world have become widely influential and his book “The Cost of Discipleship” is considered by many—myself included—as a modern classic.

Apart from his theological writings Bonhoeffer became known for his staunch resistance to the Nazi dictatorship, strongly opposing its euthanasia program and genocidal persecution of the Jews. He also—allegedly—became involved in plans to assassinate Adolf Hitler. He was arrested in April 1943 by the Gestapo and executed by hanging in April 1945, while imprisoned at a Nazi concentration camp, just 23 days before the German surrender—in January of 1943, three months before he was arrested, Bonhoeffer wrote about Christian hope and faith when times are dark. He wrote:

“There remains for us only the very narrow way, often extremely difficult to find, of living every day as if it were our last and yet living in faith and responsibility as though there were to be a great future. It is not easy to be brave and keep that spirit alive, but it is imperative.”

These words which Bonhoeffer wrote some seventy years ago are stark; they are bold and jarring. They were written in response to a dark and tragic moment in human history. And they’re words which conjure up not the warm, reassuring spirit of our grace-filled faith, but the difficult and scary components of prophetic faith.

Bonhoeffer calls us to a faith beyond simply social benevolence and charity. He calls us to a faith which demands accountability; a clarity on where—and with whom—we stand. This is a faith which can leave us alone and at odds even with people whom we thought we knew so well. Indeed, in the end, Bonhoeffer's faith left him alone—alone in prison cell ninety two in Tegel prison waiting for his death.

Now, in the same position what would we write? If we were to find ourselves in a prison cell, alone, waiting for our impending death with war and social upheaval raging outside the prison walls—what would we say? What would our word be to the world? What would we do as a testimony to the world—a statement that the darkness of the times was not going to prevail? What would we do to inspire future generations?

Martin Luther was believed to have said, “If I believed the world were to end tomorrow I would still plant a tree today. I’m fairly certain that Bonhoeffer, as a good and faithful Lutheran, would have been quite familiar with that quote. I’m equally sure that he (Bonhoeffer) had as much in common with the prophet Jeremiah as he did with Luther, the father of the Reformation.

In 588 BC, during the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem and the beginning of the time known as the Exile, Jeremiah found himself imprisoned in the palace of King Zedekiah of Judah. He’d been charged with desertion, treason and insurrection—and on some level the charges had merit.

Jeremiah had been forcefully pleading for Israel to turn from their ways. He saw the gathering storm of Babylon in the north. He spoke God's word of judgment and divine condemnation of social injustice and idolatry. So, King Zedekiah had good reason to imprison Jeremiah. Jeremiah simply didn't tow the royal line. But then, as our reading this morning tells us—with war raging and despair growing—Jeremiah gets a new word from God. And this word is different. Some might say strange, given the circumstances.

This word has to do with some family business. A plot of family-owned land needs to be purchased. And by the right of redemption, a law found in Leviticus 25 which prevents the loss of family property, Jeremiah's cousin Hanamel asks the prophet—who's in prison mind you—to buy the family field in Anathoth. It's an absurd request. It's the wrong time to invest in real estate. It's the wrong time to invest in the future. It's a time to panic about the present. War is raging. Terror is threatened on all sides. Exile is happening and Israel's future looks pretty bleak.

But Jeremiah doesn't watch the news. Jeremiah doesn't listen to the prophets of doom on TV or talk radio. Jeremiah knows that King Zedekiah doesn't run the world, neither does King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon—just like presidents or members of congress or governors or health officials don't run the world.

None of these really run the world. Jeremiah knows this. He knows who runs the world. He knows that God runs the world. He knows that God will have the last word and—good news—it's **not** destruction. God's last word is **never** destruction. God's last word is renewal. God's last word is **always** renewal. The **new** covenant, articulated only a chapter earlier in the book of Jeremiah, lays it out pretty clearly: **“The days are surely coming,” says the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.”**

It won't be anything like the old one says God. They didn't get that one. They didn't understand. This time is different. This time, God says, **“I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God and they shall be my people; for I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more.”** So—in the spirit and promise of the future trusting completely in God—Jeremiah offers a surprising lesson in stewardship and buys the land. Land where houses and fields and vineyards will once again flourish.

When Dietrich Bonhoeffer was in prison, he wrote a letter referencing this to his fiancée Maria von Wedemeyer. He wrote:

“When Jeremiah said in his people's hour of direst need that ‘houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land,’ it was a token of confidence in the future. Our marriage must be a ‘yes’ to God's earth. It must strengthen our resolve to do and accomplish something on earth.”

Bonhoeffer's words—inspired by Jeremiah—are as true today as they ever were.

We live in a world where the bad news of the day, news of pandemic, protest and violence, are both a source of despair and—in our 24-hour news cycle—a source of entertainment. As a result, we're tempted to react to the tragedies and social unrest of our day with either a self-absorbed denial or a self-centered hedonism.

But the people who have Jeremiah as their prophet; .who know God as the source of hope and life and strength—those who have Jesus as their Savior—these people do not despair. These people do not live lives of denial. These people do not live lives of hedonism. These people live lives of radical hope. A hope that doesn't deny reality, but that knows that God is with us and—as we will heard last week—has plans for us. Plans for our welfare and not for harm. Plans to give us a future with hope. A hope which isn't simply some sentimental feeling, but a genuine ability to trust and an orientation which serves as a commitment to action...

An orientation which allows us to see the world differently and to do our part to bring that hope-filled vision to life. We in the church are those people! We're the ones who've been called by our baptism to bring hope to our world, to our neighborhood and to our church. We're the ones challenged to buy land when all the "experts" say, "Not now" or "Sell" or "No—the market's not good" or "You'd be foolish to invest now."

Jesuit Priest and theologian Daniel Berrigan reminds us of the critical importance of Jeremiah's field. Berrigan writes:

"Jeremiah's field collapses time. It symbolizes promise and gift and an entire land restored. "Is the land blood-ridden and desolate now? Perhaps, but it shall be again a land flowing with milk and honey."

What, then, are we to do? How shall we live? And what in the wide, wide, world of sports does any of this have to do with Stewardship? Jeremiah says to us today, go ahead—buy the land. Buy up the church. Build up God's kingdom. Invest in God's reign of justice and righteousness and peace. Invest in the church and prepare the ground for its future. Show the world that God's spirit is alive and well here on earth and—in particular—here at Westwood First Presbyterian Church. Indeed the future of our lives, our world and certainly not our church are not pre-determined—it hangs in the balance.

So here, brothers and sisters is the thing: in God's economy the church is called to make an investment in that future. We are called to make an investment in that future. No matter the cost. No matter the risk. No matter the bad news of the day! This is what lies at the heart of stewardship—this is its essence! May we—as stewards of the church of Jesus Christ here at Westwood First Presbyterian Church—have the courage and strength and faith to make that investment!

Thanks be to God! Amen and amen.