

June 14, 2020 We Are Witnesses Pt. 9 Jeremiah 32:1-26

Dearly Beloved;

This past week the Premier of Ontario declared that churches could meet in their buildings provided the gathering was 30 % of the seating capacity of the sanctuary. Let me begin by saying we could probably meet those basic limitations at St. Andrew's. However, a number of weeks ago I reminded you that I have a duty to God concerning you, which is to keep the flock safe. Clearly we are not meeting at this time. I have called the Elders to meet as a Session with me to consider a way forward. The Government of Ontario has not laid down a lot of conditions governing our meeting to worship. The Presbyterian Church In Canada has produced a document, and so has the Church in Alberta. What these documents make plain is that Covid-19 makes the whole process complex. This plague is spread by the propulsion of droplets resulting from speech, and the basic act of breathing. We cannot easily meet outside in the open air in the summer. Rain would mean simple cancelation of the worship opportunity. Most of the active cases of Covid-19 have been transmitted in doors. In the summer the majority of our services occur in the Church Hall because the sanctuary gets hot and stays hot. Here is what the documents mentioned above teach us. Worship will be shorter. Singing will be limited if not eliminated. There will be no right hand of fellowship, and no hugging. There will be no social time after the service. Dismissal will be formal, and orderly. We will feel like we are back in school. I would also share with you, the Lutherans and the Anglicans have already

stated they are going to wait until September to open their churches. Rosedale Presbyterian Church in Toronto, and a number of other congregations have announced a similar intention. Your Session will make the best decisions we can, your safety being our uppermost concern. I will report in detail on their decisions next week if that proves possible. I word it that way, because we may find ourselves saying, we need more time to figure out the details. Please pray for us and please be patient. Let's turn to the Word.

Jeremiah 32 makes us witnesses to a remarkable ministry, by a remarkable prophet. The army of Babylon under Nebuchadnezzar has besieged Jerusalem. Jeremiah the prophet is confined inside the walls of the city. For the moment the people and the prophet are safe inside those marvelous and great stone walls. But it is clear to many that the outcome of the siege will lead to a Titanic moment. As the ship will sink so the city will fall. At the point at which chapter 32 begins all of Israel has fallen into the hands of the Babylon army. Only the great walled city remains of a Jewish kingdom under God, the Almighty. The old world is, before their eyes passing away. Uncertainty about the future is like the fever of a plague spreading throughout the population. This is definitely not the time to invest in Jewish land, or to buy, or build a house.

Jeremiah has in fact been arrested by order of the King of Judah, Zedekiah. Jeremiah is under house arrest in the courtyard of the guard in the royal palace. (vs. 2) The prophet's

crime is outlined in the 3<sup>rd</sup> verse. He has been consistently saying that he has heard the voice of God. And what God has revealed to Jeremiah is that Jerusalem will fall. Zedekiah will be exiled to Babylon as a prisoner of Nebuchadnezzar. “If you fight against the Babylonians you will not succeed.”

Barbara and I have been watching movies in the evenings since this Covid-19 plague caused our lifestyle to change. Two nights ago we watched the DiCaprio-Winslet portrayal of the sinking of Titanic. There is a scene involving the builder-designer, the Captain, and the incredulous representative of the White Star Line. He says, “This ship cannot sink!” To which the designer replies, “She is made of iron sir. I assure you she will. In two hours all of this will lie at the bottom of the Atlantic. It is a mathematical certainty.” Captain Smith begins to say, “But surely the pumps...” The designer, Andrews, cuts him off, “The pumps buy you time. But minutes only.” The sinking of the Titanic dashed the hopes of a world that had become addicted to the concept of Progress, and the undeniable ingenuity of man. In 2 years World War I would complete the unveiling of what “man” is capable of when he forgets that God alone is King of the world, and all that is.

Zedekiah was outraged and asking that age old question. How did it come to this? It was Jeremiah’s task as prophet appointed by the grace of God, given a message to declare by the voice of God, to announce the end of the divided Kingdom. Zedekiah is not just outraged. He is standing in the shoes that would be occupied by that man from the White Star

Line who had told the Captain to create “More speed” in order to capture a headline. The King just cannot believe that once an Empire, Israel is now 2 nations, and Judah is about to fall into the hands of Babylon. “This ship can’t sink!” But like the Titanic, it is a mathematical certainty that it will. God has spoken. Jeremiah is the messenger.

The marvelous reality is the little story within the story of the Fall of Jerusalem and the Kingdom of Judah. Jeremiah has an uncle, Uncle Hanamel. The word of the Lord comes to Jeremiah. He hears that voice which by faith he must obey. It is a Voice, he recognizes. He knows it is not his own. In fact, on his own Jeremiah knows he would never dream of doing what this Voice commands. “Your uncle is going to come to you and say, ‘Buy my field at Anathoth, because as nearest relative, it is your right and your duty to buy it.’” (vs. 7) We have to really concentrate to get the full implications of this.

