

### **Jeremiah 32:1-3, 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. 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.

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## **The Audacity of Hope**- September 29, 2019

*Jeremiah 32:1-3, 6-15*

Hope. An amazing word. The poet Emily Dickinson wrote about it. You may be familiar with the first verse: "Hope" is the thing with feathers - / That perches in the soul - / And sings the tune without the words - / And never stops - at all - However, there are two other verses: And sweetest - in the Gale - is heard - / And sore must be the storm - / That could abash the little Bird / That kept so many warm - || I've heard it in the chillest land - / And on the strangest Sea - / Yet - never - in Extremity, / It asked a crumb - of me. I think this means, and I could be wrong, is that hope lives in every one of us. We are born with it. It is a gift from God. Moreover, hope is almost impossible to destroy. She says that only under the most adverse conditions can hope be suppressed, if even for a moment. Yet, hope lives in the most extreme conditions and emerges over and over again without our having to do anything.

On the other hand, as rational beings who like to be able to explain how everything works, the idea of hope makes no sense at all. Hope, you see, is about imagination. It is about possibility. It is about envisioning a world and situations which do not currently exist.

Moreover, hope often does disappoint us. All of us can name not one, but many occasions in our lives when we have hoped for something and it did not turn out as we wanted. We have all hoped for jobs. We have all hoped for the health and recovery of loved ones. We have all hoped for a future free of hatred and violence. We all hope that the world will figure out how to deal with climate change before it's too late.

Yet, few of us, if any, have gotten all the jobs we've wanted. We are reminded every day of persons who are ill and loved ones who have died in spite of our hope that they would get better. We hope mass killings will end in our nation, yet every week there is another. We want our planet to cool down a bit and the glaciers to return, yet every year tops the previous one in terms of the average temperature of the planet.

Given this rather poor track record, it would seem that the idea of hope belongs to the realm of fairy tales and is utter foolishness. I mean, how many of the things we have hoped for have actually happened the way we wanted them to?

Prayer is our way of pouring out and directing our hopes to God. When we pray, we are on some level seeking access to a power higher than ourselves to make the world go our way for a change. There is not one of us who has not prayed for something or someone only to find that the prayer was

not answered in the way we desired. And when our hopes are not fulfilled, we can become bitter. We feel foolish, we question ourselves. We beat ourselves up.

But hope persists. No matter how much we want it to go away and leave us alone, hope persists. Why? Hope is fundamental to being human. We can ignore it for awhile. We can deny it. We can say that we are “burnt out” or “have nothing left to give.” Yet somewhere inside of us, hope persists. We believe deep down, no matter how bad things seem, that our situation can change and things will improve.

Yes, I know there are many times in our lives when we have hit rock bottom and think nothing will get better. Sometimes we are right. Sometimes things don't get better. Hope does not always translate into the results we seek. We can hope and hope and pray and pray and nothing seems to happen.

Certainly someone totally familiar with that situation was the prophet Jeremiah. In many ways, Jeremiah, who lived over 2500 years ago, would relate well to what is going on today in our 21st century world.

Just like what's happening today, Jeremiah's world was falling apart. If anyone had the right to say, “I told you so,” it was he. Perhaps he could be compared with Al Gore who warned of climate change twenty years ago. We all know what's going on in the environment. Will we ever see reasonable summers and snowy winters again? Probably not. Do we give up hope?

The House of Representatives has opened an impeachment inquiry against the President of the United States. Some have dismissed this as an exercise of futility and openly question whether our democratic institutions can survive. Regardless of what happens, will we ever see civility and integrity in government again? If that is to happen, it will take a very long time to undo the damage which comes from many sides. Do we give up hope?

There are some of you here who remember when this sanctuary was full. We look around and that is not the case today. Some have given up hope. Some want simply to go through the motions of being church and ignore the good news of Jesus Christ. Some can only see the doors closing and our mission and ministry coming to an end. Will we ever see all these pews filled again? Probably not. Yet, I ask you do we give up hope?

From today's scripture reading, we learn the main event that happened was that Jeremiah bought some land from a relative and arranged for the deed to be preserved for a long time. Now, what is so

special about that? Why would the Bible have a story about a man buying some land? Where is the lesson here?

