

WGUMC Sept. 27, 2015 "Jeremiah: Prophet of Hope"
Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15; I Peter 1:3-9

Over one thousand homes have burned in the Valley and Butte Fires over the past few weeks. Even after seeing the pictures, I still can't begin to imagine the devastation. Many of the folk who lived in Middletown worked in the vineyards of Napa County. They were not wealthy. And now, the only thing left of their homes is their mortgage. In this fourth year of drought, the scorching fires have not only given us a reality check. For too many, it's been a very rude realty check.

It makes me think about that term *real estate*. The word *real* means "having verifiable existence." It means "true and actual, not illusory or fictitious." But even if you don't live in Middletown or Cobb or Anderson Springs, real estate in California is pretty illusory and fictitious. It hasn't been that long since the housing crisis and prices are right back in the stratosphere. We don't have real estate here. We have *surreal* estate. And it's kind of scary. Buying a home used to be

considered a safe investment. More and more, it feels like a big gamble.

It looks to us like Jeremiah was taking a big gamble when he bought land in Judah back in 588 B.C. At the time, Jeremiah was in jail. He had been put there by King Zedekiah. Judah's army was in the middle of a rebellion against their Babylonian overlords. And Jeremiah was not being very patriotic. He had been going around telling Zedekiah's people that they were going to lose. The king was going to be captured. And it was going to be all their fault. God was punishing them for their sins.

Jeremiah was in prison because powerful people didn't like what he had to say. They thought he was a prophet of doom, a traitor, and a terrorist sympathizer. And you know what happens to people like that. But putting Jeremiah in jail didn't win the army any battles. It didn't keep the Babylonians at bay.

Ironically, just as Zedekiah's hopes for victory were all but broken, Jeremiah was visited by a broker. God sent Jeremiah a cousin from his home territory north of Jerusalem. Hanamel came offering to sell Jeremiah a piece of land. Now that's about like trying to sell a lot in Middletown as Main Street is burning down. Jerusalem was about to be sacked by the Babylonians. That couldn't have been good for real estate values in a suburb like Anathoth. Yet, Jeremiah bought the land, not knowing if he would ever set eyes on it. Indeed, not long after this, he was forced into exile. He went down to Egypt and presumably died there. He never returned to the land he bought.

So the question for us is: why did Jeremiah buy the field? Was he being faithful or foolhardy? What are we supposed to learn from this story? We won't be able to answer those questions unless we understand something about the land in Jewish imagination. Remember, Israel and Judah were two

halves of a once united nation that the Hebrews called the Promised Land.

The Bible tells the story about how that land was forever promised to Abraham and his descendants. That promise is repeated over and over in the Bible and is still remembered by Jews in Israel today. Incidentally, Abraham's descendants also include the Arabs, which may explain why the land is so contested there today.

When the Hebrews were dragged off into exile in Babylonia, they sang lamentations over their lost land: "For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!' How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy." [Psalm 137:3-6]

The exiles did return home. But in 70 A.D. the Romans destroyed the city and temple and Jews were dispersed all over the ancient world. And ever since, they have been longing to return. The annual Passover ritual includes the hope: "Next year in Jerusalem."

So, when Jeremiah buys a piece of land in prison, knowing that that land is going to be overrun by Babylonians, what is he doing? For one thing, he is standing on the promises that God made to Abraham. And he is sending a message of hope to the people of Judah, saying: "I put my trust, not in kings, not in armies, not even in a piece of property. But I'm going to buy it to show that I put my trust in God who will bring us home."

In a lot of ways, Jeremiah was smart. He paid cash for the land. And he didn't pay in temple currency, which soon enough wouldn't be worth anything. He paid in cold, hard, silver. His cousin, Hanamel, now had real money to escape from the

Babylonians. And Jeremiah had no debt that he wouldn't be able to pay.

