

Investing Faith in a Depressed Market
Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15
Second Baptist Church, Memphis
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On the surface, a story about a real estate transaction seems like it would be the most boring story in the Bible. If you've ever bought a piece of real estate, you've gone through that ridiculous little scene where you sit in that room and sign all those papers.

I heard someone who had recently bought a new house list out some of the documents from the closing: There's the "Settlement Statement" and a copy of the "Uniform Residential Loan Application." That's followed by the "Uniform Residential Appraisal Report." This document explains what kind of property it is. It's nine pages.

Next is the "Notice of Right to Cancel." Then there is a "Final Truth-in-Lending Disclosure." All the truth-in-lending disclosures up to this point have been merely preliminary. This one has eleven pages, and there are two copies. Then there is the "Settlement Statement Escrow Account Addendum." There is the "Request for Taxpayer Identification Number and Certification." Then there is the "Occupancy Affidavit and Financial Status" form. And on and on it goes.

And every one of them you have to sign.

A story about the details of a real estate transaction has all the makings of the driest, most boring story in the world. And

yet...and yet, some real estate transactions can be so poignant, so hopeful, that they almost bring tears to your eyes.

Wayne Randolph brought me some old newspaper clippings this week from the early years of our church, the 1960s. There was an article from the *Commercial-Appeal* about when Second Baptist bought this land here.

In August 1963 the church approved a major real estate transaction—the purchase of what was called the Herff home with its six-acres here at 4680 Walnut Grove Road. The cost of the property was \$204,130. The congregation moved into its new facility on September 12, 1964.

In the newspaper article about the opening of the new building, our pastor at the time, Dr. Brooks Ramsey, said that he envisioned that the church would now be trying to *meet the needs of the whole person*. His dream, he said, was that the facility would be more than a center for the routine needs of religious family life but would also meet a multitude of community needs.

The young congregation wasn't done making significant real estate transactions, though. On October 11, 1967, the church announced plans to purchase the Fisher and Halloran properties adjacent to the church. The Fisher property included the W. H. Fisher home and the almost five acres it sits on. The Halloran property was the home over here on Perkins and the five acres that went with it.

The total cost of these two additional homes and ten acres of land was \$550,000. So by the fall of 1967, exactly 40 years ago, our church had purchased what we now know as our

church property, which came to a total of 16 acres at a cost of about \$750,000.

When you think about it, it takes quite a bit of faith for a 5 year old church with an annual budget of \$300,000 to buy 16 acres of land. They certainly didn't need 16 acres of land right then. But they had a dream, a God-given vision for the future that led them to buy that land despite the cost, despite their present circumstances. They connected hope to action. And I'm glad they did.

It reminds me of the prophet Jeremiah's purchase of land—except his really made no sense. For the people of Second Baptist in the 1960s, the church was growing. This was the fast growing eastern edge of the city. A reasonable person might expect that someday they might need all that land.

But the land that Jeremiah bought made no sense whatsoever. Its future prospects were not bright at all. But he had a dream, a God-given vision for the future that led him to buy that land.

Jeremiah bought real estate in the worst possible location at the worst possible time. This was not a good time to invest in real estate. But Jeremiah bought a field. And it's not as though Jeremiah was just an optimistic person, always seeing the sunny side of life, a glass half full kind of guy who just naturally thought the market would improve.

Do you know the word *jeremiad*? It means a doleful and thunderous denunciation. That word was created from the name Jeremiah.

You don't get the idea that Jeremiah ever had a smile on his face. Even in prosperous times for Judah, he was not your everyday cheerful, friendly, local preacher. He was always launching into a jeremiad. That's where we get the word.

There was nothing in need of denouncing that Jeremiah didn't denounce. He denounced the king and the clergy. He denounced recreational sex and extramarital affairs. He denounced the rich for exploiting the poor, and he denounced the poor for deserving no better. He denounced the way every time a new god came around they all followed after it like the latest fashion fads.

Jeremiah did not believe in the power of positive thinking.

When he told the people of Israel that the Babylonians were going to come in and rip them to shreds just as they deserved, they beat him up and threw him into jail.

When the Babylonians did come and not only rip them to shreds but tear down their precious Temple and make off with all the valuables in it, Jeremiah told them that since it was God's judgment, they better submit to it or else.

That's the kind of guy he was. The people got so sick of him they threw him into an open cistern that happened to be handy. Luckily, the cistern didn't have any water in it, but Jeremiah sank down into the mud and muck up to his armpits and stayed stuck there until an Ethiopian eunuch came along and pulled him out with a rope.

[Frederick Buechner, Peculiar Treasures]

The people got so tired of listening to Jeremiah railing against the king and the nation, they finally just threw him in the king's jail to keep him quiet. He was destroying the morale of the people.

And now the armies of Babylon were at the city gates of Jerusalem. Soon, within a year, the best and the brightest of Judah would be carted off to Babylon to live in exile. They would lose all their *houses and fields and vineyards*. There would be nothing left.

In that moment in time Jeremiah is told by God to do a seemingly foolish thing. Jeremiah says that the word of the Lord came to him and told him that it was time to start investing in real estate.

Just as the armies of Babylon were at the city gates ready to destroy the city of Jerusalem, Jeremiah says that he had received a message from God that he was going to be offered a chance to buy a field in Israel. Sure enough, he was offered this piece of land.

For years Jeremiah had been preaching the coming judgment that would take the form of destruction for Israel. For him to buy a field would be like a weatherman investing in beach front property on the coast of Florida when a hurricane was on the way. It would be like a geologist, or whoever it is who studies earthquakes, buying a house on the San Andreas Fault if she knew an earthquake was coming.

This "field at Anathoth" that is offered to Jeremiah lay just outside Jerusalem's northeast wall. As I said, the armies of Babylon, led by King Nebuchadnezzar, had the city of

Jerusalem surrounded. This field that Jeremiah was offered to buy was just outside the city wall, so it was literally occupied by the Babylonian army. There couldn't have been a worse piece of real estate to buy in all the world.

But Jeremiah bought the land. I love this story. It's one of my favorite stories in the whole Bible. I've preached on it several times over the years. I preached on this story right after September 11, 2001.

In the worst possible moment, in a time when everything seemed to be falling apart, in a time when the future of the city of Jerusalem could not have looked any bleaker, Jeremiah bought a piece of property in the city. Jeremiah made a long term real estate investment.

The real beauty in this passage lies in what happens next. The details of this real estate transaction are spelled out in great detail in verses 9-14 of Jeremiah 32.

Summoning his trusted companion Baruch, along with a number of other friends, Jeremiah conducts this purchase in very conspicuous fashion. Elaborate steps are taken to make this a public act. Everything was done according to law and tradition. The purchase price in silver was weighed. The deed was signed and sealed. Witnesses were present.

Jeremiah then instructs the lawyer to place the deed in a jar so that it will last for a long time. With the holy city under siege and about to be destroyed, Jeremiah makes it clear that there's going to be a future, that he's planning for the future.

When Jeremiah bought that field, that is what we call putting your money where your mouth is; it is investing in your hope. This is no prophet of word only, this is a prophet of deed. So much so that he acquires a deed. He buys a field.

He is connecting his hope to his deed, his hope to his actions. *I purchase this land, not as a smart real estate investment, no, I purchase this land because my hope in God is unshakable. We shall return to the city that God has given us.*

Between the years 1950-1953 the Hayden Planetarium in New York ran a marketing campaign to entice people to visit the planetarium and it revolved around helping people imagine the day when common ordinary folks like us would be able to travel in space and, in particular, visit the moon.

This was, of course, some ten years before anyone traveled into space, and almost twenty years before Neil Armstrong stepped foot on the moon. And what the Planetarium did back in the early 50's was send out coupons for people to make their reservations for the day when commercial interplanetary tour services would be offered.

People were given the chance to be first in line for the chance to travel to the moon. The response was fairly overwhelming. People from all over the world wanted their chance to fly to the moon.

Along with sending in their coupons some wrote with particular questions:

Will it be a round-trip ticket?

Do I need to bring my own oxygen?

Does the Planetarium (remember this is 1950) have a specific schedule of flight departures?

And this one comment, *Since the way I've lived my life guarantees I'm not going to heaven, I'd sure like a crack at the moon.*

Now as I said the response was overwhelming to this little marketing effort, but what the Planetarium did not expect was that over 50 years later people would be calling the Planetarium to see what the flight status was and where were they in line.

Ten year olds, now sixty years old, have been calling to see how things are looking for their reservations to go to the moon. The offer and the promise they were still banking on as being good.

Fortunately, the Planetarium had kept the coupons in a file somewhere in some storage room and it has become a source of humor to think about the great expectation of those a half-century ago, and even those today.

There is something quite compelling, I have to admit, in these hopeful travelers. Not only to have sent their coupons in, long before they had any proof that any man could make it through the atmosphere and into space, not to mention the moon, but then fifty years later to follow up on it, to see how things were going with their reservations! Now that is hope.

I suspect, though, that things might have changed for many of these coupon holders if a significant advance deposit had been required of them to hold their reservation. What would be an appropriate deposit for a multi-million dollar ride into space?

\$10,000, \$100,000? I imagine that the line would get a little bit smaller.

[Thanks to Dr. Steve McConnell for this story in a sermon preached August 5, 2007 at Liberty Corner Presbyterian Church, Liberty Corner, New Jersey]

Think with me for a moment about connecting your hope to your deed. Think about investing faith in a depressed market. Not getting out. Not putting up a for sale sign. But investing faith in a depressed market, connecting your hope to your deed. This is the crux, isn't it, to being a disciple, hoping in God not just in word, but in deed.

I heard a story about an Iowa town that had been through months of drought and the fields were dying and the crops were parched. And finally one day the local preacher called for a prayer meeting, a meeting to pray for rain. It would be at 6:00 there in the little church in the middle of town.

And so when 6:00 came around and the church bell rang throughout the town, not a cloud was in the sky. But the people came and they crowded into the little church to pray for rain.

And the pastor got up and looked around, and finally said, *This meeting is dismissed. This meeting is over.* The people looked around in consternation. The pastor continued, *How can we dare to have a prayer meeting for rain, if not one of us thought to bring an umbrella?*

What does it mean to connect your hope to your deed? It's one thing to book a flight to the moon; it's another thing to pay for it in advance.

G. K. Chesterton, the great writer from the 19th century, once said, *As long as matters are really hopeful, hope is mere flattery or platitude. It is only when everything is hopeless that hope begins to be a strength at all. Like all the Christian virtues, it is as unreasonable as it is indispensable.*

Jeremiah bought a field.

He staked a claim on the promises of God.

He planted the flag of faith in a field that was occupied by his enemies.

You know what he did?

He bought a field for the future.

Jeremiah bought a field, and he closed on it. That's all he did. And yet...and yet, some real estate transactions can be so poignant, so hopeful, that they almost bring tears to your eyes.

He bought a field. And he made the proclamation in verse 15— a proclamation that he had already acted on in great faith: *Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.* Some day.

Connecting hope to deed, connecting hope to action: it's as unreasonable as it is indispensable.

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

We could stand here today and beat the drums mournfully about the brokenness and hopelessness of our day. We could be like investors or home owners who see a market tumbling down and scramble to get out.

Or we can invest in our hope. We can buy a field. I think God may be calling us again to put down some earnest money on the future.