

The Field at Anathoth

I want to begin this morning with a word of thanks to someone who is normally here among us but is not this morning. In a moment, I'll start the sermon proper with a look at the context of our passage this morning and how it might have been understood by its original audience. That should come as no surprise to any of you as it's the pattern that my sermons often take. What may surprise you is that the primary source for that part of my sermon is the section of the Word Biblical Commentary on Jeremiah written by Dr. Pamela J. Scalise. Our friend Pam is an essentially modest person. She doesn't toot her own horn very often, if at all. So while we are well acquainted with her musical gifts at the piano and the depth and warmth of her friendship, it's easy for us to forget that she's an acclaimed Old Testament scholar. The editors of the Word Biblical Commentary, for example, refer in their introductory text to her "highly respected scholarship," to her "perceptive" and "revealing" work on difficult passages, and on her ability to "shine unexpected light on knotty textual problems." Of Dr. Scalise's work on another major commentary, the New International Biblical Commentary second volume on the Minor Prophets, one reviewer cites her "wisdom and interpretive modesty" and says that she and her writing partner "write lucidly, with contemporary readers of the Bible in mind, while consistently, expertly, guiding us through the complex world of the text and its details." It's probably good that Pam's not here to hear me say these things; I think she'd be embarrassed to be singled out. But I also think it's good for us to remember that she is one of the treasures of our congregation.

Now to the context and meaning of this story of Jeremiah, which has been dear to me for many years – I was surprised a few weeks ago to discover that I've never preached from it. It's important, first of all, to remember that this is the story of a life and a nation in crisis. Things are very, very bad for the little Kingdom of Judah. Although neither he nor anyone else knows it at the time, King Zedekiah is the last king of Judah. Although the House of David will produce a few more men who are allowed to govern Judah by their Babylonian or Persian overlords, such as Zerubbabel, whom I mentioned last week, none will ever again be known as "king." Unless, of course, you count the distant descendent of Zerubbabel born into poverty and known as Jesus of Nazareth.

As our story opens, Zedekiah's unsuccessful rebellion against Babylon has led to the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem. Less than a year later, on the Ninth of Av, the Babylonians will break through the walls of Jerusalem and burn Solomon's Temple to the ground. It is a tragedy still remembered by some observant Jews for whom Tisha b' Av (the Ninth of Av) is an annual day of fasting occurring in July or August of our calendar. A long list of tragedies which occurred on that day of the Jewish Calendar or in that week are remembered: the negative report of the spies sent to Canaan by Moses which prevented the Children of Israel from entering the Promised Land; the destruction of the First Temple by the Babylonians and, many years later, the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans; the commencement of the First Crusade; the expulsions of Jews from England, France, and Spain; the beginning of World War I; the approval by the Nazi government of the "Final Solution;" the clearing of the Warsaw Ghetto; and several more. These events are still to come, of course, at the time of Jeremiah but their foreshadowing haunts this passage for our Jewish brothers and sisters and all students of the history of the children of Jacob.

Not only is Jerusalem a city besieged but Jeremiah is a prophet besieged within the city. He had consistently warned against Zedekiah's adventuring. Now, as his unheeded warnings have come

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to pass, he has been confined to the courtyard within the headquarters of Zedekiah's army as what we might call "an enemy sympathizer," considered guilty, because of his clear-eyed warnings, of sedition. In fact, not only is Jeremiah under official suspicion, he has very few friends he can count on. Earlier in the Book of Jeremiah, we read that even his own relatives in the town of Anathoth have plotted against his life. As Dr. Scalise writes, "Jeremiah's prophetic ministry had cut him off from normal family activities and relationships in order to illustrate the suffering in store for the people of Judah and Jerusalem." The subject of our story is a man imprisoned and isolated in the midst of an isolated, besieged city. It is about as bad a situation as you can imagine.

