I. Read Jeremiah 32: 1-15

II. Consider some Commentary

This story of Jeremiah buying the field at Anathoth has got to be one of the most audacious/outlandish stories of hope in all scripture. Even at first glance, the situation is dire. The text tells us that this is the tenth year of Zedekiah of Judah which was the eighteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar had made Zedekiah king ten years earlier, when he ordered King Jehoiachin, the legitimate Davidic heir, to accompany the first deportation of Judeans taken into exile in Babylon. So, we join Jeremiah ten years into the exile among those "left behind" in a severely depleted Jerusalem. Zedekiah has thrown Jeremiah into prison for committing treason and insurrection – for prophesying that Zedekiah would himself fall victim to Babylon. The prediction does not seem all that far-fetched, given that the Babylonian army is at that very moment besieging the city, and is in fact camped on the very piece of land available for Jeremiah’s purchase. Imprisoned by a puppet king in a besieged city, Jeremiah is given the option to purchase a piece of land currently occupied by the Babylonians. At full price. What a deal.

But the significance of this moment goes well beyond the immediate circumstances. Jeremiah’s choice comes at a point in Judean history that constitutes the rock bottom of a narrative that has been cascading for over 600 years. Way back when God’s people first entered this Promised Land, both Moses and Joshua made clear that their success was contingent on remembering who they are and why they are: They are the Chosen of God and the Servant of God. Ten Commandments point to two basic principles: 1) Worship God Alone, 2) Take care of each other.

After the successful reigns of David and Solomon, the United Kingdom divided. The bulk of the tribes grouped together to form the Northern Kingdom of Israel. The smaller southern Kingdom of Judah centered itself on David’s city of Jerusalem and worship in the temple there. The unfolding story of the Divided Kingdom is basically the story of how the people forgot their core identity, chose and chased after other gods, and lost their way.

The more powerful Israel went first. They trusted in their wealth and prosperity seeing it as a sign of God’s favor. They worshiped not God, but their own accomplishments. They not only neglected the poor and the needy, but heaped abuse upon them. As prophesied, they fell hard, defeated by the powerful Assyrian army and scattered to the four winds.

Tiny Judah surprisingly learned no less from the destruction of Israel, and they charted their own course for destruction. Fearing the principalities and powers now breathing down their own neck, Judah sought military alliance with Egypt, trying to pit a super power against another super
power to save themselves. And they took confidence in their possession of the Temple in Jerusalem and the proper worship they conducted there. Obviously, Israel had taken the wrong position on proper worship and that is why they went under. Jeremiah’s clear warnings aside, Judah trusted in their military alliances and their right worship. Instead of worshipping God alone, they worshipped themselves and their own perceived righteousness.

So, back to Jeremiah in Jerusalem. As we see from the fates of King Jehoiachin and King Zedekiah, Nebuchadnezzar had an ingenious deportation program that allowed him to keep peace at home and in the far territories. He deliberately took the most essential citizens first – the leaders, the craftsmen, the builders, the bankers, the doctors, the priests – and left those less able behind. Nebuchadnezzar conducted a series of deportations and with each, repeated the same formula. So we find Jeremiah left behind with the losers among the losers. He himself has prophesied that God’s promise rests among the exiled – that the Remnant to return, foretold by Isaiah, would come from Babylon. Those left behind, clinging to a crumbled temple in a devastated land, are not those who hold God’s blessing.

So that is the situation when our story opens.

The offer from Jeremiah’s cousin to buy the field at Anathoth is completely absurd on two levels. The first we have already discussed – on a strictly practical level, purchasing occupied territory on the outskirts of a soon-to-be-occupied city is nuts. It seems even crazier from a faith perspective. Jeremiah is among the losers of the losers, imprisoned by the loser king. The promise is gone from this place. The prophet Ezekiel sees clearly through a vision that the glory of the Lord, the presence of the God of Israel, has left the temple – this place is now forsaken and the promise rests among the Exiles in Babylon. Jeremiah himself will not see that promise. Historians tell us that he left the city with refugees fleeing its destruction and most likely died among them in Egypt.

But this is not an offer and story about good common sense, or sound investments, or opportunities for personal gain. It’s a story about leadership and responsibility in the context of faith and hope and love. God says, *Buy [the] field that is at Anathoth in the land of Benjamin… for [Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land. Jeremiah believes him. Jeremiah acts. God says, buy the land and Jeremiah puts cash on the barrel head. He swallows hard and steps out into the abyss: no net, no security, no false hopes of an 11th hour save, of an oasis just over the horizon. Jeremiah literally puts his money where his mouth is in one audacious act that screams confidence that all God has promised, all Jeremiah has prophesied, is true and will be true to the glory of God. No matter that the most powerful army in the world is camped on this land. No matter that Jeremiah will never live to see the promise realized. No matter that there is not one scrap of evidence that God’s people will ever turn back to God. Somebody has got to go first. Jeremiah says, “Why not? Give me the paper! I’ll sign on the dotted line! I AM the Chosen of God and the Servant of God and I WILL follow God blindly and boldly into the great unknown!*

*2018 Annual Conference Minutes, “Vitality and Viability,” 258-260*
III. Questions for Reflection

- Are there ways that our world today resonates with the world of Jeremiah?
  - Like the people of Israel do we feel pressure to worship idols instead of God?
  - What priorities threaten to occupy our hearts and block our service to God and to one another? What “safety nets” might ultimately stand between us and God’s love?
  - Like the people of Judah, are we tempted to pride ourselves on our own righteousness and to turn our backs on God’s grace? How do you see this at work in our world? In our church? Do you see ways we obsess about winning, seeking victory over our rivals? Ways we monitor the speck in our neighbor’s eye rather than addressing the log that obstructs our own vision? How? In what contexts?

- What might be our “Anathoth moments?” – our opportunities to step out in faith, to act in the world with reckless abandon and trust in God?
  - In a world of anxiety and fear, how do we live out our trust and hope in God’s providence?
  - In a world of anger and hostility, how do we live out our commitment to worship God alone and to take care of each other?
  - In a church addressing its own forms of anxiety and hostility, what types of tired logic keep us locked in unhealthy patterns? What are audacious ways we might step out in new directions, proclaiming our faith that God is at work in our church?

Note: This study builds on work that contributed to my Annual Conference sermon, preached Wednesday evening, June 28, 2017.