Also note that Jeremiah was not in this as a speculator, buying low and hoping to flip the property when prices rose. No, Jeremiah was in this for the long haul, and in the presence of many witnesses, he ceremoniously signed and sealed the deed and a copy. Then he gave his assistant explicit instructions to put them "in an earthenware jar [ancient equivalent of a safe deposit box], in order that they may last for a long time."

Jeremiah was investing his trust in God to return the people to the land. And God did, about 50 years later. But that might not be the word of hope that the people of Middletown need to hear. For that, let's turn to the passage in I Peter and consider how Christians look at the land differently.

First some background. Many of the early Christians were Gentiles living all around the Mediterranean. They didn't have

the same tie to Jerusalem and the Promised Land. And ever since the ninth and last crusade ended in 1272, Christians have pretty much stopped trying to reclaim the old Jerusalem.

Now that doesn't mean that they didn't try to build a new one. The poet William Blake saw 19th-century England as a candidate for the New Jerusalem. Blake wrote a poem about it. It was made into a hymn:

And did those feet in ancient time,
Walk upon England's mountains green;
And was the holy Lamb of God,
On England's pleasant pastures seen!
And did the Countenance Divine,
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?
And was Jerusalem builded here,
Among these dark Satanic Mills?
Bring me my Bow of burning gold;
Bring me my Arrows of desire;
Bring me my Spear: O clouds unfold!
Bring me my Chariot of fire!
I will not cease from Mental Fight,
Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand:
Till we have built Jerusalem,
In England's green & pleasant Land.

And there were all kinds of attempts to build the New Jerusalem in the New World as well. The Puritans did so in New

England; missionaries, out on the Frontier; and Mormons, in Salt Lake City. We Americans have always seen our country as God's country. Rightly or wrongly, we've pretty much agreed that wherever WE ARE is Promised Land.

But if the land is holy, it isn't because we happen to be in it. It's only holy if Christ is in *us*. For Christians, it isn't geographical coordinates that mark out the holy land. Jerusalem for us can only be measured in spiritual coordinates. The holy land is a spiritual state more real than real estate.

Most Christians in the ancient world had never seen the great stones that made up Solomon's temple in Jerusalem and the Romans had destroyed it anyway. For them, the temple was not in Jerusalem. The place where heaven touched earth was in Jesus Christ. Christ was the cornerstone of a spiritual temple that could not be destroyed. He was the foundation of a faith that didn't have to be located in any one place. Christians don't have an ancestral land, but we have a Lord. We

never had a holy city, but we have a Savior. So, wherever Jesus is, there is the New Jerusalem for us. For a Christian, home is not where the heart is, unless our heart is where God is.

What this means is that the people of Middletown are not homeless if they know that their heart is where God is. That may not keep the rain off this winter, but it might keep their hope up long enough for them to settle into temporary shelter and let us help them begin to piece their lives together.

For us, these fires are a good reminder to all of us that owning a home is not what makes us secure in this world, in case we didn't learn that in the last recession. That's good to know because much of the middle class here can't afford to buy a home, anyway. And far too many workers can't even afford to rent one.

We have a real housing crisis in this part of California and I hope we do something to address it, but at the same time, I don't want anyone to think that you have to own a home to be

human. Buying a piece of property doesn't get you into the Promised Land, so be careful that you don't sell your soul to buy a home. Housing costs cause us to make all kinds of decisions that we aren't comfortable with. Maybe we would make different ones if we remembered that our true home is in God. Maybe then we could have the wisdom and the strength to live our life in service to the Messiah instead of to our mortgage. With that hope, let us pray.

God, we are not about to be run over by Babylonians, but sometimes it feels that way. We don't feel very secure where we live and sometimes we don't feel good about how we live. To many of us, life here seems like a disaster waiting to happen, and many people are a paycheck away from homelessness. Whether we own a home or not, we all need your help. Like Jeremiah, we need to purchase a little piece of hope and, no matter what happens, hold on to it. So send us your Son Jesus and make him the cornerstone of our faith. Give

us the grace to sign and seal the deed on our commitment to Christ. Then, come fire or flood, we will know what it means to be safe at home. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.