

The Field of Hope

Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15 & 1 Timothy 6:6-19

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost/ 29th September 2019

The Babylonians are at the gate. King Nebuchadnezzar, the longest-reigning and most powerful monarch of the Babylonian Empire, and his massive army have laid siege to Jerusalem for a second time. It's 586 BCE, and the Kingdom of Judah is in chaos and on the verge of collapse. After the previous siege of Jerusalem, in 597 BCE, Nebuchadnezzar installed Zedekiah as king of Judah by Nebuchadnezzar. He was twenty-one years old. The prophet Jeremiah was his counselor. Against the strong advice of Jeremiah and others, Zedekiah tried to revolt against Babylon and entered in a secret alliance with Pharaoh Hophra in Egypt. Nebuchadnezzar discovered the plot and responded by invading Judah and headed for Jerusalem. At the time of the siege of the city, Jeremiah is in prison, confined to the court in the palace of the king.

The lectionary skips over the reason why Jeremiah is in prison. He's confined there because he wouldn't tell Zedekiah what he wanted to hear. He wanted to hear from Jeremiah that everything will be okay. Zedekiah asked, "Why do you prophesy and say: Thus says the LORD: I am going to give this city into the hand of the king of Babylon, and he shall take it; King Zedekiah of Judah shall not escape out of the hands of the Chaldeans, but shall surely be given into the hands of the king of Babylon, and...he shall take Zedekiah to Babylon, and there he shall remain...; though you fight against the Chaldeans, you shall not succeed?" (Jer. 32:4-5).

Zedekiah was living in an alternate reality, he only wanted to hear good things about his future, he didn't want to hear anything bad. And it was bad and about to get worse. Somehow Zedekiah, his family, and some followers made it out of the city, but they were captured on the plains of Jericho—and then brutally treated by the Babylonians. Soon thereafter, in 586 BCE, Jerusalem fell. The city was plundered and razed to the ground, including Solomon's glorious Temple: *the dwelling place of Yahweh*. All the treasures of the Temple were carted off to Babylon and placed in the temples of their gods, as we read in Daniel (1:2); and the Jewish people were carted off too, to Babylon, to live in exile. It's difficult for us to imagine what this experience was like for the Jews, to watch the fall of Jerusalem and the devastation of the Temple. A monumental, existential shock, a colossal crisis of faith and meaning, a devastating trauma that would extend for generations. The future looked bleak—there was no future, not one worth living.

For the Babylonians are at the gate. Zedekiah is terrified. Jeremiah is in prison. Things are pretty grim. And that's when Jeremiah hears something. It is Yahweh, speaking to him. He receives a word that is to be given to Hanamel, a relative. God says, "The son of your uncle Shallum" is about to arrive and when you see him say, "Go buy my field that is at Anathoth" (Jer. 2:6-8) God's field, that is. Go now, make sure everything is legal and notarized, get the necessary witnesses. Get the deeds of purchase. In the court of prison, Jeremiah charges them in the name of God, "Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel; Take these deeds, both this sealed deed of purchase and this open deed, and put them in an earthenware jar, in order that it may last for a long time. For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be brought in this land" (Jer. 32:14-15). And then Jeremiah prays, "Ah

Lord God! It is you who made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm! Nothing is too hard for you” (Jer. 32:17).

And, still, the Babylonians are at the gate. It’s a remarkable scene, isn’t it? Devastation and chaos and fear are all around them, everything is about to come undone and fall apart. It’s inevitable. There’s no turning back. There’s no savior or hero to come and rescue them. The end is in full view. And then Jeremiah hears a word, this irrational, nonsensical direction from God to go and buy a field. God tells him to invest in *property*. But is this a practical use of one’s savings in a time of crisis? Why throw away money on a field that he and his family will probably never enjoy? Jeremiah is being told to invest in a future that he cannot even begin to imagine. And it was God—*God*, not Jeremiah, who came up with this ludicrous idea to make a point: yes, all is about to come undone, the suffering of God’s people will be intense. But there’s another story, another future that you cannot see now, a future that will be given to you. “Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.” That’s the promise. That’s the plan. *Yes*, the Babylonians are at the gate. *And* go invest in the future.

