

Sunday September 28, 2025

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 21 – Creation Time 4

MEDITATION: “Fear or Hope?”

Some years ago the Royal Ontario Museum was host to a travelling display of some of the Dead Sea Scrolls. My daughter, Christina, was interested to see them and called to ask if I wanted to go see them with her, and off we went. Because they were extremely fragile, they were housed in cases that were temperature and humidity controlled, under glass that blocked UV rays, and the writing was still clearly legible. I don't read ancient Hebrew or ancient Aramaic, so I had to depend on the English translation. Just to behold these ancient documents, documents that were about two thousand years old, filled me with awe. They had survived many years, stored in sealed earthenware containers that were themselves stored in caves in the arid climate near Qumran. One of the last documents that we saw was a deed of purchase for a piece of land. It reminded me immediately of the story from Jeremiah: “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.” I'm sure it wasn't ‘the’ deed mentioned by Jeremiah, but two thousand years is certainly ‘a long time.’

Let me give you a bit of the back story to Jeremiah's story. Zedekiah was installed as king over Judah by Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian ruler, in 597 BCE. The idea of a king of Judah being installed by a foreign power was not popular with the people. Although he had taken an oath to serve the king of Babylon, Zedekiah could not withstand the nationalistic pressure within Judah. Zedekiah met with ambassadors from Edom, Moab, Ammon, Tyre and Sidon to plot against Babylon. Although the plot never got off the ground, news of it reached Nebuchadnezzar. Eventually, the cities on the Mediterranean coast were captured by the Egyptians and Zedekiah aligned himself with Egypt against Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar responded by sending his army to crush the rebellion. The siege of Jerusalem started. It was like our modern

blockades, only it was total. Nothing and no one in or out. The siege lasted a year and a half before the walls were breached, the city – including Solomon's temple – were demolished, and the populace taken into exile to Babylon, in 587 BCE. There was a brief period of respite to the siege when the Babylonian troops left to put down another Egyptian uprising, and it was likely then that Hanamel was able to make it from Anathoth to Jerusalem to sell his property to his cousin Jeremiah.

Now, you are probably wondering to yourselves, what kind of a fool would buy a piece of land that is about to be conquered by a foreign power? What person in their right mind would invest in the future when clearly there is not going to be a future?

It's easy for us to look around in our time at the world outside these walls and feel the way the people of Jerusalem must have felt – fearful and despairing. The wider church, and I don't mean just the United Church, is in decline and churches are closing their doors forever on a weekly basis. The values and priorities of our society are changing, and we wonder, what will happen to us and all that we value?

In the midst of the siege Zedekiah and Jeremiah responded in two completely different ways. Zedekiah responded in fear. It could have been fear of being seen to be a failure in the eyes of others. It could have been fear of losing his power and status as king of Judah. It could have been fear of being carted away to a foreign land as a nobody. It could have been fear of being put to death by the Babylonians. If he was a good king, it could have been fear of what would happen to his people. Whatever the reason, he had Jeremiah locked up so that his words would not be heard, and he put his trust in the strength of the Egyptian army to defeat the army of Babylon. Zedekiah wanted to maintain the status quo.

Jeremiah, on the other hand, responded with hope: not some sappy, 'don't worry, be happy' kind of hope; not hope that disaster would be averted; but hope alive and meaningful even in the midst of disaster; hope that one day things would return to normal and land would again be bought and sold; hope that God was with them in the time of siege, and would continue to be with them in the time of exile, and in the time of return from exile. Jeremiah put his hope in God and in God's promises and in God's grace.

The question for us is, when we are facing what looks like dire circumstances, whether it be in our personal lives or in our corporate life together, will we allow fear to rule us, as Zedekiah did? Or will we look forward with hope, trusting in God's constant presence in good times and in times of trial and tribulation? Will we struggle to maintain the status quo, or will we invest for God's promised future? The answer is in you.