But for God's people, no situation is without hope. Jeremiah relates that God has sent him a dream – his cousin Hanamel is going to come from Anathoth and ask him to redeem a piece of family property, which is Jeremiah's right as the oldest cousin. No sooner has Jeremiah had this dream, than it comes true. Hanamel does come; it is the beginning of a thaw in the broken family relationship. Despite the fact that Anathoth, like Jerusalem, is in occupied territory and will not be able to be farmed for some time to come; despite his own status as a prisoner, in danger of execution for treason; despite all these things, Jeremiah somehow comes up with nearly 200 grams of silver (that's seven ounces of silver, or nearly half a pound) and redeems his cousin's land from Hanamel's creditors.

It's a highly symbolic gesture. Quoting again from Dr. Scalise's commentary, "When Jeremiah redeems the field, he is not just doing a favor for his cousin; he is taking possession of a piece of Israel's inheritance from the LORD." Despite being accused of negativity and treason, Jeremiah shows that he has faith in the future of God's promise, if not in this particular king. Likewise symbolic is what Jeremiah tells his friend Baruch to do with the deed. After it has been prepared in the traditional way with wax sealings and an "open copy," Jeremiah has Baruch seal both copies of the deed into "an earthenware jar, in order that they may last for a long time."

This may seem to us a homey, old-fashioned manner of saving something important, something along the lines of burying a Mason jar full of cash or stuffing bonds into a mattress. Those of you who are fans of "The Lord of the Rings" may be put in mind of Gandalf sealing the Ring of Power into an envelope and telling Frodo to "Keep it secret - Keep it safe" only to have Frodo bury it under some old cloaks in a chest. But in reality, this was the ancient Near East's equivalent of a bank safe deposit box. Remember instead the traveling exhibit of the Dead Sea Scrolls which many of us went to see at the Pacific Science Center some years ago. In the arid climate of Judah, to seal something into a clay jar and bury it was to preserve it for a long, long time. No matter what may happen to Jerusalem, to King Zedekiah, even to himself, Jeremiah wants that deed preserved for posterity.

Ultimately, Jeremiah knew, God was faithful to God's promise to the descendants of Jacob. They would again inhabit their Promised Land. Houses and fields and vineyards would again be their concern. No vineyard is mentioned in the purchase Jeremiah made in Anathoth but he mentions it here as a part of the word from the Lord because vineyards have always been understood to be a part of God's blessing to humankind. Jeremiah looks to the future of Judah and sees shalom: peace, wholeness, blessing.

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That future, however, will not be without struggle. Human life in this realm never is. We must remember when we hear the promise “Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land,” that in the perfect will of God, property was not for sale. The land of Israel had been given by God to the Twelve Tribes as a gift and divided by God’s command among the families. To have to sell land meant that one had fallen deeply into debt and had no other recourse. And that land, under Torah, had to be returned to the family that had sold it on the Year of Jubilee. But, as Dr. Scalise points out, the exiled Jews would have to redeem land on their return, perhaps buying their own family’s historic land from those who had inhabited it during the exile. “Like Abraham,” she writes, “some returning exiles would have to buy their first piece of the promised land.” Through Jeremiah, God promises a healthy future but God does not promise that it will simply come to the people. It must be worked for.

I, for one, do not know what it feels like to be imprisoned, as Jeremiah was, or to live in a city which is literally under siege, as Jerusalem was. But I certainly understand what it is like in 21st century Lynnwood to feel besieged. I feel besieged this weekend as I open the morning paper and read of yet another mass shooting in our region, with five people dead in a mall in sleepy Burlington, just up the interstate. I feel besieged as I log on to Facebook, hoping for a little fun interaction with far-flung family and friends, only to find more news of black men gunned down in suspect circumstances by those sworn to serve and protect them. I feel besieged as I see hateful remarks made about those who are trying to address the deep problems of our nation, as men and women struggling to reconcile the promise of our nation with their own reality as people of color are reviled and threatened in violent, odious ways by those who live lives of relative privilege. I don’t think it’s possible to be an aware, thinking citizen of the United States and not feel besieged these days. I don’t think it’s possible to be a serious follower of a brown-skinned, Semitic man from the an impoverished village in the Middle East, who was a refugee as a child and the victim of corrupt justice, torture, and execution as an adult and not feel besieged today as we see brothers and sisters in the family of humankind likewise suffering poverty, homelessness, refugee status, and violence. I cannot close my eyes to what is going on, to what is being done to fellow Christians, fellow human beings, because of the color of their skin, or their political or religious affiliations, or because they have the courage of their convictions to speak out. I am under siege. My community is under siege. My nation is under siege.

