

August 9, 2009  
Alpena Presbyterian Church  
Steven Hammond, Pastor

Ephesians 4: 1-6; 29-5:1

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, <sup>2</sup>with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, <sup>3</sup>making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. <sup>4</sup>There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, <sup>5</sup>one Lord, one faith, one baptism, <sup>6</sup>one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. <sup>7</sup>But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift.

Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. <sup>31</sup>Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, <sup>32</sup>and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children.

## Jeremiah 31: 1-15 (selections)

This is 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: “I am going to give this city into the hand of the king of Babylon, and he shall take it; <sup>4</sup>King Zedekiah of Judah shall not escape out of the hands of the Chaldeans, but shall be taken 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!”

<sup>6</sup>Jeremiah said, The word of the LORD came to me: <sup>7</sup>Hanamel son of your uncle Shallum is going to come to you and say, “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.” <sup>9</sup>And so I bought the field at Anathoth from my cousin Hanamel, and weighed out the money to him, seventeen shekels of silver. <sup>10</sup>I signed the deed, sealed it, got witnesses, and weighed the money on scales. <sup>11</sup>Then I took the sealed deed of purchase, containing the terms and conditions, and the open copy; <sup>12</sup>and I gave the deed of purchase to Baruch in the presence of the witnesses who signed the deed of purchase. <sup>13</sup>In their presence I charged Baruch, saying, <sup>14</sup>Thus 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. <sup>15</sup>For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: **Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.**

### **Jeremiah: The Future is Not for Wimps**

Perhaps you're wondering why the story of a real estate transaction is the basis for this morning's message, much less why this report would ever be recorded in the Bible in such detail.

From my experience real estate transactions are daunting experiences for both buyer and seller. I don't know about you, but the pages and pages of fine print material that is placed before you at the closing of a real estate deal sets my head spinning. Who makes up all this stuff? Who reads it all? Who understands what the heck it all means?

In today's real estate market is tough. It seems that a lot of folks bought high and are now having to sell low – not the outcome they wanted. We know that a lot of folks are facing foreclosure or eviction because they either relied on bad advice, were scammed into making deals they did not understand, or simply overextended themselves into something they could not afford. Many hoped that the real

estate market would just continue to climb and climb and that what they bought would continue to increase in value – obviously it hasn't.

So today, we seem to be getting a lesson about real estate purchases – with the prophet Jeremiah as the purchaser and “the word of the Lord” as the financial advisor. You would think that if God says: “Buy” it might turn out to be a pretty good deal. I mean if you heard “Thus says the Lord” like Jeremiah did – wouldn't you be encouraged?

Well – maybe not so much.

During the summer months here at 1<sup>st</sup> Presbyterian we have been taking a little break from the lectionary readings and marching through some of the old testament characters who appear in the Bible. We've done Abraham, Moses, Ruth, David and Amos, among others. And today's character is Jeremiah.

Jeremiah was a prophet – an old testament prophet. Now Biblical prophets were not fortune tellers, psychics or palm readers. They were not folks whose primary purpose was to predict the future. A Biblical prophet was a person who is selected by God and speaks as God's representative.

The intent of the prophets' message is not to give those in the know some inside information about the future but instead consists of pronouncements that are meant to bring about some sort of social or behavioral change so that the behavior of people conforms to God's will and purpose.

Now prophets do point out the consequences of failing to make those changes – which often leads people into thinking that they are simply predicting the future – but again that's not the purpose.

Well, poor Jeremiah had the “honor” of being picked to be God's prophet during a difficult time. At the time of this real estate deal (around 593 BCE) - Mighty Babylon was on the move under King Nebuchadnezzar, squashing nations like bugs on a rug and the Kingdom of Judah was in his sites.

Now it wasn't always this way. Jeremiah was called as a youth to “be a prophet to the nations” in 626 BCE – over 30 years earlier. He lived in the southern Kingdom of Judah which was something of a vassal state under the domination of the Assyrians who had overrun and conquered the northern Kingdom of Israel some 100 years before that.

As the Assyrian empire began to lose power and influence, the Kingdom of Judah had the chance to wiggle out from under the domination of that foreign power.

Under King Josiah – the temple in Jerusalem was repaired. While this project was taking place workman had come across a scroll hidden in the Temple walls. The document set forth specific laws by which the nation was expected to live. They had discovered or re-discovered the book of Deuteronomy and as they read it – found that changes needed to be made. In their interpretation – it explained how the northern Kingdom of Israel had fallen – they’d ignored the rules. The folks in Judah suddenly got religion – hoping to escape the same fate.

The reform movement forbade the worship of any other gods but Yahweh – all altars and pillars erected to pagan gods were destroyed - all worship was restricted to the temple in Jerusalem – temple ritual was rigorously observed. Justice was required in all human relationships.

