

“INVESTING IN HOPE”

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Psalms 91:1-6, 14-16; Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15

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I try to imagine the scene. The armies of the King of Babylon were systematically shredding the last of the kingdom of Judah's defenses. The city of Jerusalem was under siege. There was only limited food and water within its walls. It couldn't hold out much longer. Jeremiah the prophet was locked up in the courtyard of the royal guard, a prisoner of Judah's king because he had dared to prophesy that Judah would indeed fall, that the holy city Jerusalem would fall, that God's temple itself would be destroyed by the Babylonian raiders. Blasphemy. The conventional wisdom was that God would never let that happen. It was not only blasphemous, but also seditious to spread such talk.

So there's Jeremiah, confined in his courtyard, when his cousin approaches him with a deal that pretty much anyone could and should have refused. There's this plot of land at Ananoth. We're not entirely sure where Ananoth was. The best historical guess locates it on a hillside about a mile outside of Jerusalem. Most likely, at the time that Jeremiah was offered this "deal," Babylonian soldiers were camped there, had certainly stripped the land of anything of value. "It was as potentially useful to Jeremiah," claims one of my favorite ministers who has a way with words, "as a goat is to an astronaut." And yet, there in the middle of the guard's courtyard, with probably hundreds of onlookers, Jeremiah demanded a scale be brought, and he counted out 17 shekels of silver and bought the land.

Now it's important to know that coinage as a means of exchange for goods and services was still a relatively new invention. Taxes were paid, and goods normally exchanged in Jeremiah's time for oil or barley, or goats, or wheat. The thing coinage had going for it in the ancient world is that it was portable, much easier to carry around than barrels of barley or jars of oil—or goats for that matter... So here's Jeremiah—at best weeks from being led off to slavery when Jerusalem fell—using seventeen precious coins, coins that would have been incredibly useful to him in the short term, and using them to buy a field that was no use to him in any foreseeable future.

So why did Jeremiah do this, and why is this land transfer recorded in such abundant detail in the prophetic book that bears his name? To buy the field at Ananoth was an act of lunacy.

It was an act of defiance. It was an act of hope, a public and visible symbol of Jeremiah's faith that reminded him, and shouted out to the others in that courtyard with him, that beyond the power of the king of Judah and beyond the armies of Babylon, there is the power of God in which we dwell, and in which someday, all will be restored.

Hope. It's hard to find words that speak of hope that are not sentimental, mawkish, trivial and trite. But true hope is none of those things. It is brave and yes, defiant, and is often mistaken for foolishness. Hope is concretely living forward when the facts or the noise in our head or some combination of the two tell us that we should be packing our tents and giving up on a dream, on a relationship, even on life itself. Hope stands and looks squarely into the face of a future where the facts or our friends or the images in our mind tell us that it's futile or stupid to do x, y, or z, and we do it anyway. We invest—like Jeremiah—instead of selling out or letting go.

It's easiest for me to think of hope in terms of stories. One night I received a phone call from a woman friend, who had been through a terrible divorce and had lived small, depressed, immobilized for three years after. She called me that night to tell me, "I bought a \$20 bottle of wine on my way home from work today, and I'm sitting here by myself drinking this wonderful glass of wine." I wanted to cheer. For three years, this woman had told herself she was worthless: would not buy new clothes, would not consider moving out of a job she hated, would not allow herself to believe she deserved anything that gave her pleasure or moved her life forward. She bought a bottle of good red wine and was enjoying it. From the outside, one might think it foolish or frivolous or unimportant. For Judith, it was buying a field at Ananath. She had found her hope, and from that moment she began the hard and wonderful work of building a new life for herself.

One of my great heroes is Marian Wright Edelman, the founder and Director of the Children's Defense Fund. An African-American woman, she was born in a small town in South Carolina, and despite all odds, went on from high school to Spelman College, and then to be both the first African-American woman to attend Yale Law School and the first African-American to be admitted to the Mississippi Bar. At 71, she is still a tireless advocate for children, espousing such unpopular causes as universal health and dental care for children, better public education, subsidized day care, contraception information in the schools. The list goes on and on. She is a woman who has had more doors closed in her face than most of us try to open in our lifetimes. I'm proud to say she is a member of the United Church of Christ, and in 2007, I had the privilege of hearing her speak at General Synod.

She is for me the very embodiment of hope. With her ramrod stiff back and her plain speaking, you just see her and realize that “no” is not a word she accepts. No matter how many campaigns she loses, no matter how discouraged she is at the end of any day, she is simply unstoppable in her quest for a better life for all our children. She writes, “You are not obligated to win. You are obligated to do the very best you can every day.”

One last story. Josh is a man of 32 who my daughter Jessie met when she was part of the young adult support group of the leukemia-lymphoma society. Josh has Acute Lymphocytic leukemia, the same diagnosis as Jessie. He, like so many, writes a blog that I visit from time to time. Josh just began his fourth round of treatment for his illness. Though he has spent, by his reckoning, as much time in the last decade feeling unwell as well, still his attitude is incredibly positive. “My job,” he says, “it to try to stay alive long enough for them to come up with a cure for my disease.” To that end, he takes great care of himself, keeps his body as strong as possible, searches the internet for new treatment protocols, and corresponds, Jessie tells me, with hundreds of others with his disease, offering practical advice, humor, and most of all, the message to not give up hope.

Now what I’d like to say right here is that I know Josh’s story will have a happy ending, that he will live long enough to see and know a cure. But like him, I don’t know that do be true. I do know that the hope that drives his getting up and doing the very best he can every day matters.

I don’t know where Josh finds his ability to live hopefully. But for us, for we who are people of faith, who claim a God of compassion and of steadfast support, a God who is always recreating the world, bringing new life even out of death: for us, I believe, hope is a spiritual discipline, like prayer, or gratitude, working for justice or generosity. These qualities to our living do not just come to us like manna sent down from heaven. They are choices we make based on our first choice to love and serve our God. We choose to live our life in service. We choose to live our life as generous people. We choose to live mindfully and prayerfully. We choose to live in hope, which does not mean that we live with a false and shallow cheerfulness or a denial of the facts of our lives and the world. It does mean that we get up every morning and we do the very best we can to live and savor our lives, to honor our relationships, to invest in living in a world where the outcome is always uncertain and often out of our control.

And the fact is that life is uncertain, not just for those who are working for universal health care for children, or those whose personal life has fallen apart, or those with life-threatening diseases. We live in a world of environmental disasters, and natural disasters, of economies suddenly gone south and drunk drivers and terrorists who fly airplanes into buildings. And we can look at all of that and choose fear, and cynicism, or violence or despair. Or we can choose hope. We can buy a field in Ananoth on the eve of 50 years in exile. We can build and heal and reconcile. We can get up every morning and give thanks for this day, just this day, and the opportunities it brings us for kindness, for purposeful work, for building relationships, for joy. And every day, as we do that day by day—in acts large and small—every day we choose hope, we are worshiping and serving the God of heaven and earth who stands by our side and within our hearts urging us forward as we go. Thanks be to God. Amen.