

The lesson from Jeremiah is a departure from the lectionary, and I picked it deliberately for this day. I wanted to tie it to the story from Acts 2 about the Holy Spirit coming into the church – which we celebrate at Pentecost.

I picked this text not knowing that this is the week I would buy a house in Birmingham, and so I have. It is as close to the center of the city as I could afford and find the things I was looking for. And it *does* make the Jeremiah story timely for me.

This is interesting. Jeremiah is in prison for treason; he told King Zedekiah things he didn't want to hear, and Zedekiah had the prophet under house arrest. Jerusalem was under siege by vastly superior Babylonian army. It would only be a short time until Babylon captured Jerusalem and carried its citizens off into captivity. Jeremiah saw this coming – probably *everybody* saw this coming – but sometimes those in power don't respond well to being told the obvious.

Your investment counselor would say in such a situation that it is a good time to have all your assets liquid! So what did Jeremiah do? He bought real estate.

Jeremiah's field was the place where he ought to be. Anathoth, a little village west of Jerusalem, was Jeremiah's familial home, and the field belonged to his relatives. As next-of-kin, he had first right of refusal; he could pay off the mortgage and take ownership. Not out of any hope the disaster would fail to materialize. Jeremiah was the prophet who predicted it. (The King was the one in denial: “The Babylonians will not take the city.” Jeremiah: “Sure they will. I think I'll put a gazebo on the north side of the olive trees. What do you think?”) Jeremiah bought real estate because there is always life on the other side. That is God's answer. He did it with a mundane, ordinary contract. Buying the field and putting his money where his mouth, where his heart was. A dramatic symbol of his belief that out of tragedy, God would send deliverance. Out of troubles, peace. Out of death, resurrection. Because that is what God does.

William Leety had this paraphrase of Jeremiah in an issue of Presbyterian Outlook

The word that comes to Jeremiah from the Lord
in July of 1945 in the reign of Hirohito in Japan:
buy a field in Hiroshima and a house in Nagasaki.
Houses and fields shall again be bought in this land.

The word that comes to Jeremiah from the Lord
in the years of Pol Pot in Cambodia:
buy a rice paddy in the killing fields,
Houses and fields and vineyards
shall again be bought in this land.

The word that comes to Jeremiah from the Lord
in the first year of President Bush of the United States of America:
buy an empty block in the South Bronx

**and buy a crack house in East L.A.
Houses shall again be bought in this land
and parks created and schools built;
and people shall flock to the neighborhoods
because of the learning in the schools
and the quality of common life.**

**Buy an old family farm in Appalachia
and buy a house along the fault line in the San Fernando Valley
and buy a factory beside a river in a Rust Belt City.
Invest in acreage that's been clear cut
or a landfill, or a toxic waste dump;
spend yourself on neighborhoods with the highest crime rates;
buy a hotel in Sarajevo and a farm in Rwanda.
Buy a sawmill that mills only crosses.
Accept an invitation to a supper where all you're promised
is a crust of a loaf or a tablespoon of wine.**

**It'll take a long time, but
'Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be . . .'
Bread is down payment on house and field,
and wine mortgage on vineyard.
And the One who commands is fulfillment
of all hope for the world and in the world.**

Buy a field in Anathoth, God said, because "houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land." And in doing so, Jeremiah made a down-payment on the future. An investment in hope. Paul Lehmann said, "The future shapes the present out of the past."

Here is my point. When First Presbyterian Church was established on this corner in 1872, the very first church in the city of Birmingham, there was energy, excitement and great dreams. Birmingham was the "Magic City" – quickly growing and full of promise. Promises that were fulfilled!

But there were other times. Ninety years later, a prophet named Ed Ramage (then pastor) saw the changes coming in the land, and along with a courageous Session ranged this congregation on the side of truth and justice. And First Birmingham was integrated. And stayed right here on this corner, when nearly half the membership went elsewhere. Buy a field in Anathoth, God said, because "houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land."

There were times coming which saw the city center decay, saw the end of the steel mills' heyday, times when other congregations said, "Why doesn't First Presbyterian come and join with us. Leave the center of the city." But this congregation stayed right here on this corner. "Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land."

And this congregation did ministry from here, and tilled this field, and planted ministries of urban justice in Birmingham. And now the city is reviving. Downtown Birmingham is coming alive. The whole region is coming alive.

And some in the Presbytery have said to *me*, coming in here new from a far part of the country – “You all are in a great location, you know?” “Well, yeah. We know. We’ve been here all along.”

There have been people who have invested heavily over the years in the life of this congregation – emotionally, financially, physically, spiritually. And on a day when Memorial Day weekend and Pentecost Sunday converge, we celebrate those saints gone before us.

We’ll celebrate two day over this luncheon – Dolly Porter, who is one of those gone before us, and Will Holmes, who is still here and walking with us! The church has received a substantial gift from Bill and Weesa Matthews (who don’t like to be singled out and given attention, I know, but I need the example of their gift to make this point), in memory of Dolly and in honor of Will. That doesn’t mean we can all sit back and think things are taken care of. In fact, we’ve been running deficit budgets in recent years, and what this gift will do – if we are very smart and very careful – is keep us alive and functioning and able to balance a budget, WHILE, this set of factors comes together which will make this place a presence to contend with in Birmingham!

The corner has been turned, friends. Membership has been increasing, ministry is vital, the laity are deeply involved in this church: Drew is working with those imagining creative mission opportunities, and Michelle has the next generation already on the way.

It may seem in some places in the denomination like the Babylonians are at the gates. My friend Paul Hooker, an Executive Presbyter in Florida, preached on this text to the General Assembly Council, because it kind of looked to them like the Babylonians were at the gates. But I think the Babylonians were at the gates years ago, for First Birmingham. And we have lived through that, trusted the way of Jesus Christ when we were fed at his table, and that long ago real estate deal in Anathoth is starting to pay off. “Houses, fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.”

We are today kicking off the real work of the First Presbyterian Birmingham Foundation. We have already had others join the Matthews in buying this field, on this corner, in this city. It is an investment in the future. It is a down-payment on the church that is not yet, but ought to be – the church that isn’t yet but *will* be. It *will* be because through Jesus Christ, God has the final word!

Historian Edward Gibbon tells this story : In 211 BC, the middle of the Second Punic War, the brilliant General Hannibal of Carthage carefully led his forces on elephants across the Alps, and laid siege to Rome, intending to destroy the city. The Romans panicked when they learned that Hannibal had overwhelmed the city’s defenses and was camped on the plains just outside the city walls. With battle at hand, the Roman Senate met to consider whether to surrender Rome to avoid bloodbath and death. As the story goes, in the midst of the discussion, one senator – a man named Cincinnatus – arose to express his desire to buy a plot of land. Not just any plot, however, but a particular piece of land he wanted: Cincinnatus wanted to buy, at full market value, the very spot on which Hannibal had that night encamped his army.

Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.

So says the prophet; so says the prophet’s God.

Love Jesus. Love one another. Love the church. God has promised to give us the future.