

“Invested”
Jeremiah 32:1-15; I Timothy 6:11-21

I Timothy 6:11-21

¹¹But as for you, man of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. ¹²Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.

¹³In the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you ¹⁴to keep the commandment without spot or blame until the manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁵which he will bring about at the right time—he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords.

¹⁶It is he alone who has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see; to him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.

¹⁷As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. ¹⁸They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, ¹⁹thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.

²⁰Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you. Avoid the profane chatter and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge; ²¹by professing it some have missed the mark as regards the faith. Grace be with you.

Historical Setting

In the long history of God’s Chosen, Covenant People, the Old Testament reading for today comes 400 years after the Golden Age, when, about 1000 years before the time of Jesus, King David had reigned over a unified and thriving Israel.

It was not too long after David that the kingdom fell apart, splitting into two countries and never again knowing the prosperity and security of those golden years. Now the People of God were in two kingdoms: the northern kingdom, Israel, and the southern kingdom, Judah, whose capital was Jerusalem.

Israel, the northern kingdom, fell to the Assyrians in 722 BCE.

Judah struggled on for another century and a half, but by 587 BCE, Jerusalem was on the verge of being overthrown, and the Temple leveled, by the conquering Babylonians.

Just north of Jerusalem is a town called Anathoth. The prophet Jeremiah came from there. "...Anathoth, like the rest of the Judean countryside, was already occupied by the Babylonians."ⁱ And now they were poised to finish the job on Jerusalem.

As R.E. Clements has noted, at this point, "militarily and politically the situation had reached a point where no human resources of hope remained credible."ⁱⁱ

As we come into the reading, Jeremiah is "under [something like] house arrest" in Jerusalemⁱⁱⁱ for something like treason—for having done his job, which was to be a prophet of his time and place.

Jeremiah 32:1-15

^{32:1}The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD in the tenth year of King Zedekiah of Judah, which was the eighteenth year of Nebuchadrezzar [of Babylon].

²At that time the army of the king of Babylon was besieging Jerusalem, and the prophet Jeremiah was confined in the court of the guard that was in the palace of the king of Judah, ³where King Zedekiah of Judah had confined him.

[King] Zedekiah had said [to Jeremiah], "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; ⁴King 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 shall speak with him face to face and see him eye to eye; ⁵and he shall take Zedekiah to Babylon, and there he shall remain until I attend to him, says the LORD; though you fight against the Chaldeans, you shall not succeed?"

⁶Jeremiah said,

The word of the LORD came to me: ⁷Hanamel son of your uncle Shallum is going to come to you and say, "Buy my field that is at Anathoth, for the right of redemption by purchase is yours."

⁸Then my cousin Hanamel came to me in the court of the guard, in accordance with the word of the LORD, and said to me, “Buy my field that is at Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, for the right of possession and redemption is yours; buy it for yourself.”

Then I knew that this was the word of the LORD.

⁹And I bought the field at Anathoth from my cousin Hanamel, and weighed out the money to him, seventeen shekels of silver. ¹⁰I signed the deed, sealed it, got witnesses, and weighed the money on scales. ¹¹Then I took the sealed deed of purchase, containing the terms and conditions, and the open copy; ¹²and I gave the deed of purchase to Baruch son of Neriah son of Mahseiah, in the presence of my cousin Hanamel, in the presence of the witnesses who signed the deed of purchase, and in the presence of all the Judeans who were sitting in the court of the guard.

¹³In their presence I charged Baruch, saying, ¹⁴Thus 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 they may last for a long time.

¹⁵For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land. ■

Prayer

God of our years and our moments,
our systems and our decisions,
our strength and our weaknesses;

All-Wise and All-Seeing God,
Judge of our past,

Now that we have infiltrated your awesome and delicate creation
with rampant, thriving chemical technology
that enhances the lives of some
and poisons the bodies and the food supply of many;

Now that we have settled into a constant state of war,
with a young and idealistic generation

who have no memory of not being a country at war,
and those of us who profit most
are asked for little or no personal sacrifice for the cause;

Now that the level of our national discourse
makes the most disappointing imprudence of the political past
look and sound in retrospect like brilliant, mature statecraft,

Judge us as you must,
and hear our remorseful prayer for mercy.

