

“Time is on God’s Side” (Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15)
Rev. Joyce Kirk-Moore

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San Dimas Community Church, UCC

The fresco on the screen before you is of the prophet Jeremiah and was painted by Michelangelo on the wall of the Sistine Chapel. Jeremiah was one of those reluctant prophets who found himself in a particular time of Israel’s history called by God to speak words of tough love to God’s people.

The message of tough love addressed the people’s idolatry. The worship of only one God, monotheism, was a unique and relatively new theological idea in the ancient world, and it was also the basis of the covenant, the relationship between Yahweh and the people. But all around them were people worshipping many gods, and it was easy to adopt a “more gods the merrier attitude.” Perhaps if one god didn’t deliver the goods, another god would. So even God’s covenant people fell into forgetfulness; their devotion was divided and just as any important relationship depends on fidelity and intentionality, Yahweh expected Judah to choose one God as the ground of cultural, national, and religious worship.

Jeremiah was not the only prophet around; he had competition and the message from these other prophets was that everything was OK, just fine, the nation was safe and secure and, of course, good news is more pleasant to hear and easier to believe. So Jeremiah’s threats of doom and gloom placed him in peril. He was dumped in a cistern and left to die and then rescued by a foreign slave.

Jeremiah was put in prison, and then after Jerusalem fell, again foreigners (the Babylonians this time) released him and made sure he was safe. He and his faithful scribe, Baruch, went to Egypt to live out their days.

But before the final destruction of Jerusalem, while Jeremiah is still in prison, he did something incomprehensible. In this very land of Judah, soon to be absolutely desolate, he purchased a piece of land. And Jeremiah proclaimed that down the line, somewhere in God’s future, the land will be inhabited once again. It was an act of hope in the very cusp of hopelessness. It was a costly act based on a future time that is on God’s side. This would be like buying a bombed piece of land in the middle of Bagdad and paying a high price for it because one has reason to believe that the future there will offer prosperity.

Jeremiah’s purchase was meticulously recorded and placed inside a special jar to preserve the deed. Now earlier in his prophetic career, Jeremiah had shattered a jar to symbolically show that Judah would be shattered. Now he places a tangible costly deed for land within a jar to symbolically represent a future with hope. Many centuries after the apostle Paul writes: *But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.* Paul is talking about us, within the clay jars of our bodies, holding a treasure that is part of God’s future time.

It is difficult for us to imagine the complete and utter destruction of Jerusalem. Perhaps imagining those scenes from Hiroshima after the atomic bomb was dropped would help us grasp the devastation. So you can imagine in stark contrast to the devastation of Judah the idea of hope concretely illustrated by the purchasing, recording, and preserving this deed of land and what a powerful vision for the future. How on earth can this place be whole again? Time is on God’s side.

Yes, the Jews were taken as prisoners of war to Babylon. In an underpopulated world, people and the labor they would bring was a great acquisition to the victors. Yes, the nation and capital of Jerusalem were no more. But something happened even in this foreign land. The Jews did as Jeremiah prophesied they would do and built homes, established families, but they also established synagogues. They no longer could get to the temple so they created a new kind of sacred space, the synagogue. And they wrote their faith story. In this foreign land of Babylon, they reformed their identity as children of God and they gathered and compiled both the written and oral traditions that now fill most of the Hebrew Bible so that they would not forget who they were and whose they were. They became bearers of sacred story.

And all the generations that followed throughout the Jewish diaspora carried the written word, their faith story, with them, and it was passed on generation after generation until a young man named Jesus was born and he taught the story anew and he became the story and we are here today because we've heard and believed the story.

Jeremiah's act of buying land in a place soon to be destroyed was the audacity of hope. What did Jeremiah think he was doing buying that land? Talk about a toxic asset! What was Jesus thinking when he taught and healed and proclaimed God's word knowing it would only get him in trouble. In spite of all that happened, Jesus stayed faithful unto death all the while offering to those in despair hope of new life because God holds the future and time is on God's side.

I remember a friend and spiritual mentor saying years ago when we were about to invade Iraq that the only way he could deal with what was coming down without feeling total despair was the belief that somewhere, somehow God was at work in the midst of it all. As Martin Luther King said "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." So whatever the conditions of our world, we trust that time is on God's side! There is indeed tragedy in our world--enough to keep us busy as servants of God working for justice.

I also remember another story Stan told at our wedding. I think I've shared it with you before, but it's good enough to tell again. About three years before our wedding, Stan came to visit Tom and encourage him when he was feeling discouraged by life. And as they waited at the airport for the plane that would take Stan home, he said to Tom: "Today we cry, but one day, there will be a day of joy." As Stan and Liz stood with us on our wedding day, he then added these words: "today is that day of joy!"

I don't know all the grief and despair you might be feeling today, but I do know this: Time is indeed on God's side and God will not abandon you. You may be grieving a loved one, feeling that the pain will never go away. You may be facing a serious illness or be living with a weakened body because of one. You may be worried about someone you love who is far away, perhaps in harm's way. You may be without a job, wondering if you'll ever be gainfully employed again. You may have a job but be underemployed and not making enough to pay your bills. You may be spiritually soul-sick and wonder if the day will come again when you see a future of hope and happiness. Wherever we find ourselves today, whatever sorrow weighs us down, we live with the believe that time is on God's side.

The possibilities for a future that seems so far off and undefined are possibilities within God's dream for you and for me. So we live in hope and faith; we live with courage and devotion. We give thanks for what has been and welcome a future yet to be; as Natalie Sleeth's song says: "unrevealed until its season something God alone can see."