



First United Church of Oak Park

The Silver Thread of Hope

Jeremiah 32:1-2, 6-15

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The King of Israel sat in his throne room with no control over his nation's future. The Babylonian Empire was on an unstoppable rise, defeating the armies even of once great powers like Egypt. And they were on their way to Jerusalem. For the King of Israel, there was no stratagem, no tricks, no alliances he could fall back on to control the chaos of imperial war. So he did the only thing he thought was left to him, he surrendered. The king allowed himself to be carried away into exile. And Babylon appointed a new ruler for the people. Zedekiah. And Zedekiah, the puppet king, thought perhaps he could control the nation's future by appeasing the Babylonians in every way. Giving them what they wanted, perhaps, would allow him to control the nation's future. But King Zedekiah could not bend and scrape low enough for Babylon, it seems. Because after just a few short years the Babylonian Empire had once again encamped an army outside Jerusalem. Babylon had cut off their supplies, isolated them from any rescue, built up great siege works against the walls of Jerusalem, as if to say, we can take this whenever we please. Puppet King Zedekiah had no control. Adding to the king's woes was the prophet Jeremiah, who was preaching throughout Jerusalem that even God said that the city would fall. They were friendless, hapless, hopeless, with no way to control their future. The king hauls the prophet Jeremiah into court, demands of him, what are you doing, how does this prophesying help?

And at the narrative reaches the moment of greatest tension, with an army on the doorstep and the city wracked with internal division between prophet and king, the Book of Jeremiah pauses for...a lengthy description of a real-estate transaction.

Verse after verse after verse explains in exacting detail how Jeremiah is set to purchase a field from his cousin. Jeremiah's right to purchase this field is explained, a sixth-century BCE probate document on how Jeremiah has right of first refusal. Anyway, the price is detailed, 17 shekels of silver, the method of payment is detailed, literal silver is weighed out on scales. The paperwork is detailed, there are two copies made, one the official sealed version and one an open copy for review, and both copies are to be stored away carefully so they won't decay. And. AND the location of the field is detailed, it is in a territory already conquered by the Babylonians, so not exactly the best location, given that it's not clear that his cousin is selling something that Babylonian king has conquered.

What is the prophet doing? Buying what is already lost? Behaving as if the laws of the nation are still in effect when the nation itself is about to cease to exist? On the precipice of disaster, the prophet Jeremiah engages in a lengthy real-estate transaction.

What is Jeremiah doing?

The king had been trying to exercise control; Jeremiah was creating a silver thread of hope. Jeremiah was creating the ground for a new future where none had existed before. He was buying conquered land to create the ground for hope that the people would return one day. This was the message. The prophet was buying conquered land to create the ground for hope that the people would return one day. Though there was no reason to believe it would occur. All signs pointed to it not occurring; there was no rational stratagem that would carry them from here to there, they had no control. Jeremiah purchased the field and created the ground for a new future where none had existed before. Jeremiah's was a creative act; it created a silver thread of hope. But what good could it do? In the face of dire odds, what good would such a slender act of hope create?

It would take seven decades to see it. Seven decades later the grandchildren of the exiles who had grown to adulthood would process back into Jerusalem to rebuild. Make ready a highway for God, every valley lifted, every mountain made low. The grandchildren of the exiles would return, but how could the people endure for so long? They lived to see the highway of their God, because they held in their hands a silver thread of hope.

That same thread of hope had been handed to them by their parents, those who had been just children when they were exiled. They lived almost their entire lives in exile, their memories of Jerusalem fading as age and distance makes all memories do. They lived their entire lives in Babylon, where the hanging gardens must have made Jerusalem seem a small and paltry and lackluster place. And yet they told the stories and sang the old songs of Zion, they endured because of a hope that would never be fulfilled in their lifetime. How could they endure? Because of a hope greater than death, because they held in their hands a silver thread of hope.

And that same thread of hope had been handed to them by their parents. Those who had been adults at the time of the fall of Jerusalem. They had seen their entire world collapse, all of what they had known of their country, of their God, of themselves: they had watched it fall apart. Had lived through a siege, a sacking, a fire, a conquering. They were forced to march away from everything they had ever known, certain they would never return, certain that the only piece of their home they would ever have again was the silver thread of hope they held in their hands. It would not lead them home, or their children, but perhaps their children's children. How did they endure? Because they drew out behind them on that long march to Babylon the silver thread of hope.

The silver thread of hope had been spun by the hand of the prophet Jeremiah. A thread spun from 17 shekels of silver used to buy a plot of land that had already been conquered. Seventeen shekels weighed out that said this conquered land would someday become a home for them again. That though there were no rational signs or seeds of it being a sound decision based in fact, Jeremiah made sure to have the paperwork notarized, signed, duplicated, stored in earthenware jars so it would last

decades, seven decades even. A lengthy real estate transaction held in the middle of a siege, a silver thread of hope that created the ground for a new future.

Analyzing a situation and charting a course that is most likely to succeed, that isn't hope. That's oddsmaking, that's strategizing, and it has its place. But it isn't hope. Hope is a creative act. Hope spins a thread connecting the present to a new future. A new future where none had existed before. A new future must first be hoped into existence, a new future must be spun like silver thread. A new future must be created, and that creative power is what I mean by the word hope.

And hope, this kind of hope is sorely needed. Suffice it to say that our world stands on the edge of a precipice. All the terrors of my grandparents' generation have returned—rising tides of nationalism across the globe, wars in Europe, the threat of nuclear war. Added to these old fears are economic crises unseen in 100 years, a pandemic, environmental collapse amid a vacuum of leadership. There is no stratagem, no tricks, no alliances, no oddsmaking that will prove a quick and easy deliverance. As much as I would like that to be true, it isn't. As people of faith, ours is a different task than oddsmaking. Ours is to create hope, silver threads of hope that connect today with a future yet to be created. Ours is to hope the way Jeremiah did, buying conquered land at the height of danger.

Ours is to create hope like Jeremiah, raising children and teaching them of a world as boundless and beautiful as an autumn sky. Ours is to create hope like Jeremiah, planting great oak trees whose full growth we will never see. Ours is to create hope like Jeremiah, proclaiming a broad and expansive love that God holds for trans people, for immigrants, for young Black men. Ours is to build communities of faith that dare to look generations ahead and imagine a future where the grandchildren of this year's confirmands can remember and give thanks for the acts of hope we inaugurate in this generation.

Thanks be to God for the hope Jeremiah crafted, and may God bless us with that same prophet's hope.