Jeremiah is often called the “weeping prophet.” His was not a ministry filled with joy and affirmation. He did not get to live in a world of hard working rulers and faithful people. He did not see the lives of the common folks getting better. Instead, God gave Jeremiah the utterly thankless task of going to the rulers of Israel and reminding them constantly that unless they changed their evil ways God was going to allow foreign armies to invade the land and destroy them.

In the world of Jeremiah, the rich got richer and poor got poorer. Rulers were dishonest and they changed the law to insure they got a bigger and bigger share of the nation’s wealth. They passed laws that took land away from regular people and instead concentrated ownership into the hands of a few. Families that were able to make a modest living from farming their own land found themselves as virtual slaves working for landowners on the very same land they used to own.

I assume much of this sounds familiar in our own time. We’ve seen millions of jobs in the country send overseas. We endure the ridiculous spectacle of seeing the wealthiest Americans pay a smaller share of their income in taxes than to the vast majority of us. We have seen the top 1% of Americans control at least 50% of the nation’s wealth. Some call this situation good. Some say that whoever seeks to change this unjust situation is a socialist — whatever that means. Some say that the rulers of our land should have the power to break laws and not be held accountable for them.

And we all know this has been true for a long, long time.

The prophet Jeremiah warned and warned. He tore his clothes to symbolize how the rulers were tearing up the nation. For over thirty years, he said the great and terrible Day of the Lord was coming when the unjust rule of Israel’s kings and wealthy would come to an end.

And finally, it did.

If you look at a map of the middle east, you’ll see that Israel is at an incredibly advantageous position, geographically speaking. Israel sits at the intersection of the three main trade routes of the known world. Africa had to go through Israel to get to Europe or Asia. Likewise, Asia had to do the same for access to Africa and Europe. Remember, no boats, just overland camel caravans.

So Israel got rich servicing all the traders that came through their land. For centuries, the nations surrounding Israel wanted a piece of the action themselves. Who wouldn’t like to control the nexus of the world? Fortunately for Israel, her neighbors were consumed with their own internal problems so they couldn’t invade Israel. In the meantime, the rich and powerful in Israel exploited the poor.

Then finally, a new nation, a country called Babylon, which is now called Iraq, became strong enough to invade and take over not just Israel, but all the nations of the Middle East. Their armies drew closer and closer. Jeremiah warned and warned about the coming disaster. He prophesied that hope would be finished, the people would be destroyed. The nation would end.

And he was right. When Babylon arrived at Israel's doorstep, they easily took over. Israel didn't even bother to fight. Why? Because the poor people, who were the soldiers in Israel's army, had no reason to fight. They had been so abused by their rulers that they figured anything, even the Babylonians, would be an improvement. So Babylon took over and the rulers were either killed or sent into exile.

But even as the country was falling apart, Jeremiah did a strange thing: he bought a piece of land. How strange! Here the nation was collapsing and essentially going out of business, and Jeremiah was buying land. Who knew whether his deed would mean anything?

Jeremiah had hope. He had the audacity to hope in spite of every terrible thing happening around him. He hoped even though he would be captured and sent into exile. He hoped not knowing what the future would hold. Some 13 years ago, an unknown presidential candidate named Barak Obama wrote a book entitled The Audacity of Hope. In it, he said, "America is big enough to accommodate all their dreams." In other words, President Obama, like the prophet Jeremiah, saw a future of hope for their respective nations.

In Jeremiah's case, 100 years after the Babylonians destroyed Israel and kidnapped their people, they allowed them to come home and restart their lives. In America's case, we are not sure what the future brings, but given the choice between ignoring the dangers we face as nation or getting involved to do something about our problems, I hope and trust we would choose to be involved.

Here at Collingswood Church, we face our own questions of hope. For the last few weeks, we have been engaged in a capital campaign to help us raise the money we need to heat our building and do other improvements. Your contribution to this effort is a sign and symbol of your personal hope that our mission and ministry will not just survive, but thrive in the coming years. Since becoming your pastor, I have had the privilege of meeting many caring, hard-working people who hope for the future. I am proud to say they are just like the prophet Jeremiah and echo the ideas of Barak Obama. I invite and encourage you to be among the hopers and dreamers who see a future directed by God for our church and community.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.