

September 1, 2019
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Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15

Jeremiah's Prophetic Acts

Jeremiah was prophet for a long time, from his calling when only a boy and for decades after. Jeremiah was a prophet during a long, hard time, a time of a truly terrible political situation, a time when his country was completely divided, when the ancient kingdom of Israel was split in two. The tensions were not only internal, though, there were serious external threats as well. During the time of Jeremiah the Babylonian empire invaded Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple. The central symbol of God's favor and presence, reduced to rubble. Jeremiah witnessed the disintegration of society and the destruction of all he held dear, and when he talked about what was happening and a faithful way to respond he was imprisoned, accused of treason, and nearly executed.

Throughout all of this, Jeremiah had much to say. It surprises many—myself included, I always have to look this up to confirm it—the book of Jeremiah is the longest book in the Bible, not by chapter, but by words. Jeremiah has more words than any other book, Old or New Testament, and most of them aren't exactly uplifting. Many verses of this prophetic book are livid, accusatory, indictments of the people, as Jeremiah points out both the terrible situation and the part they play in it. This book is where we get the term “jeremiad.” Other parts of Jeremiah are lament, chapters of utter sadness, painful reflections on the public and personal toll of living in such a time. According to tradition, Jeremiah is called “the weeping prophet.” Also according to tradition, the book that follows, Lamentations, was also written by Jeremiah.

Angry, sad, overwhelmed, that's what Jeremiah was. There was just so much bad news, all the time. Every time he checked his phone, or turned on the radio, or watched the news on TV there was another story about fears of a recession, and the city's huge budget hole, and vulnerable people being treated less than human, and mass shootings, and sexual abuse, and the Amazon burning, and a hurricane on the way... Tough things going on out there, and close to home, too. A couple days ago one of our previous seminary students, Ole Schenk, stopped by, he was eager to hear how things were going, “There have been some tough things recently,” I said: difficult diagnoses, people living in precarious conditions, people dying. Much to mourn. Much to make us feel angry, and sad, and overwhelmed.

The long book of Jeremiah faces right up to that; Christian faith faces right up to that. We begin our worship services confessing all the ways that the world—that we ourselves—have gone terribly wrong. It is both personal and collective: we confess. It's a stark way to start worship on a holiday weekend, unless you remember what's at the center of our faith: the cross. It was not to a world that was doing just fine that God came. It is not to a people who have things figured out, who manage well on their own, who make and work within systems that operate according to mercy and justice. It was to this world, and to us, that God came. God comes to be with us in the most terrible situations. God is with us in the tears, and the rubble, and the cries of despair. With us God is also angry, and sad, but God is not overwhelmed. God has more to say, more to do. God knows our situation, and takes action.

Jeremiah is a long book, full of anguished address and lyrical lament, but there's a part, about halfway through, a somewhat odd scene, we heard it as the first reading today, a section that is different in style, a prose section, and prosaic. At first glance it's rather boring, a tedious

description of a land purchase, ancient legalese concerning the exchange of deeds, who is going to buy this certain field, the right of redemption. It's rather unremarkable—until you think about when it happened, and where, and to whom, and why. This is Jeremiah the issuer of jeremiads, the weeping prophet amidst the ruins, one called by God to tell the people to face up to it—also called by God to buy a field. In that time of sadness and uncertainty, God says, buy a field, outside of Jerusalem. “Houses and fields and vineyards may again be bought in this land,” God says. The purchase was a prophetic act.

Last Sunday in a meeting after church we voted to renovate our gym bathrooms to make them handicapped accessible, a project that is neither simple nor inexpensive. Much planning has occurred, but there is still some uncertainty about how it all work, which will continue through the doing of the project. I was uncertain we could even propose the project, especially when the almost final estimate came back much, much higher than expected. We can't do this, I thought. And then, as the Property Team scrambled to reduce the estimate—which they were able to do, some—as they were doing that the church office got an email from a lawyer for a longtime member, Betty Fridlund, who had died a year and a half ago. Before she died Betty had been living in a nursing home for quite some time. She had trouble with a hip and her last years were spent in a wheelchair. But she was indefatigable, Betty was, sharp and bright. She had been a social worker, she knew what it was to face up to the world, and she was deeply faithful. When I visited Betty—as many people here did, and they would say just what I am, that she loved to laugh, and you would have great conversations with her about books and current topics, and she was eager for church updates. When I visited, sometimes she would apologize to me, because she could no longer give to the church like she wanted to. Well, as we learned from that email I mentioned, after she died, Betty left the church a very generous gift. I don't know how, social workers are not known to make a lot of money. And she was also incredibly generous to her alma maters and her family and she would not like it that I am going on about her in this way in a sermon. Sorry, Betty. I called the lawyer and Betty's niece to thank them, and I said how the timing of this was truly remarkable. We'd been hoping to do a project on our gym bathrooms to make them handicapped accessible, but it was uncertain, it was so expensive, but maybe this gift could make it possible. They were so gratified to hear that, they said how happy that would make them, and Betty. Thank you, Betty.

Some of you have already heard that story, but I couldn't help but tell it today as I was thinking about today's first reading and property negotiations and prophetic action. And then I remembered another story, which also includes Betty and the church property that is our gym. You might have also heard this story, it has to do with this shovel. This shovel was used at the groundbreaking of the gym, long, long ago, the year was 1936. It is important to note the situation at the time, 1936 was smack in the middle of the Great Depression. Still, this church decided to do something with a plot of land. Various members of the congregation took a turn with this shovel, it was a symbolic, a prophetic, act. One of the people who took a turn with this shovel was Betty Fridlund. It is recorded in our ancient documents.

God has also done some groundbreaking. In Christ, God does something truly groundbreaking. God, who owns all the earth, invested yet more deeply in humanity in a field outside of Jerusalem, a plot of land called Calvary. The right of redemption belongs to God. The cost was high, the gift everlasting. God now calls us. The time of prophetic action has not ended.