

Sermon: How Close Can You Stand?

Year C, Proper 21

[Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15; Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16; 1 Timothy 6:6-19; Luke 16:19-31](#)

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Let's be honest. Peter totally drew the short straw today. Not only were there about a million names in the reading from Jeremiah, it wasn't even interesting. It was a real estate transaction. Told in Biblical Hebrew, which means that you don't underline the important bits, you repeat them. What can possibly be so important that they say three times that there's a sealed deed to buy a chunk of the family farm in a suburb of Jerusalem?

Let's begin with the land. In an agrarian society, land is life.¹ If Hanamel is selling it, something catastrophic has happened. The Israelites believed God owned the land. God had brought them out of slavery in Egypt, through the wilderness and into the land of milk and honey. God put the families on their pieces of land. When something or someone was going to be lost from the family, it was the obligation of the oldest male member of the family to make it right.² So, apparently, in this situation, that's Jeremiah.

What catastrophe is Hanamel facing? Well, Jerusalem is surrounded by the Babylonian army, so in all likelihood, they are camped on the family farm; everything has been eaten, slaughtered and burned. This is the Babylonian army that Jeremiah has been warning of for years. Jeremiah has gone around telling everyone that if they didn't get it together, if they didn't return to a right relationship with God, God would act through the army coming from the north. Jeremiah has been alone in this warning; all the other professional, court prophets have been saying that God lives in the Temple and God won't let anything bad happen to Jerusalem. Which is an interesting take since the rest of the land of Israel is now under Babylonian control and thousands of people have been sent into exile.

In fact, the king of Jerusalem stopped paying tribute to the Babylonian empire a few years back. They sent an army, killed that king and put another one in place. The tribute, the taxes, started flowing to Babylon again. Then the new king decided to ally himself with Egypt (don't get me started on what a bad idea that was) and not pay tribute either. The Babylonian army is back and they're not messing around anymore. As far as they're concerned, Israel is going to become a province of Babylon, with no independence whatsoever.

Jeremiah has been sharing God's pain about how stubborn the people of Israel are. He asked if there was no balm in Gilead to ease the sin sick soul (Jeremiah 8:22). Jeremiah has been arguing so forcefully for his understanding that the world as they know it is coming to an end that he has been chased out of his home town of Anathoth. He's been arguing that now that Jerusalem is surrounded by Babylon, the Israelites should put down their weapons and submit to the Babylonians. When they heard him say that, the court authorities threw him in jail so he

¹ Stephen Breck Reid, "Proper 21, Theological Perspective, Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 4*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010], 98.

² James D. Newsome, "Proper 21: Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15" in *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV – Year C*, ed. Charles B. Cousar et al. [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994], 529.

wouldn't lower morale in the city.³ That's why his cousin found him in jail when Hanamel wanted to sell Jeremiah the farm.

So let's review: there's a catastrophe at the farm, namely there's a hostile army camped on it. Hanamel wants Jeremiah to buy this essentially worthless piece of land, because there's certainly no way anyone from their family is going to be farming it in the coming generation. The farm is in the town that has threatened Jeremiah's life, should Jeremiah ever return. The army camped on the farm is there to crush Israel once and for all, to eliminate any independence. Jeremiah has been arguing that all of this is because the Israelites have gotten out of right relationship with God. He's been so passionate, so articulate, so clear in making his point that God is wounded, grieving, broken hearted by the actions of the people and the leadership of Israel, that God has sent this very army to the gates of Jerusalem. Indeed, Jeremiah is no longer arguing that it's time to repent. Jeremiah has been saying it's too late. Submit to your punishment at the hands of the Babylonians. That's your only choice. So he's in jail, unable to get to the registry of deeds.

Sounds to me like this is the perfect moment to engage in a little real estate speculation. Can I interest *you* in a little land in Venezuela, Syria, the Bahamas, Afghanistan, Kashmir? Buying land outside of Jerusalem is illogical, irrational.

But Jeremiah is a prophet. He sees under the present moment. He has spent years naming what the people are numb to, that they have walked away from a right relationship with the God who brought them out of slavery in Egypt. In this moment when he himself has said, as God's spokesman, God has had enough of the capers of the people of Israel, God is washing God's hands of them, in this moment, Jeremiah sees his cousin as also sent by God. Not only does Jeremiah purchase the farm, he buys it in the most formal and most public way possible. He goes through all the rigamarole that you have to do to make sure that his ownership of the land is official. Jeremiah's in jail; so he recruits a whole bunch of other people to help him make the purchase of this land as public and official as possible.

Because this purchase of the land is a sign, a symbol. That's another part of being a prophet, offering a sign or a symbol that helps people re-orient themselves. Jeremiah is saying that one day his family will work the land that God gave God's chosen people. Jeremiah is saying that God told me to say all those warning that you guys ignored about God being fed up with the people of Israel and I was right. So listen to me now too. Israel's land will support the chosen people of Israel again.

Jeremiah has no logical basis for this claim. There is nothing in Jeremiah's present reality that even vaguely supports the idea that there is a future for Israel. The only reasonable, rational conclusion you can reach is that Israel is done. God has walked away and it's over. Jeremiah is not arguing with that. He's in jail because of how forcefully he's argued that it is indeed all over, all done.

Jeremiah has argued all along that there is no set of rules that contains God, not even God's own rules. God is so powerful, so loving, so longing for us to return to God that God will do a new thing, something outside our experience, outside of logic.

³ R. E. Clements, Jeremiah, in *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1988), 194.

I want to believe that. I want to stand with Jeremiah and his deed and his earthenware jar. I believe that prophets are just regular people sharing what God has asked them to share, naming the hurts and the hopes of the community that God has asked them to name. I want to believe that I live with Jeremiahs, that at times I am called to be a Jeremiah. I want to believe that this mess of a world, with its conflicts and rising temperatures and pollution and people retreating into camps where they are not challenged but only confirmed, I want to believe that God will do a new thing.

But I don't see how Jeremiah did it. How did Jeremiah stand in the middle of this train wreck and not be so worn down by reality that he could still hear God saying, "and yet." (Jeremiah 4:27, 32:25)?

I've known plenty of happy-clappy people who seem dedicated to building a bubble around themselves so that nothing terrible ever happens to them. Maybe that works for them, but I'm always skeptical of what will be left when the bubble bursts. Jeremiah definitely does not strike me as one of those.

Looking at the text, looking at what he did and what he said, I think Jeremiah understood something really important. If you want to hear those moments when God says "and yet", you need to be standing pretty close to God. That means you have to be standing close to God when God's heart is breaking because God's people turn away. You have to be standing pretty close to God when God says, "That's not right. That's not how you love your neighbor. That's not how you love the widow, the orphan, the stranger among you. That's not how you love the poor, the sick, those who mourn, those who hunger and thirst. That's not how you handle your dominion over all the earth." You have to be standing pretty close and you have to say what God says. You have to make the call, out loud, to the people around you. You have to make the call as public and official as you can.

It's only by standing that close, listening that carefully, weeping with God at the failures and stubbornness of the rest of us, that you catch the "and yet", that you see the signs of God doing a new thing that does not come out of the mess of the present reality. When you speak the truth of God's pain, you're freed up, you have more room to maneuver, you're not drowning in all the denials that say, somehow Jerusalem is going to find a way out of this mess. You speak God's truth, that this is the end for Jerusalem. And then you move on, free to speak more of God's truth, that Jerusalem will have another beginning that is not dependent on the present reality, but rather is dependent on God's love, on God doing a new thing. We can hear and feel the grief clearly enough. Can we bear to stand close enough to hear the "and yet"?