

September 25

A Field in Anathoth

Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15

This story from the life of Jeremiah has always given me such hope. Let me tell you why. Jerusalem was besieged. It looked like the end of everything that was important to Jeremiah and to the people of Israel. Right then, when despair is at its highest because the future looks so bleak, God asks Jeremiah to take his hard earned money and buy a field in Anathoth. Anathoth was on the far side of the besieging army. He had no idea in what shape the land might be. He likely would never get to Anathoth again! It seems, at first glance, that he was throwing his money away. Money might be used to purchase a bit of food if the siege continued. Money could be useful in bribing the opposing soldiers when they breached the walls. Everyone was looking for money. That is why the individual wanted to sell his land. Jeremiah was a prophet that often shared God's word through specific actions. Earlier he had wandered around Jerusalem with an ox yoke on his shoulders. By his actions he was saying that God was using King Nebuchadnezzar of the Babylonians, whose soldiers were outside the wall, to bring judgment against the people. He wanted them to know that soon all would be under his yoke. Now he publicly buys this field as a sign. He wanted these besieged people to know God was with them. He wanted them to know that there was hope for the future. All around they saw signs of despair and of endings and he wanted them to look further into the future and see hope. So this story asks me, "Where do I need to believe and invest in the future?"

When I begin to ask this question I also come to realize that the current darkness I am experiencing is not my ultimate reality. It sure feels that way at the moment but stories like this remind me that God is in the midst of these struggles and there is the possibility of a hope-filled future. I recently had one of those times where it seemed as if everything was going wrong. People were angry; committees were experiencing levels of dysfunction that was alarming; responsibilities related to the general church were demanding, family issues were pressing, and so on. At the moment it felt like I could not keep my head above water. I would work on one thing and get further behind in three

others. I would handle personal or relational issues with one person and find out two others were more upset than ever because they felt ignored. Have you ever had one of those times? It was overwhelming and I began to think that this was how my life was going to be forever. I was stuck. Have you ever been there?

Looking back I can see the positive things that came out of those trying times. What had looked like dysfunction was actually a creative spirit moving a couple of committees in new directions. The general church work was accomplished, and concerns within my family calmed down as time moved on. I can see how God was with me.

Now I realize that what I am expressing is minor to some of the dark times we deal with such as: a major illness in our lives or one we love, the death of a family member, or major financial setbacks. These feel like there is no hope, no possibility of things being better. But the story of Jeremiah buying a field is a reminder that God is with us, even in the darkest of times, and with faith we will get through it.

The second thing this story reminds me is that if there is going to be a brighter future I am going to have to invest, believe, and risk, to make it happen. It is easier to stay stuck or give into despair than try to move forward. To do so seems so overwhelming. Jeremiah probably wanted to keep his money but he bought the field because he was willing to risk all to help people see that God was with them and that there would be a better future to come.

I think of people I have seen that have chosen to invest in the future. I recall a man who was laid off from work and saw it as an opportunity to go back to school. Or the person who was diagnosed with terminal cancer and used the time she had left to write her family's stories and do as much genealogy for future generations as she could. Or the woman whose husband divorced her after 30 plus years of marriage who decided she could move forward or become bitter. As she went back to work she looked each day for opportunities to be supportive of her co-workers. She believed that seeing that she could do good things would counteract all the negative feelings the divorce had brought to her.

As you see, in some cases the investment in the future was not going to change the reality. The woman with cancer died but she left a great legacy to her family. But in other cases it made all the difference. The man who went back to school got a job that was the most fulfilling ever. The woman at work, because of her positive attitudes, soon was advancing in her career and finding it very rewarding. Without the risk-taking the family would not have had their history, the man would have sat around drawing unemployment and then likely ended up finding a dead end job, and the woman would most likely have become bitter and with that attitude not engendered the trust of coworkers that led to her promotions.

Jeremiah wanted the people to understand that God's promise is true. God had told the people that God would be with them always. Believing the promise helped them remain faithful even in a foreign land. They looked forward with anticipation for that time when they would return home, which they did. And later, they believed God would send a Messiah. Living with hope into the future is claiming God's promises and living as if they are true.

This is why we can proclaim life in the face of death. Hope in the future even in the midst of hopeless times. We believe God is with us and so will help us create something new.

Living with this positive attitude is such a witness. I have a friend in ministry who is now blind and almost deaf. He deals with a rare disease that is passed down through his family. He had watched his father and grandfather go through this same journey. In the end it left them unable to hear or see. They spent their last days sitting in a chair. As soon as his hearing began to go he decided that he would invest in his future. He has used technology to help him hear and see as long as he can. He has learned to communicate with a type of hand signage so he can still be in contact with people. He goes to church every week. When someone asked him why since he cannot see or hear anything there, his response is, "I go to share with people that worshipping together is important." His rock of support was his wife. She was diagnosed with cancer and died in just a few months. He was even more alone as his children and grandchildren had not mastered that special hand language. The Sunday after his wife's death came and his

daughter found him up early getting dressed for church. He wrote, "Even more important." This is a person who buys a field in Anathoth.

We don't know if Jeremiah ever sees Anathoth again. We do know Jerusalem falls, the people go into exile, but ultimately they do return and the fields of Anathoth are fertile once more. This is what God wants of us to believe as well. There is hope and a future.