The lesson here is: be realistic about the current state of affairs, don’t be naïve, but remember, as children of God, the present doesn’t have the power to predict the future. Poet Wendell Berry [said](#), “Be joyful, though you have considered all the facts...practice resurrection.”¹ The future is in God’s hands.

As people of faith, we are always living in the tension between the now and the not-yet (1 Jn. 3:2). And that not-yet, the future is in God’s hands. For “nothing is too hard for God.” The purchase of that field, a field of dreams, a field called hope, is a symbolic prophetic gesture that flows from the will and intention of God, from the Word of God. And it’s good for us to remember this symbol when we find ourselves in situations when it feels like the Babylonians are at the gate, when the circumstances of the present overwhelm us, when we feel defeated; when we have come to our limits and the future looks grim. God says, “Don’t just sit there. Do something. Act. Invest in the future.” Go buy a field! It can feel like an exercise in futility, nonsensical, irrational, beyond our reach, impossible. But what if we need moments, experiences, seasons when we are forced to face futility, acknowledge our limits, but then grasp after something beyond our reach, embrace the impossible, aspire toward something that might even defeat us. What if we need these experiences in the life of faith in order for us to grow?

When I was a boy I was transfixed by the musical *Man of La Mancha*, inspired by the novel *Don Quixote* by Miguel de Cervantes (1547-1616). I used to listen to the soundtrack all the time. My favorite song was/is “The Impossible Dream,” also known as “The Quest.” Don Quixote is asked what does it mean “to follow a quest.” And he sings:

To dream ... the impossible dream ...

To fight ... the unbeatable foe ...

To bear ... with unbearable sorrow ...

To run ... where the brave dare not go ...

To right ... the unrightable wrong ...

To love ... pure and chaste from afar ...

To try ... when your arms are too weary ...

To reach ... the unreachable star ...

*This is my quest, to follow that star ...
No matter how hopeless, no matter how far ...
To fight for the right, without question or pause ...
To be willing to march into Hell, for a Heavenly cause ...
And I know if I'll only be true, to this glorious quest,
That my heart will lie, will lie peaceful and calm,
when I'm laid to my rest ...
And the world will be better for this:
That one man, scorned and covered with scars,
Still strove, with his last ounce of courage,
To reach ... the unreachable star ...²*

It's so wonderfully dramatic, isn't it? But it speaks to this need to boldly step out into the future, to go on a quest, even if it appears zany or impossible. It might look like you're charging after windmills.

I was reminded this week of something that twentieth-century English sculptor [Henry Moore](#) (1898-1986) once said, "The secret of life is to have a task, something you devote your entire life to, something you bring everything to every minute of the day for the rest of your life. And the most important is this, it must be something you cannot possibly do." I love this proverb. Sure, it's demanding, but it's also very liberating.

As people of faith, every day, we attempt the impossible. While I don't think we can live this way every minute of every day of our lives (maybe some can), there's wisdom in working toward something that we cannot do, something we cannot do on our own, reach toward something that is not entirely within our grasp, which we cannot ever fully master or control. So we have to be wise about where and how we direct our energies, our focus, our passion.

Paul warns against those who put all their energy in the accumulation of wealth, who invest in investments, instead of investing in the future toward which we are being summoned in Christ. "For the love of money,"—not money, but the *love* of money—"is the root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains" (1 Tim. 6:10)—and I would add, and pierced countless others with many pains. Put your wealth, your resources into something larger than yourself. Paul summons us toward a different calling, a different future: "pursue healthy relationships, piety, faith, love, endurance, gentleness" (1 Tim. 6:11). And then he says *fight* for these. "Fight the good fight" (1 Tim. 6:12). Strive after these. Yes, we will fail again and again and again. Nevertheless, struggle for it, contend for it, like an athlete who sets her mark for the prize. Give it your all. That's what this Greek verb suggests here—*ἀγωνίζομαι* (*agonizomai*), from which we get the word "agony." It's more than fight, it suggests striving to accomplish something, something *good*. Take hold of it, Paul says. Take hold of this life, this life of God, to which you were called (1 Tim. 6:12). We will fail time and again, but this is our call, our quest, our struggle as we reach for what appears and might be impossible.