There is no question of the right of Jeremiah to buy the field at Anathoth. It will be a purchase within what we now call the family bubble. The price would be fair as far as the value of land is concerned. But here is where the reality of the deed as an act of faith comes into clear focus. The armies of Babylon are just beyond the stone walls of Jerusalem. In other words, the field at Anathoth is a long way behind the front lines in this war. And from Jeremiah’s point of view, (he has heard the Voice, he has recognized the Voice, it is the Voice of the Living God in whom Jeremiah passionately believes and to whom he has given himself) victory for the Babylonians is a

done deal. It is as sure as the fate of the Titanic once it was side swiped by the ice berg. A mathematical certainty. The Babylonian army is a conquering force. And it is camped right there, where everyone can see it.

Jeremiah makes one comment to explain what he is going to do. "I knew that this was the word of the Lord, so I bought the field at Anathoth." God's word, God's holy Voice, in contrast to the conquering force at the city gates, and what God has said about the fate of Jerusalem and Judah, and the King Zedekiah. Jeremiah accepts God's word concerning Judah, concerning Babylon's conquest, but he also accepts God's word concerning this real estate deal. He buys as the stock market collapses. He buys as the Jewish economy disappears as a free entity. He buys as Babylon makes it a legitimate question, will he ever see the field at Anathoth let alone plant crops upon it? But that is not the issue. The Voice that called him to be a prophet said buy it. It is a pure act of faith. He trusts God.

As a result, Jeremiah does not simply buy the land! He attends to all the steps that make this legal. He weighed out the seventeen shekels of silver and gave it to his uncle. He signed and sealed the deed. He made sure it was properly witnessed. He had an unsealed copy of the deed made as well. When he filed the deed he required that his uncle and the witnesses of the signing were present. There was a legal paper trail and a human trail of witnesses that all the conditions were made and the total bill had been paid to the penny. And he assigns Baruch to see to it that the documents

are properly stored in a clay jar. He wants the papers to last a long time. Stored in clay jars, the Dead Sea Scrolls survived from the time of Christ to the time in which they were first discovered in the 1940's. When Jeremiah said he wanted them to last a long time, he really meant it. Why? Why was it so important? The Voice of the Lord God Almighty had said something else to the prophet Jeremiah. "Houses, fields and vineyards will again be bought in this land."

It is a simple (singular) promise of God. Hard times, difficult times, times that test us to the marrow of our bones, to the limits of our ability to be faithful, do not last. Hard times come to an end. As hard as it is for us to take heart, there will come a time which we will see, when we will say to one another, "Remember the pandemic of 2020...Covid-19? We wondered how the church could survive? And yet, here we are." The Church of Jesus Christ is not bricks and mortar, it is men, women, young people, children who very simply believe. Who like you, hunger to sing Hymns and choruses and sacred songs. To hear the scriptures read, the stories of Jesus, the history of God's grace, the words of prophets like Jeremiah. People who buy the field at Anathoth when hard evidence indicates it would be a waste of good money.

We are witnesses to these things. Every time someone sends an offering to the Church we call St. Andrew's by the Mill pond, they are buying the field at Anathoth. They and we cannot worship there at the moment. Not safely! And yet, we look to a better time. A time, "when houses and

fields and vineyards will again be bought in the land.” A time when the economy is humming again, and people are back at work. A time when Parliament is back in Session with every seat in the chamber of the House of the People filled, and the gallery too.

You see. That is what it means to be a witness, to see what occurs. The promise of God is so full of truth, and so trustworthy, you can bank on it when you cannot count on a Bank! This time will become a memory. Like Jeremiah the Voice of God calls us to be faithful in the interim, and (this is the harder part) to be faithful when life feels safe and normal and predictable again. The temptation in good times is to think we can handle things on our own. The temptation in good times is to forget God’s saying buy the land of faith when logic would say there is nothing logical about God in the face of hardship and exile. That is why the documents that were sacred, were placed in clay jars. So they would last to a time when wise faith would be able to actually see, as historical fact, what God had done in restorying the land and the people. HE is in the business of saving us from the world, armies of conquest, and viruses that are lethal. HE is in the business of asking the impossible in the midst of a world that does not comprehend what is happening and refuses to comprehend the power of God in the faith of ordinary people like you and me. We have made the investment in the Kingdom of God as Jesus calls us to do. We have sealed our faith. There are witnesses, we call them our brothers and sisters in Christ. And we have put our faith in Jesus because HE is the clay jar that keeps us for

eternity. Longer, so much longer than the life of the sacred scrolls found near the Dead Sea.

The field at Anathoth was a real field. The church that meets within the walls of St. Andrew's is a real Church. They belong to God. That is why they (we) are safe, no matter what occurs, no matter what it takes. The purchase of the occupied field at Anathoth was a good deal. It was an act to which the Lord called HIS servant. The hardship of this time is also a good deal. God is with us. The Holy Spirit is upon you and in you. The name of Jesus is the name which is above every name. Faith in HIM is by definition safety and saved. God bless you until next time. Run the race. Keep the faith.

Let us pray;

Thank you Lord for your servant, the prophet Jeremiah. Thank you for his willingness to suffer, and his eagerness to pray. Thank you for giving him the faith in you to buy a piece of ground that caused a lot of people to say, "what a dummy." But there came a time when houses and fields and vineyards were bought again...as YOU said would occur. Lord, walk with us through this time when we are tried, when we find it hard, when we miss former times and former privileges that we failed to recognize. Grant our leaders wisdom when they meet, as well as faith. Be with us as we practice a cautious but faithful way forward. In Jesus name we pray. Amen