



## **Sermons from Northwood United Church**

**“The Worst Real Estate Deal Ever!”**

**Jeremiah 32:1-3(a), 6-15**

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May the words of my mouth, the meditations of our hearts, and the actions of our lives be acceptable in your sight O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

The prophet Jeremiah is about to engage in history's worst real estate deal. No real estate agent of any century would touch this one with a ten foot pole. Now you need to understand the background. We are at the very end of the life of the country of Judah. Since the accession of David to the throne of Israel in 1000 B.C.E., through the division of the kingdoms, Israel and Judah, in 922 B.C.E., to the destruction of northern Israel in 722 B.C.E., Judah has existed for over 400 years. Now the country's future is sealed. Nebuchadnezzar, king and general of the armies of Babylon, is camped out around the city of Jerusalem. The date is 587/586 B.C.E. Jeremiah is confined in a royal prison in the palace of Judah's final king, Zedekiah. Because of his message of gloom and doom, Jeremiah has spent more than a few days of his prophetic life confined by some angry person or another.

This time though, its serious. He has been accused of treason for predicting the king's overthrow, and he is facing the death penalty. What is his response? A new prophesy. "God spoke to me: 'Hanamel, son of your uncle Shallum will come to you and say, 'Buy my field at Anathoth, because the right of purchase is yours'" (Jeremiah 32:6-7). What?! Jeremiah faces a sentence of death, chained in a royal prison, and is told by God to transact a real estate deal? To buy land just outside of Jerusalem just before it is going to be run over by the neighboring army? This is insanity! That'd be like sinking all your RRSPs in Blackberry stock this week. Would you do that? It would be like buying a business in Baghdad on the eve of the American invasion! Would you do that? It would be like buying a piece of water front property in New Orleans with hurricane Katrina on its way. Would you do that? No! It would be utterly ridiculous. But that is what Jeremiah does even though he knows the Babylonians are on their way, in fact they are camped on the very property he is purchasing. People must have thought him a fool. After all, why would anyone but a fool purchase land when they are awaiting their own execution or an invasion of the city, for that matter!

But Jeremiah is no fool. In fact this has nothing to do with making a good or poor deal over land. This has everything to do with a prophet's trust in a God who is bigger than the present impending disaster, and believing in a nation more deeply connected to the land than even the present king knew. He is not purchasing land because it's a good or wise investment. He is doing it because of the flame of hope that will not go out in him, even if the Babylonians run them into the ground. "For thus says the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel: 'Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land,' " (Jeremiah 32:15).

With the purchase of this field in Anathoth, the home of his youth, Jeremiah has announced more clearly than any other act could have announced that God is not through with Judah and God's people just yet. There is a future for God's people, though at the moment all the evidence points to the contrary.

He knew that God would not abandon them. Even though God would not fix the situation and make the Babylonians go away. And Jeremiah wanted a quick fix like everyone else. In last week's reading, we heard Jeremiah's calling out to God for a balm to cure his

people so that they would not have to go through this pain. But somehow Jeremiah knew that regardless of the situation, God would be faithful, somehow. Jeremiah had hope.

Hope is that intangible thing that lives within us and keeps our dreams alive even when they should be long gone. Hope is that thing that lives inside all the heroes we have ever admired, the Nelson Mandelas and Mother Therasas of this world. Hope is that necessary thing that makes it possible for us to take risks in life because something in us is telling us that if we give ourselves to the right kinds of things, we will be alright. Hope is that thing that allows the cancer patient to make it to the next birthday, the next family gathering, the next anniversary, the wedding, the child's birth even though all the evidence would call it impossible. Hope, resilience, courage, they are the sacred intangibles in life, that defy the news, defy the odds, defy logic and make it possible for us to risk something big for the sake of something deep, intangible and beautiful.

I have been enchanted by the Northwood Reads book club book this month, "The unlikely pilgrimage of Harold Fry". It is the story of a dotty old guy with a crazy idea motivated by love. He is a 65 year old brewery worker who has never done anything unusual in his life. Followed the safe, narrow, straight and rather uninteresting path. He has lived in the same corner of Devon his whole life. He married young and has stayed faithful to his wife for 45 years, even though for the majority of those years his marriage was as dry and colorless as dust. Then one day a letter arrives from a woman he used to work with, who clearly had awakened in him something that had color and energy. He has not seen her in 20 years. The letter states that she is in a hospice in North-eastern Scotland, has cancer and is in her final stages. He is flooded with sadness at the end of a life he would have loved to participate in more fully. He calls the hospice where she is staying and impulsively, like he is being guided by a part of himself that has never seen the light of day, says he will walk to her from southwest of London to north-eastern Scotland. He says to the nurse, "Tell Queenie Harold Fry is on his way. All she has to do is wait. Because I am going to save her, you see. I will keep walking and she must keep living. As long as I walk, she must live. Please let her, this time I won't let her down."

He sets off, and the book is a quaint English travelogue of Harold walking and the characters he meets, his doubts and fears, and thoughts about life and its meaning and purpose. Early on he is sitting in a bed and breakfast with sore feet and aching old legs, having breakfast and feeling utterly foolish about this crazy idea. He is scared to tell anyone for fear of appearing foolish, but somehow the word got out at the breakfast table, and he felt naked and foolish and silly. "Harold was an old man. Not a walker, let alone a pilgrim. Who was he hoping to fool? He had spent his adult life sitting in confined spaces. His skin stretched like a million tessellations over tendons and bones. He thought of all the miles between himself and Queenie and (his wife) Maureen's reminder that the farthest he had ever walked was to the car. He thought too of the (man in) the Hawaiian shirt laughing and the businessman's skepticism. They were right... He should pay his bill and take the bus home." He would slink home, forget this whole strange episode. Forget the silly little flame burning in his heart, and resume his ordinary, predictable life...

Harold is standing in the lobby of the bed and breakfast in a pool of self-doubt, "...when the door of the breakfast lounge burst open. The waitress emerged followed by the two gray ladies and the businessman. "We were worried you had left," said the waitress, smoothing her red hair and slightly out of breath. "We wanted to say bon voyage," piped up the plump lady. "I do hope you make it," said her tall friend. The businessman pressed his card into Harold's palm. "If you make it as far as Hexham, you should look me up."

They believed in him. (To his amazement, they had understood. They had looked passed the craziness on the outside of his journey and seen the rightness on the inside of it) "They had looked at him in his yachting shoes and listened to what he said, and they had made a decision in

their hearts and minds to ignore the evidence and to imagine something bigger, something infinitely more beautiful than the obvious.”

That is what hope is made of, looking beyond the obvious outside of a thing, an idea, a longing, and seeing the bigger, infinitely more beautiful thing at its core, and choosing to believe in and invest in that bigger, more beautiful thing. God lives in that bigger, infinitely more beautiful things to which we are called to give our hearts. For Jeremiah it was a field in a war zone. What is it for you? Amen