But, like Jeremiah, I hold on to the promises of God and I hope you do, too. In so many ways, we have seen those promises play out. Here, on land purchased for us that was formerly home to an orchard and a farm and before that, perhaps, home to another group of people now displaced, we have been granted the opportunity to create a place of shalom. People gather here in search of peace and wholeness for they have heard that this is a place of promise. Some of them gather officially at set times on set days. We are hosts to other spiritual seekers like ourselves. Some call on the God of Abraham, just as we do, albeit in a different language. Some follow a different path but come together to celebrate the similarities of all paths. We are also hosts to those looking for peace of mind and wellness to counteract the ravages of addiction. Our friends in the recovery community, be it AA, NA, or AlAnon, have meetings here every evening and on Saturday morning. For those dealing with different struggles, Puget Sound Christian Clinic continues to hold counseling hours here until their new facility is ready. And, of course, we are now hosts to families looking for a place to begin the education of their little ones. The second year of having Playful Learning Co-op Preschool in our building is underway and the laughter of

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children rings through our building during weekdays. Sometimes I wish it was a little quieter but, you know, it's a nice problem to have.

We provide a place of shalom here on our blessed grounds for some other folks, too – the gardeners who so carefully nurture their flowers and vegetables on land we share with Shepherd's Garden. For all the headaches suffered by our garden coordinators over the years, we have given much more in the way of peace, satisfaction, and even improved nutrition to so many people over the years, just by allowing them to dig in our dirt! And, although I know it worries some of you, we have unofficial tenants here at night, too; people who just need a safe, quiet place to pitch a tent or roll under a tarp or park their truck. I'm grateful that they associate Good Shepherd Baptist Church with the only scrap of shalom they may have in their day. In ways we may have never expected, we continue to spread Jesus' message of love among those he called "the least of these."

And, of course, God has granted us this place as a place of shalom for our congregation, too. Take a moment to look around. Go ahead, turn around and look behind you and on either side. As you do, look at the friends that you have made over the days, months, or years that you have been here. Some of you have relationships that stretch across the 55 years of this church or even longer. Some of you have met in the last year. As you look around, think about those who used to fill these pews who are no longer among us. Some have passed away; some have moved away; some just aren't here right now. Think of the ways your lives have been blessed. Think of the ways your lives will continue to be blessed by those who are here now. God has granted us this little piece of land as a mighty place of shalom for ourselves, for our children, for our friends, for people we may never meet. But it is God's place for us. In a world in which we feel besieged, this is God's place of promise.

My sisters and my brothers, the pain Jeremiah experienced as a lonely servant of God is still among us but, even more importantly, the promise of God to which Jeremiah pointed is still among us as well. We see here, today, and across the history of this people called Good Shepherd Baptist Church, the promise of God for shalom in action. We see how it comes in little ways, in stillness, in flowers, in children. And we understand that the Kingdom of God, the Beloved Community, will not be realized in its fullness without struggle, without pain, without work and sacrifice on our parts. We must continue to do our part for the healing of God's world for we are the stewards of God; we are the Body of Christ. But we are not left alone to face the difficulties. God remains with us. We have each other. We have the goodwill of people across our community. We have been blessed. So do not let your hearts be troubled. In this besieged and fearful world, give God the glory, let your hope rest in God, and count your blessings. May God grant us all the courage, hope, and comfort to withstand whatever ills may come. Amen.