I've been thinking about all of this a lot this past week. Twenty-nine years ago last Monday, I was ordained a Minister of Word and Sacrament, and a week later I was serving my

first church in Scotland. As you know, it is a good and beautiful thing to be part of the church of Jesus Christ. And you probably also know, especially if you've been around any church for a time, we try to fight the good fight, we strive to be faithful, to share God's good news, we try to love one another and care for one another, and so often fall short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23), and sometimes fail miserably. Yes, it's a privilege and joy to be part of the church, but these are challenging times. There are times when it all feels impossible, overwhelming. There are certainly Babylonians at the gate of the church—and many congregations wonder about how they're going to survive, feeling all but defeated and discouraged for a variety of reasons. And yet it's not about us, but about God, and we continue to fight the good fight. And so, week after week, we're called back to worship, "Let us worship God!"

And there are days when I'm reminded that being a minister is an impossible job. Sure, it's a calling and an extraordinary privilege, but it's a call to do a job. It's demanding work, with stress and strain and sometimes tears. Planting seeds, watering the seeds, trying to be faithful, rarely seeing the fruits of one's labor. Without the Holy Spirit, the love of my partner, support of close, dear friends, your prayers, and a very good psychotherapist, I couldn't do it. Some days I'm inspired, like Don Quixote, to quest after the impossible. But not every day. There are days when I'm discouraged, and feel inadequate to the task, to the call, and discover again that the work is impossible. Then I come to my limit. I'm defeated. And I'm thrown upon the mercy of God and remember that I'm a jar of clay. "We have this treasure in jars of clay," Paul said, "to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us" (2 Cor. 4:7). All this is true. But then I go back into the arena, to fight the good fight, invest in the future, buy a field, dare the impossible.

Like [Greta Thunberg](#), the 16-year-old Swedish environmental and climate activist who has single-handedly achieved the seemingly impossible by galvanizing the world, especially the youth, to what feels like an overwhelming task of healing the planet, as we face the accelerating change occurring to the earth's climate. Talk about Babylonians at the gate. It can feel like all hope is lost. *What have we done?* Now that we've entered the [Anthropocene](#), as environmentalists call the current geological age, *we* are the Babylonians at our own gates.

In a speech last week in New York at the United Nations's Climate Summit, Greta, this modern-day prophet worthy of Jeremiah, implored the world, especially wealthy corporations that really have the power and influence to perhaps reverse course, to do something bold. She said, "People are suffering, people are dying, entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are at the beginning of a mass extinction, and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth?" On Friday, more than 7 million throughout the world responded to her call to strike for the climate, one of the largest global demonstrations in history. I love Greta's Twitter hashtag for the demonstrations: #fridaysforfuture. Like Jeremiah, she's not willing to gloss over the current crisis—and there are plenty of "Zedekiahs" who are angry with her and wish her to just be quiet. And like Jeremiah, she's not giving up on the future. "For more than 30 years," she said, "the science has been crystal clear. How dare you continue to look away and come here saying that you're doing enough, when the politics and solutions needed are still nowhere in sight. You say you hear us and that you understand the urgency. But no matter how sad and angry I am, I do not want to believe that. Because if you

really understood the situation and still kept on failing to act, then you would be evil. And that I refuse to believe.”³

...then you would be evil, and that I refuse to believe.

That belief in humanity, perhaps unfounded, that trust is, perhaps, like buying a field for homes and vineyards, while the Babylonians are at the gate. She is staking a claim on the future.

And as people of faith, aren't we called to do the same, to stake a claim on the future, despite how ludicrous and seemingly impossible it seems? We trust in the God, as both Jeremiah and Paul discovered, who has the power to redeem the future, the God for whom “nothing is too hard,” even as we fight *God's* good fight, striving, reaching, grasping after the *good*.



¹ Wendel Berry, “Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front,” *The Country of Marriage* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973).

² *Man of La Mancha* (1965), book by Dale Wasserman, lyrics by Joe Darion, and music by Mitch Leigh

³ <https://www.npr.org/2019/09/23/763452863/transcript-greta-thunbergs-speech-at-the-u-n-climate-action-summit>