All of that sounded good, and we might give credit for good intentions – but in reality, after the death of the reformer King Josiah – the “reforms” turned out to be rather superficial. Because of the weakened power and influence of Assyria – vassal states began to rebel and gain a certain amount of freedom and independence, ignoring the demands of the once powerful invaders.

A spirit of nationalistic fervor grew and began to deflect the intent of the reform. “You see,” folks were saying, “this proves we are the chosen people”. Instead of seeing this window of prosperity and freedom from Assyria as an opportunity to be a light to other nations – to be a nation of justice and witness to God’s intentions – the ruling and religious elite began to think if things were going well – it was a sign that that they were specially blessed by God. And like so many rich and powerful people , past and present, they began to feather their own nests seeing their prosperity as signs of favor from God.

And that’s when the empire of Babylon appears on the ridgeline. Babylon – the empire that sweeps through countries – destroys cities and in order to maintain control of its empire has this method of either killing off or carting off the ruling and or educated classes of people and replacing them with people from other conquered lands, so that there is a mixture of foreigners and immigrants with those peasant class people left behind. It was quite successful.

So is this anytime to buy real estate...when the market is not only about to crash – but your entire country is about to disappear entirely. A conquering army is about to take possession of all the lands and the fields – and your cousin Hanamel comes to you with a deal - “Hey Jerry-

you know that cute little parcel of land that has been in the family for 400 years. – why don't you buy it from me?"

And Jeremiah says "Yes".

What was he thinking?

There is no doubt that Jeremiah knew that Babylon would win – would soon take over his little field. There were no false hopes in his purchase. There was no economic motive in this plan. What was the message that this prophet wants to convey?

It is the message that the future belongs to God – the God of history – the God of creation.

Jeremiah reminds us that our task is not so much to expect that we will be the beneficiaries of the future as we are called to be faithful in the present.

He bought the land because of his faith in God's promise that **Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.** His purchase is an object lesson – a children's sermon – if you will – that there will be a future for this land. It may not be the future you imagine, but a future there will be.

Nowhere is Jeremiah being reassured that he will personally benefit from this. Nowhere is it indicated that Jeremiah will be rewarded for his actions. He is

simply being faithful to the calling – to the instructions – to the behavior – to the activities that God asks of him.

For many people this just doesn't make sense. Why back a loser? Why engage in something that has little or nothing in it for you? This runs completely contrary to a cultural understanding that gives "me-first" attitudes the good housekeeping seal of approval. Who would do it?

The answer is that you would. That right! You would! After all - You are the people of God and You will live and behave in ways that put the needs of others ahead of your own.

You are the people of God You will live and behave in ways that demonstrate that God is the owner and administrator of the future – not the powers that seem to have assumed temporary control.

You are the people of God and You will live and behave in ways that demonstrate that God believes in you – to do the right thing – to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience and compassion,

You are the people of God and You will live and behave in ways that serve as a witness to the world putting away from you all bitterness and wrath; all pettiness, gossip and slander.

You are the people of God and In a world where there is plenty of greed, selfishness, violence and cruelty – You will live and behave in ways that demonstrate how powerful it is to be kind and forgiving to others.

You are the people of God and In a world that may treat people as flies on a window pane – in cultures that may only respect brute force – you will live and behave knowing that as fragile as it might seem, the power of the human spirit, infused by the presence of God within each and everyone of you, is ultimately invincible .

You are the people of God and In a culture filled with and satisfied by superficial optimism and shallow commitments, you will live and behave as light to the world, the salt of the earth, as imitators of Christ bringing genuine hope, durable justice and life altering passion to situations circumstances and people you encounter.

As you can see – the future is not for wimps – but the future belongs to you if you're ready to claim it.

Let us pray:

Creator God: in a world where so many people can not see beyond the selfishness of today, help us catch a view of life that reaches out into all eternity. May our lives be a reflection of Christ as we live and work in your world. Amen.

Creator God, We come to consider again the call extended to us – that of **being the change** you wish to see in the world.

This morning we acknowledge the challenges of life and faith. And we celebrate a journey filled with new and renewed thoughts and commitments.

This morning we celebrate the unfolding of our abilities and the potential possibilities for creating brighter and gentler futures.

This morning we remember those people and circumstances that have been expressed and we acknowledge that there are other joys and concerns that will need our attention as we live through the week ahead. May we be attentive and attuned.

As we meet and as we prepare to depart, may we again commit as individuals and as a community to the values and ideals that would contribute to the transformation of this world.

May each of us undertake again the appraisal and joy of living out what is important, may we be able to separate out what is important from what only seems to be important and that our energies be directed toward those things which truly advances and invites compassion, grace, forgiveness, kindness, justice and love to flourish and transform.

May we abide in the assurance that goodness goes on even in our wavering... in our waffling...that it endures even in our doubts and questions.

With this prayer we add our voices together in the prayer that Jesus taught us to say together: