

“In the Tenth Year of Zedekiah”

Jeremiah 32:1-15; Psalm 91:1-6

There is no such thing as a simple real estate transaction. There are always a stack of closing papers to be reviewed and signed by seller and buyer. After the “Settlement Statement” there comes the “Uniform Residential Loan Application,” followed by the “Uniform Residential Appraisal Report.” This document alone is about nine pages. Next is the “Notice of Right to Cancel.” Four copies of this notice. Then there is a “Final Truth-in-Lending Disclosure.” Does that mean that all the truth-in-lending disclosures up to this point have been less than truthful? It has ten or eleven pages and there are two copies.

I love this one: “Settlement Statement Escrow Account Addendum.” Who comes up with all this stuff? Then comes what sounds like a tax form. It’s titled “Request for Taxpayer Identification Number and Certification.” They can’t just ask for it, they apparently must have a form for it. You can’t buy a house without the government’s involvement, can you? Then there is the “Occupancy Affidavit and Financial Status” form and lots more forms.

I think you get the picture. Sign here, initial there...and there and there and there. There is no such thing as a simple real estate transaction. But our story from Jeremiah reveals that this has always been the case. It is one of the more fascinating things that happened to Jeremiah—when he bought a field in Anathoth—and we are told in great detail how it all happened. First, I’d like to explain how the Jewish law worked in such circumstances. Needless to say, it’s a bit different from ours.

When people today decide to sell a piece of property, they can do it on their own, “For Sale by Owner” style, or put it in the capable hands of a real estate agent. They put a sign in the yard, place the property on the real-estate multi-listing, so that every real estate agent around knows the property is for sale. Then there are open houses and walk-throughs by agents. Prospective buyers have the property inspected, so all problems and defects can be determined. And if you believe that the inspection process is fool-proof, I have a piece of property to sell you in the Everglades!

The sixth-century B.C. was a little different. Back then, if you wanted to sell a piece of property, you first had to go to family and offer it to them. You’ll find the rules in the twenty-fifth chapter of Leviticus, and they are quite specific. Verses 25-27 say, *“If one of your fellow Israelites becomes poor and sells some of their property, their nearest relative is to come and redeem what they have sold. If, however, there is no one to redeem it for them but later on they prosper and acquire sufficient means to redeem it themselves, they*

*are to determine the value for the years since they sold it and refund the balance to the one to whom they sold it; they can then go back to their own property.*” But if there are not sufficient means to recover it, what was sold shall remain with the purchaser until the year of jubilee. In the jubilee it shall be released, and then they can go back to their property.

If anyone sells a dwelling in a walled city, it may be redeemed until a year has elapsed since its sale; the right of redemption shall be one year. If it is not redeemed before a full year has elapsed, a house that is in a walled city shall pass in perpetuity to the purchaser and to his descendants; it shall not be released in the jubilee. But houses in villages that have no walls around them are to be considered as open country; they can be redeemed, and they are to be returned in the jubilee. Whew! So you see, there is no such thing, and probably never has been a thing like a *simple* real estate transaction.

Which brings us to our story in Jeremiah 32. Hanamel, the cousin of Jeremiah, son of his Uncle Shallum, has an offer that Jeremiah can't refuse. He has a piece of property at Anathoth in the land of Benjamin and he wants Jeremiah to buy it. Let's remember Jeremiah is under house arrest because King Zedekiah resents the prophet's constant meddling. He has put him under the watchful eye of his own guards. Jeremiah's preaching has been a relentless ranting and raving about how judgment was coming to the people of Judah. There will be destruction and death, says the prophet. No one will escape the fate that God has in store. In this case the armies of Babylon have become the armies of God. That is Jeremiah's message. The prophet has a one-point sermon and that's it. And the king has gotten sick and tired of hearing it over and over and over. Even though, in his heart of hearts he knows it's true, he can't take it anymore, so he has Jeremiah thrown in jail. Hanamel goes to see his cousin in jail.

All that Jeremiah has prophesied is about to be fulfilled. The city of Jerusalem is under siege and will fall at any minute to the Babylonian forces of King Nebuchadnezzar. The invading army is camped on Hanamel's property in Anathoth, and he can't work it. It's useless to him, so he needs to sell it. Since Jeremiah is Hanamel's closest relative, by Levitical law he must first offer his property to Jeremiah because Jeremiah is family.

Let's take a moment to understand this situation. Jeremiah is behind bars; the city of Jerusalem is about to fall into the hands of the enemy; and Hanamel comes to Cousin Jeremiah asking him to buy his property even though all of Judah is about to become the possession of the Babylonians. Does that sound like a great deal to you? Why doesn't

Jeremiah go ahead and buy the Brooklyn Bridge while he's at it? Why not buy that beach house in the desert?

They say there's a sucker born every minute. If that's so, Jeremiah takes the cake. Not only does he take up Hanamel's offer, he doesn't even dicker over the price. He buys the field for seventeen shekels of silver and is very meticulous in recording how the transaction goes down. He signs the deed, seals it, gets witnesses to the transaction, and in front of everybody carefully weighs the money on scales so that Hanamel can't come back later and say his cousin swindled him. Then, he takes the sealed deed which contains the terms and conditions of the transaction and makes a copy. He then gives the deed to Baruch, who I guess you could call his real estate agent. "*Take these documents, both the sealed and unsealed copies of the deed of purchase and put them in a clay jar so they will last a long time,*" (v. 14). he tells Baruch. Because, "*This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel*" told him to do. Sign here, initial there...and there, and there, and there. The question is, why? Why would Jeremiah buy a piece of property that in a matter of no time is going to be worthless? When the Babylonians break down the city walls and come thundering in, killing and pillaging and looting, which could happen at any moment, all the property in Jerusalem and all of Judah will be absolutely worthless. So why would Jeremiah pay seventeen shekels of silver to do such a thing? The simple answer is because God told him to do so.

But like all real estate transactions, the answer might not be that simple. At least, it isn't so simple if you are faced with the immediate prospect of death or exile to a foreign land. The future for Jeremiah and his people is about as bleak as it can get. It would be like someone trying to buy a place on Trafalgar Square in London during the German blitzkrieg of World War II. It just doesn't make sense. Unless, God has something in mind. And it's a safe bet to say that God always has something in mind.

We find it in verse 15 of our story where Jeremiah suddenly becomes more than a one-note preacher of gloom and doom: "*For this is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Houses, fields and vineyards will again be bought in this land.*" Jeremiah buys the field at Anathoth as a sign that one day it will be his, free and clear. One day, the people of Judah will return and claim the land that God gave to them. One day, redemption will come to the people of God. Jeremiah is not only *saying* that redemption, and not judgment, is the final word from the LORD, he is *acting* it out. In their darkest hour, there is a seed of hope for the land of Judah.

But it's easy to hopefully talk about redemption when life is easy. It's another thing when the enemy is about to bust down your door. What kind of faith does it take to have hope when there appears to be none? How do you look for a little bit of light when it is so dark that you can't see your hand in front of your face? One thing that is absolutely certain about this real estate transaction is its *date*. Jeremiah makes that perfectly clear, saying in verse 1: "*In the tenth year of Zedekiah king of Judah...*" Woven throughout God's marvelous story is a golden thread of redemption. We could zoom ahead 600 years to Jesus in John's gospel where he says, "*You study the Scriptures (i.e. the OT) diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me*" (John 5:39). When we read the Bible in its context it strengthens our faith. We're able to see Jesus in not only the New Testament, but the Old. And we can comprehend why Jesus had to come by reading the good news of redemption way back *in the tenth year of Zedekiah!*

You see, the Bible is a composition of documents and eyewitness recordings, written at different times, for different reasons, all under the overarching theme of God's redemption. This is important to recognize because it means that each book of the Bible has its own historic and literary context to consider, within the bigger backdrop. In our own lives, sometimes a hospital room or an office cubicle is all too similar to a jail cell. The future is as bleak as it was in Jerusalem in the year 588 B.C.

I've noticed that some people are able to place themselves fully in the hands of God and others find it very difficult to do that. What kind of person are you? Faced with a terribly bleak future, what would you do? How would you react? If you've never had to face that kind of situation before, you may not know. Is it even possible to be prepared for such a thing? Jeremiah would say YES!

But we will not find the hope we need in our darkest hour on our own. It comes to us from God. And this transaction does not require that we put our signature on complicated forms, or that we jump through hoops designed to make it difficult. There's really nothing very complicated about it. It simply requires that we reach out our hand and place it in the hand of Jesus; that we trust him. When we do, we will find that the closing papers are already signed by the One who gave his life for us; and the deed is already sealed and recorded. All we have to do is accept it. Nothing very complicated about that, is there? Amen.

(Thanks to Randy Hyde for sermon suggestions)