

“In God We Trust”

Jeremiah 32: 1-3a, 6-15, Psalm 146

The 26th Sunday after Pentecost/C, September 26, 2010

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In January of 1943, three months before he was arrested and subsequently killed by the Nazis, the Lutheran pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote these words 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.”*¹

Bonhoeffer wrote those words 67 years ago. They remain startlingly and profoundly faithful. He wrote this in response to a dark and tragic moment in human history. Bonhoeffer was jailed and killed because he confronted the evil of Nazi Germany. Even as a pastor, he was willing to sacrifice himself in the struggle for justice and peace.

It may be hard to imagine being thrown in jail for speaking the truth, putting one’s life on the line in the work for peace or prophesying to your own people’s demise. It is hard to imagine that people are still imprisoned for simply taking a wrong turn and ending up on the wrong side of the border. However, in the past year several Americans have been imprisoned in foreign jails and charged erroneously with spying. First there were the two journalists held in North Korea then more recently three American hikers held in an Iranian prison.

If you were to find yourself in a prison cell, alone, waiting presumably for your impending death, with war and social upheaval raging outside the prison walls, what would you do? What words would you speak? What testimony would you give? What would you do to inspire future generations? This is precisely the scenario we find in the portion of Jeremiah’s story we hear this morning.

In 588 B.C.E., during the siege of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, Jeremiah was imprisoned in the royal palace of King Zedekiah of Judah. He had been charged with desertion, treason and insurrection. At some level, the charges had merit. Jeremiah had been forcefully pleading with Israel to turn from their ways. He was not willing to back down or soften his approach. His ministry had been marked by judgment and divine condemnation of social injustices and idolatry. Perhaps the only reasonable action the king could take was to lock Jeremiah up.

While in prison, Jeremiah receives a word from God. It is a strange word given the circumstances. God instructs Jeremiah to purchase a plot of family owned land. According to a law found in Leviticus 25 which prevents the loss of family property, Jeremiah’s cousin, Hanamel, asks the prophet to buy the family field. Jeremiah first

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Enlarged Edition, London: SCM Press, 1971), 14-15

receives this instruction from God, so when Hanamel later approaches him, Jeremiah knows what to do. It seems like a ludicrous request. This is no time to be investing in real estate. It is no time to be investing in the future. War is raging. Terror is threatening. Exile is coming. The future looks bleak for Jeremiah's family and his people.

However, Jeremiah does not hesitate. He knows that kings do not have authority over him. His authority comes from God. It is God who has the final word and that word will not be destruction. God's final word is renewal. God's final word is hope. Jeremiah does not only speak a word of hope, but he embodies this hope by agreeing to purchase this land in a moment when such an act seems ridiculous. Believing in God's promise to make all things new, Jeremiah buys the land; land where houses and vineyards will, yet again, flourish.

Behind prison walls Jeremiah enacted this faithful transaction. Somehow he obtained the money, procured witnesses, signed the deed and had it tucked away in an earthen jar for safe keeping. This was a profound act of trust. He may not live to see his family take possession of this land, however, he believed that one day, peace would be restored and justice would prevail. When the world around you is falling apart, when war is raging and injustice prevails, one wonders how such faith is possible. We witnessed such faith when in Nelson Mandela. He was imprisoned for 26 years for trying to dismantle the apartheid machine so all South Africans might live peacefully as one people. Decade after decade he remained in prison, believing that one day the world would come to understand the indecency of such a system and he would be freed. When he was released he did not seek revenge as one might expect. He became a warrior for justice, peace and especially reconciliation among all South Africans.

The Rev. Thomas Warren says, "The people who have Jeremiah as their prophet, the people who have Jesus as their Savior, the people who have Dietrich Bonhoeffer as their martyr, the people who know that the God of the Bible is the source of their lives, these people do not despair. These people do not live lives in denial... These people live lives of radical hope. A hope, which is not simply some sentimental feeling, but a hope and an orientation which is a commitment to action; an orientation which allows us to see the world differently and to bring that hope-filled vision to life." We are those people. In our baptism, we renew the promise that God makes with God's people; death is never the final word, through Jesus Christ we live lives of radical hope. Hope is always the last word. That is what we proclaim each time we gather at the font to welcome a newly baptized brother or sister. We proclaim that God's last word is hope, it is joy; God's word is a promise of goodness and renewal.

Jeremiah tells us to invest in the future, build up the church, take a radical stand against injustice; do this to promise your children and grandchildren that peace and justice will prevail. Even though the future may be uncertain, even though there are days when it seems as though chaos reigns, God calls all of us to make this profound investment in the future. No matter what happens, the theologian Walter Brueggeman declares, "The world does not culminate on Babylonian terms, because God has post-Babylonian intentions for Judah," for them and for us, "Life begins again, out of chaos!" We trust as Jeremiah did,

that God always has a plan for God's people. Therefore, we invest when it seems foolish and trust in God's wisdom beyond which even we can comprehend.

Investing in the future at this moment may seem like sheer folly. It must have seemed so to Jeremiah as well. There was no reason to believe that life would get better for his people. They had made their bed, and now, despite all attempts to change their destructive ways, they were going to have to lie in it. It is tempting to give into despair. It is tempting to assume that ethnic wars will continue, people will die from preventable diseases and there will never be enough food to feed all the hungry people. Both Jeremiah and the psalmist remind us that faithful people do not succumb to such assumptions. Indeed, the psalmist declares that God has a plan to transform the world. When we are willing, God uses us to carry out this plan. God executes justice for the oppressed and gives food to the hungry. God opens the eyes of the blind, lifts those up that are bowed down and sets the captives free. Indeed, God watches over the strangers, upholds widows and orphans, but the ways of the wicked God will bring to ruin, proclaims the psalmist. God can not do these things alone. God needs us.

When Dietrich Bonhoeffer was in prison, he wrote a letter 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."² His loving words were a profound testament to hope. Unfortunately, he never got a chance to make them real with his beloved. There are many reasons for us to despair. However, Jeremiah's simple economic transaction changes everything. When the world is falling apart, God says stake your claim in the future. Do something that tells the world that God is in charge and despair will not prevail.

Jeremiah did not just declare that God would be faithful; he made sure of it by holding claim to a piece of the future. We are invited to do the same. This new facility is more than a building. It is an investment in the future. It is a proclamation to the world that God's kin-dom has not yet arrived. There is still more light and wisdom to be received. Indeed, God is still speaking...and acting...and loving...and transforming...and prophesying. We are God's faithful people, striving to live lives of radical hope. May it be so! Amen

Source:

The Rev. Thomas Warren, UCC, "When Battered and Beseiged...Buy," Day One, September 26, 2010.

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer and M. von Wedemeyer, *Love Letters from Cell 92, 1943-45* (ed. Ruth-Alice von Bismarck and U. Kabitz; London; Harper Collins, 1994) 48-49