

## Hopeful Future – Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15 – September 18, 2016

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During World War II Lutheran pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer was part of the German Resistance movement against Nazism. Bonhoeffer was arrested in 1943 and later executed when he was found to be part of a plot to assassinate Adolph Hitler. Just prior to his arrest, Bonhoeffer wrote of Christian faith and hope when times are troubling. 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."* (From Letters and Papers from Prison)

Bonhoeffer, living in a chaotic and ugly world, wrote these words in response to a very tragic time in human history. These aren't light and cheery words meant to reassure or soothe. They are heavy words that take in to account the reality of a grim world and a tenuous future. But they are words of hope, nonetheless. Words about standing firm in the faith, even in the face of great evil and uncertainty. Anticipating with hope, a future in God. Living each day, no matter how difficult that life might be, as if a grand future awaits.

Bonhoeffer kept that attitude throughout his imprisonment, continuing to work and write and get his message out with the help of sympathetic prison guards. He held strong, even to the end. Just days before his execution, he spoke to a fellow prisoner, "This is the end – for me the beginning of life." (info from Wikipedia) Bonhoeffer's message is a call to faith, even against the toughest odds. In his darkest moment, he was convinced of the promise of God's good future.

At first glance, this message doesn't seem to have much in common with our lesson from the book of Jeremiah. In fact, when we look at this passage, which describes the purchase of a piece of land by the prophet, we wonder what on earth it has to do with anything at all. How is an ancient land transaction even relevant to us?

At this point, Jeremiah had been prophesying to the people of Judah for many years. He saw the threat from the Babylonians and had brought a message of judgment from God. It was supposed to be a wakeup call to a people who had grown careless in their faith and relied on politics to solve their problems. It's hard to hear a message of condemnation when life seems to be going so smoothly. So they ignored Jeremiah.

But then suddenly, things started to get ugly. Babylon had defeated the city of Jerusalem and carried away the first group of exiles. And now, 10 years later the Babylonians had besieged

the city again. During this time Jeremiah had been imprisoned. Apparently King Zedekiah was not too keen on having him strolling through the streets of Jerusalem, wagging his finger and saying "I told you so!"

Imagine what it must have been like. 10 years of turmoil and living under the conditions of war. The threat of violence and capture was part of everyday life. The capital city was under siege and the surrounding country was full of enemy troops. Life was pretty harsh for the people of Judah, and they found themselves face to face with despair.

And it is in this context that Jeremiah's message changed. No more did he bring threats of judgment and a call to repentance, now he spoke only words of hope. In addition to the change in Jeremiah's message, we get this strange land sale transaction. God told Jeremiah that his cousin was going to ask him to purchase his field. A common practice at this time, when a landowner was in trouble or had died, the parcel of land would be sold to the next of kin in order to keep it in the family.

But here's the problem. There is a war going on, and in fact this very parcel of land, this field, located a few miles outside of Jerusalem, is being occupied by the Babylonians. You don't have to be an expert in economics to realize that the purchase of this field is probably not a very wise decision. It's as if he were throwing his money away on a hopeless cause.

But against common sense, Jeremiah went through with the land deal.

The question is, why did he do it? It defies logic. Jeremiah could not use it for farming, since it was currently being occupied. And he certainly couldn't sell it to any other family member. Who else would want it? So why did God tell him to do this?

The key to this mystery can be found in the last verse of the passage, "For thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land."

Just prior to this episode, God had spoken about a new covenant. The people had broken the old covenant that was made during the time of Moses, when God led them out of slavery in Egypt. At that time of the Exodus, they were given a promised land, a rule of law, and a set of practices and traditions to follow. But that covenant was broken when the nation went astray and turned their backs on God.

So now God offers a new covenant, and this one is different. In the future, God promises that all will be restored and says to the people "But this is the covenant that I will make with the

house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: 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." This new covenant is not bound by land, by geography. This current tragedy is not the end for the people of Israel. Even in the face of the destruction of Jerusalem and the occupation by the Babylonian army, God is not abandoning God's people. And God is promising them a future.

Jeremiah does more than just speak words of hope and consolation. He acts on those words. In this purchase of seemingly worthless land, he is showing a tangible display of hope. Of course even Jeremiah is a tad dubious. He does what is asked of him, making the purchase in front of witnesses and all who are in the palace court, and they must have thought him a bit daft. But after this act of faith, away from the others, Jeremiah questions God. Like all of us, he doesn't understand why God told him to do it. And then God responds, "Is anything too hard for me?" God assures Jeremiah that one day, the people will come home.

I like that Jeremiah has his doubts. It makes him seem more real. And it makes me respect him even more. That even in light of his doubt, he had no hesitation. He did what God wanted him to do. He had the faith that God must know what God was doing, and then after the fact, he shared his doubts and concerns with God. Jeremiah was willing to be completely transparent before God.

Now just as it was hard for Jeremiah to fully understand God's message, it was probably even more difficult for the people who were hearing and witnessing it. With the Babylonians outside the gate, their fate was sealed, and in the moment it is hard to see beyond the tragedy. But even in the midst of darkness, there is still light. In the middle of disaster, God is there, as is the promise for the future. But we will not all see that future. Sometimes we will reap the promises of God, and other times, like Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, we must simply keep that hope and spirit alive, and bravely live each day as if it were our last.

Take for instance Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. King knew that his dream for equality among the races would not be realized in his lifetime. He recognized that the struggle of black Americans had been going on for centuries, since the first people arrived in this country on slave ships. And even since the Civil War, it had taken many years to see the Civil Rights Act signed into law. It has been a long and difficult struggle. King and many like him have struggled in this fight for equality. They knew that it probably would not be realized in their lifetimes, but they kept the hope and spirit alive. They believed in the promise of God for the future.

For us the good news is this. No matter where we are in our lives, God is with us. In the face of tragedy or disaster, the darkness may seem to be overwhelming and unending. But that is

not the end of the story. The darkness cannot extinguish the light of Jesus Christ. Our world is full of struggle and hardship. Hatred and violence greet us every day when we turn on the news. Even in our personal lives, we come face to face with difficulties. Health concerns, worries about relationships, anxiety over finances. Just getting out of bed each day can be a struggle.

Sometimes the future seems bleak, the struggle, endless. Sometimes we find that the Babylonians are standing at the gate and the future doesn't look so good. But our faith is in Jesus Christ. He is the fulfillment of God's promise to the people of Israel and Judah, and is the promise for the world. Our circumstance may be grim, but we stand bravely and face each day, knowing that Christ stands with us and a bright future awaits.

That hope in the promise for a good future informs how we live in the present, what we do on a daily basis. Our faith compels us to buy that parcel of land, even when it's occupied by enemy soldiers. We live out our faith in real, tangible ways, proclaiming by our words and our deeds that we trust in the one who gave us the promise. We proclaim to the world that the One who gave that promise is faithful and true.