

“Redeem”

Jeremiah 32:1-3, 6-15

The second part of a fall worship series,

Words Matter: Proclaiming our Faith

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The word of faith for today is “redeem”.

It is a word for those in overwhelming situations when there seems but little hope of things getting better.

The word, “redeem” means to “rescue”, “free” or “buy back”. We redeem coupons. After last week’s loss we wonder if the Seahawks will redeem themselves this afternoon. We bemoan the Mariner’s season seems beyond redemption. We wonder about Jesus being our “Redeemer”. About the meaning of his death. Because it all feels rather overwhelmingly complex, we think sometimes when it comes to Christianity “redeem” is an irredeemable word.

A lot could be said about this word and maybe not much of it matters unless you are in an overwhelming situation when it looks like there is no way out, when a way has ended and you wonder if this is the end of the story. When you are in a situation like that, it matters what you believe about the future, and whether these times can be “redeemed”. Whether there is the possibility of a door opening to a new and hopeful future.

A story from the Book of Jeremiah:

It was the eighteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar. At that time the army of the king of Babylon was holding Jerusalem under siege.

At the end of 6th century BC, the Empire of Babylon was on the move. They had conquered a vast swath of what was then their known world. Their troops surrounded the city of Jerusalem, the capital of Judah. A citizen of that country, the prophet Jeremiah, is in prison for treason. Zedekiah, king of Judah, had locked Jeremiah up.

Zedekiah said to Jeremiah, "How dare you preach, saying, 'God says, I'm warning you: I will hand this city over to the king of Babylon and he will take it over. Zedekiah king of Judah will be handed over to the Chaldeans right along with the city. He will be handed over to the king of Babylon and forced to face the music. He'll be hauled off to Babylon where he'll stay until I deal with him. God's Decree. Fight against the Babylonians all you want—it won't get you anywhere.'"

For Jeremiah, everything that could go wrong, has gone wrong.

His country has no future.

The king has no future.

And it seems he has no future.

What do you do?

What do you do in overwhelming situations when you can't do anything to put things right and it looks like there is little hope of things getting better?

In an overwhelming time when there was nothing to do to make things better, the Word of God came to Jeremiah:

Jeremiah said, "God's Message came to me like this: Prepare yourself!

Hanamel, your uncle Shallum's son, is on his way to see you. He is going to say, 'Buy my field in Anathoth. You have the legal right to buy it.'

"And sure enough, just as God had said, my cousin Hanamel came to me while I was in jail and said, 'Buy my field in Anathoth in the territory of Benjamin, for you have the legal right to keep it in the family. Buy it. Take it over.' "That did it. I knew it was God's Message.

At a time when there is no hope, Jeremiah's cousin comes to visit him in prison and offers to sell him a piece of the family homestead. And Jeremiah in contradiction to his circumstances – he is in prison! - and in contradiction to everything he believes about his country going to hell – he goes and buys a piece of property, “redeems” the land, his family homestead. As the New Revised Standard Version puts it, “*Buy my field*”, his cousin says, “*for the right of possession and redemption is yours, buy it for yourself.*” (Jeremiah 32:8, NRSV)

In 12 short verses Jeremiah repeats 7 times that this is the “Word of the Lord” speaking. It is like he wants to make clear, “I know this is irrational. I think it is a bad idea too. But let me be clear - this is not my idea. This is God's idea.”

"So I bought the field at Anathoth from my cousin Hanamel. I paid him seventeen silver shekels. I followed all the proper procedures: In the presence of witnesses I wrote out the bill of sale, sealed it, and weighed out the money on the scales. Then I took the deed of purchase—the sealed copy that contained the contract and its conditions and also the open copy—and gave them to Baruch son of Neriah, the son of Mahseiah. All this took place in the presence of my cousin Hanamel and the witnesses who had signed the deed, as the Jews who were at the jail that day looked on.

Who cares? What a lot of words! Why do we give a hoot about seventeen shekels and a sealed bill of sale and witnesses with impossible names?

We care because this tells us that redemption costs.

You can't think your way, wish your way to buy a piece of land.

To buy back a piece of land, to “redeem” it, takes real money, and Don Mallet. A lawyer who can take you through a lengthy legal process.

Jeremiah is doing a lot more than simply buying a bit of rock, sand and a few old olive trees. He is staking his claim that God will buy back, redeem the future of his people. That this overwhelming situation is not the end of the story. Jeremiah stakes a claim on the future. That doesn't mean there won't be jail, exile, defeat. It means that is not the end of the story. That even in this overwhelming time, God is at work where it seems God is nowhere to be found.

The story concludes,

"Then, in front of all of them, I told Baruch, 'These are orders from God-of-the-Angel-Armies, the God of Israel: Take these documents—both the sealed and the open deeds—and put them for safekeeping in a pottery jar. For God-of-the-Angel-Armies, the God of Israel, says, 'Life is going to return to normal. Homes and fields and vineyards are again going to be bought in this country.'"

To call ourselves people of faith is to stake a claim on the future
To put your trust and hope in the One who shapes the future.

As Christians we are called to live as redeemed people. We do so not because of what we believe or don't believe actually happened on Easter Sunday. We do so not based on what we believe about Jesus' death being necessary for the future to be redeemed. WE believe many different things about those important matters.

We don't think our way to such a place of hope and trust. We live our way to a redeemed life, day by day, decision by decision. In overwhelming situations, staking our claim in hope and trust that this is not the end of the story but that the future is God's.

Flash forward 2500 years to another city. The city of Sarajevo, capital of Bosnia-Herzegovina is under siege by the Serbian army from 1992-1996, the longest siege of a city in modern warfare.

Citizens can't leave their homes to get water or bread without fear of being killed by Serbian snipers in the surrounding hills. Vedran Smajlovic is a cellist in what was the Sarajevo String Quartet. And one day he watches from his balcony as 22 people lined up for bread were killed by a mortar shell fired from the hills.

The next day, he gets up, put on his dusty tuxedo and scuffed shoes. Takes a chair, his music stand and cello out to the spot in the street where the mortar shell had exploded. He plays Albinoni's Adagio in G Minor. And he will do that for the next 22 days to honor each of the 22 people who had been killed.

The crowds that gather to listen to the man with the black matted hair and large, dark circles under his eyes wonder: "Isn't he crazy? He could be killed. What difference will this make? It won't bring back the dead, feed anyone, won't replace one brick from a shelled building."

And then they relax, as the music seeps into them. Anxiety, fear, hopelessness slowly are released making room for something else. They close their eyes. They watch as the cellist's hair smoothes itself out, the beard disappears. A dirty tuxedo becomes clean, shoes polished bright as mirrors. The building behind the cellist repairs itself. The scars of bullets and shrapnel are covered by plaster and paint, the windows reassemble and the sun sparkles off of the glass. The cobblestones on the street set themselves straight. Around them, people stand taller, their faces put on weight and color. Clothes gain lost thread, brighten, smooth out their wrinkles. A city heals itself around him as he plays. (inspired and adapted from The Cellist of Sarajevo, Steven Galloway, Riverhead Books, 2008, p. 187)

The cellist redeems a small piece of land and a future for his people.
A place of senseless death becomes a holy ground.
He catches the imagination, fires the hope, of people around the world.

It makes me wonder, what might it take to redeem the land at Ground Zero?

It makes me wonder, what we do without our even knowing it, that offers hope for a redeemed future?

We live with overwhelming situations, in times that feel hopeless. In times like ours, every day in Sarajevo and Seattle, people do specific, small acts that redeem the future. Holy is this ground. Do not surrender to hate and fear. "We are prophets of a future not our own".