Wounded, Transcendent God,
Guide of our living,

As the pierced bodies of black men and boys bleeding out
bear insistent testimony, even when that testimony will not be heard;
As the exploited, stolen and violated bodies of women and children
bear insistent testimony, even when that testimony will not be heard;
As the emaciated bodies of starved human beings on every continent
bear insistent testimony, even when that testimony will not be heard,

shouted down by broadcasting pundits and partisan bellowing,
even over the soul- and self-searching and peace-pleading
of those of privilege and means and genuine goodwill
who do not want this madness, this blood,
this brokenness, this death,
be they conservative in believing in the goodness of this country
or liberal in believing in the generosity of our people,

Guide us, with your light that the darkness did not overcome,
into a living that is demonstrably, actively unsatisfied
with collateral damage and acceptable levels of human suffering.

Strong, Immortal God,
Only Hope of our future,

In the face of overwhelming odds,
Where too much money is at stake
to make it possible to think we can change the system,
where too much barbaric ingenuity recruits new killers

from too much poverty and inequality and pain,

where too many political complications
prevent the saving of underprivileged lives, foreign and domestic,
and too much misinformation and too many lies are floating around
for new understanding
to penetrate human hearts
and change made-up minds,

where too complicated global macroeconomics
among pharmaceutical, energy, and agricultural industries
bring us a bounteous food supply, fertilized by petroleum^{iv},
that carries just enough toxins to require the use of pharmaceuticals;

where too much brutal history and ongoing cruelty
make even the most reasonable among us salivate for blood justice,

Do not, we humbly pray, write us off
as easily as we dismiss hope;
Do not, we humbly pray, give in
to our lament that we can do nothing;
Do not, we humbly pray, agree with us
when in our lowest times we throw up our hands
and surrender to hopelessness,
as if any problem on earth could ever be larger than you.

And when in our prayers, we claim that it's all too much,
and can never be reversed or redeemed,
Thwart our sense of uselessness, our faithlessness, our hopelessness,
with the Beautiful Truth that is You,
and the Promise that is the Eternal Divine Love,
against which there is no such thing as too much of anything else
on earth or in heaven.

Please, O God, in the face of our bafflement
over what in the world you would have us do,
Tell us again what you have already told us
when we look to the skies or look in the mirror
and ask again: Is it even worth it?

Investing God, you have poured everything into us,
asking only that we re-invest the inexhaustible resource of your constant love
into the workings of this world,
which was made for beauty,
and has such a difficult time believing it.

Amen.

The Sermon

Thirty years ago, there was an African American kid in Los Angeles named Calvin, whose primary adult male influence in his life was his Uncle Charles, an officer with the Santa Monica Police Department.

The officer said to his young nephew, “Cal, the worst thing you could ever see is a police officer taking their gun out of the holster, because cops aren’t trained to shoot to wound—that’s in the movies and on TV. When we pull our gun, it’s because someone’s about to die.”

He said, “I’ve been a cop for over 30 years, and I’ve never had to shoot anybody, because I knew how serious the outcome would be.”^v

The world in which the Prophet Jeremiah meets King Zedekiah is a world full of potential and realized serious outcomes.

Human lives were at stake—human lives are always at stake. But something else was at stake, too.

With the Babylonians prepared to overrun Jerusalem, eyes and arms focused on the Temple, the People of God were in big, big trouble. The potential loss, in human terms, was threatening to be devastating. And the loss in the people’s sense of the meaning of the world, the meaning of our existence, was under even more imminent threat.

What happens in you when the thing that gives you the most meaning in your life is threatened? And what if it’s threatened by forces that are far greater than your ability to control?

The national myth of the people of my ancestry, the Serbs, involves a battle that took place in the 14th century called the Battle of *Kosovo Polje* or Kosovo Field. It

was an overwhelming military loss for the Serbs, but the myth that grew around it was that the night before the battle, in which the Serbs were greatly outnumbered by the Ottomans, a message from heaven came to Prince Lazar, the leader of the Serbian army. The message offered Lazar a question: do you choose the empire of heaven, or the empire of earth?

Lazar considers, and recognizes that the heavenly empire is eternal, and earthly empires are momentary, and so makes his choice. Knowing the fate that awaits them, they go forth the next day into doomed battle.^{vi}

So, even with their decisive defeat, the people still had something that gave them meaning.^{vii}

But if the Temple falls—the center of our life and belief and faith and nation; the place and the thing that gives us our sense of who we are, as a people and even as individuals—if the Temple falls, and all Jerusalem and all of Judah with it, what does that mean?

What happens when the things that give us meaning are threatened by forces beyond our ability to control?

If King Zedekiah, or the people of Judah, or Jeremiah himself were thinking that surely God would swoop in and somehow knock out the Babylonian army, that was not in the cards. Some people—and I used to be one of them—can't stand the expression, "It is what it is." But this was what it was, and sometimes, that's the hard reality we have to face.

"The situation had reached a point where no human resources of hope remained credible."^{viii}

Into this reality came the word to Jeremiah:

Hanamel, son of your uncle Shallum, is going to come to you and say, "Buy my field at Anathoth."

Then, says Jeremiah, Hanamel came and said, "Buy my field at Anathoth; buy it for yourself."

Jeremiah knew a couple of things. He knew that field was already occupied, in a town that was occupied, in a region that was occupied, in a nation that was just

about to be leveled by the occupying power—a power over whom it was unimaginable that anyone would ever triumph. There was no way to imagine that Jeremiah or his descendants would ever see that field again, at least not as his property.

He also knew the long history of God's interaction with God's people. If you were to ask an Old Testament person why they believe in God, they wouldn't answer you with organized theological arguments. They would recount their history.

And at every stage of that history, they would say, "God was with us. When we couldn't see over the horizon into the promise of God's future for us, God was with us."

And so, Jeremiah says, I bought the field. I signed the deed, sealed it, got witnesses, and weighed the money on scales; took the sealed deed of purchase, and the open copy; gave the deed of purchase to Baruch in the presence of my cousin and the witnesses and everybody who was there.

In their presence, I said to Baruch, "Take these deeds and put them in an earthenware jar, in order that they 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 bought in this land."

It was not just philosophical. His investment was literal, tangible, witnessed, recorded, and preserved.

When the situation reaches a point where no human resources of hope remain credible,

When the world is all about serious outcomes, where human lives are always at stake,

God says: invest in this land, this place, this situation, these people. They are all worthy of your investment.

An older pastor in New Testament times warned a youthful one that always there would be temptations to waste time on small controversies and define themselves by how much wealth they could accumulate.

Our lives were never meant to be that small. God is far too invested in us for us to live lives that small and hopeless.

When the body that used to see and hear and run
and stand up straight and strong, like a tree planted by the river,
falters and brings you aches and frustration,
God says: I am invested in you.
Will you invest in me?

When your house is falling down
and the car's out of gas
and the money's running out
and there's nothing worth eating
and there's nobody to eat with anyway,
I am invested in you.
Will you invest in me?

When your neighbors misinterpret you,
and your friends lose your number,
and your family is all over the place,
and your colleagues don't remember,
and half your lifetime friends are gone,
I am invested in you.
Will you invest in me?

When your cities bleed
and ignorance wins
and poverty lurks
and tension mounts
and innocent people die
and the limited options all fall way short of perfect,
I am invested in you.
Will you invest in me?

When you give up something you wanted
so that someone else can have something they need;
When you walk a little further than you wanted to
in order to share a good word with someone you may or may not enjoy,
When you answer disrespect with love
and by doing so, demonstrate your worthiness of respect,

I am invested in you.

Will you invest in me?

When the situation has reached a point where no human resources of hope remain credible^{ix}, God is just getting started.

Stake your claim.

Invest yourself in the work God is doing and the future that you and I can't see, but God can.

Invest everything God has given you in the healing of this broken, beautiful world full of broken, beautiful people. It's more than worth it.

Make your investment, because God is invested in you.

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ⁱ Herbert Marks, ed., *The English Bible: King James Version, Volume One: The Old Testament (Norton Critical Edition)*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012; Jeremiah 32:1-44 n. (p. 1373).

ⁱⁱ R.E. Clements, *Jeremiah (Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching)*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988; p. 193.

ⁱⁱⁱ Clements, op. cit., p. 194.

^{iv} Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*. New York: Penguin, 2006; pp. 44-46ff.

^v Calvin Moore, friend of the author, from a post on Facebook made September 20, 2016 at 2:21 P.M. from Los Angeles, CA.

^{vi} This national myth in the epic poetry of Vuk Karadžić is widely known in Yugoslav studies and of course among the South Slavic peoples. It is discussed, among many other sources, in Tim Judah, *The Serbs: History, Myth and the Destruction of Yugoslavia*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997; pp. 34-37.

^{vii} That can be good or bad—that national myth was exploited to horrifying effect as both motivation and excuse for all kinds of atrocities committed by Serbs and others at the end of the 20th century.

viii Clements, *op. cit.*, p. 193.

ix Clements, *op. cit.*, p. 193.