

Jeremiah 29:6-15

“Invest in Hope”

July 17, 2011

There are a couple of things you need to know to get the full impact of this story from Jeremiah. First, in 588 BC King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon had his troops surrounding Jerusalem. No one could get out and nothing could get in—he was starving them to death. And Jeremiah knew the Babylonians were going to win the war. As this story takes place, Jerusalem hadn't fallen yet, but it was just a matter of time.

Anathoth, where Jeremiah bought a field, lay just outside Jerusalem's northeast wall. In other words, there were Babylonian troops camped out on that field at the time. And Jeremiah knew that it would be years, maybe generations, before things would look up for Anathoth. Buying a field in Anathoth in 588 BC would be like buying stock in Lehman Brothers or AIG a few years ago.

The other thing you need to know has to do with Old Testament property law. Leviticus 25 spells out that if property belonging to a family is in danger of foreclosure and being sold outside the family, the next of kin—

the closest male family member—had the right to buy it. In fact he had the responsibility to keep that land in the family.

Jeremiah's cousin owned a farm at Anathoth, but he couldn't make the payments--because there were Babylonians camped out on his fields. So following Leviticus the poor man asks Jeremiah to buy that field, to keep it in the family. Not that the land was of any practical value to Jeremiah. He was under house arrest at the time, for saying unpopular things. And even if he got out of jail, he wouldn't be able to farm the land any more than his cousin could.

And yet, despite all that, Jeremiah bought that field. He counted out the money—seventeen shekels of silver. He signed the deed and filed a copy with the equivalent of the county clerk; he even put a copy in an earthenware jar to keep it safe and dry for years to come.

The question is: Why? Why did Jeremiah go to all that trouble and expense to buy a field in a war zone? Well, he tells us why: "For thus says the Lord: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land." Jeremiah, you see, had *hope*—hope that war wouldn't last forever, hope that in time the Babylonians would go home, hope that some day people would once again do things like buy houses and grow crops.

Jeremiah had hope—deep-down, long-term, faith-in-God hope—that houses and fields and vineyards would again be bought in his land. In the midst of disaster and despair, how important it is for someone to have hope. But Jeremiah did even more than have hope—he took out his checkbook and he invested in his hope. It’s one thing to *have* hope; it’s yet another thing to *invest* in hope.

Now the way this story is told, Jeremiah doesn’t even seem to stop and think about it. He just plunked down his money and bought the field. I wonder, though . . . Think about it. God comes to you and says, “Hey, your cousin is going to offer to sell you this field up in Anathoth—you know, the old home place, where the Babylonians are, the one that won’t do you any good for the rest of your life. I want you to buy it.”

“Now God,” Jeremiah must have muttered, “my financial advisor tells me this isn’t a good time to get into real estate, what with the war going on, the market collapse, the mortgage crisis. You’d be better off just burying your money in the ground,” he told me. (Funny, that’s more or less what *my financial* advisor told me a few years ago . . . and he was right!)

“So that’s what your financial advisor told you, is it?” God replied.

“Well, I’ve got a different outlook: houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land. Put your money where your hope is, Jeremiah. Buy the field.” And he bought it, full price. It’s one thing to *have* hope; it’s another thing to *invest* in hope.

Mary McLeod Bethune was born in 1875 in South Carolina, the fifteenth child of slave parents.¹ She saw early on that one of the big differences between white children and black children was that white children were taught to read. Through a church mission society Mary learned to read and later attended Moody Bibl Institution in Chicago.

When she moved to Daytona Beach, Florida, her dream was to start a reading school for black girls. She paid her last dollar and a half as a down payment on the little building she rented for \$11 a month. Five girls showed up on the school’s first day, paying just enough fees to cover the rest of a month’s rent. Later when the school outgrew that building, she needed \$250 for a new property, a huge sum for a black woman in those days. She wrote a letter to James M. Gamble, of Proctor & Gamble, who

wintered in Daytona Beach, inviting him to support her school. Assuming her to be a white lady, Mr. Gamble accepted her invitation.

When they met in person he was, of course, surprised at being face to face with a black woman. But she began, "I am not just coming to you for money, Mr. Gamble, but to ask you personal interest in the work I have it in my mind to do. . . Mr. Gamble, I am asking you to become a trustee."

"A trustee of *what?*" he asked dismissively.

"A trustee," she answered, "of a dream." And she won him over. He became a trustee of her dream, and on the fiftieth anniversary of her school that first little building had become nineteen buildings on a 36-acre campus, and those five little girls had turned into an enrollment of 1300 students in what is now called Bethune-Cookman University. Mary McLeod Bethune had a vision, she had hope for her people; but truly great things happen when people invest in that hope.

Mr. Gamble's contribution was financial, of course, but his importance was not only financial. He became, in her words, a "trustee of a dream." In the same ways, Jeremiah's contribution to hope was not merely financial.

It was a sign, a symbolic act, acting out of the hope he had for his people. He became a trustee of God's dream for the people of Israel.

This is why when you do a large fundraising campaign, you always ask first for what they call "lead gifts," key people who agree to give publicly and up front. So when you announce the campaign, you've already got a head start, and people will say, "Well, if the Smiths are pledging such and such and the Joneses are giving that much, maybe it *is* possible to reach that goal." Investing in hope makes dreams come true.

Let me just give you a few examples:

--When we were first married, my wife Carolyn and I dreamed about taking a trip to Italy together. But we had no savings, we made precious little money, and I thought of it as a pipe dream, not something we really would do. But I came to find out that every week Carolyn allotted herself \$50 for living expenses—gas, food, little extras. And she was actually living on \$30 a week, and putting \$20 in an envelope in her sock drawer, labeled "Italy." Now mind you, \$20 a week would not get you to Europe, even back then. But her weekly deposits made me realize that (1) that she was really serious, and (2) that we could really do it, if we put our minds to it.

Symbolically, that envelope in her sock drawer eventually got us to Rome and Naples and the Amalfi Coast. She invested in hope.

--Our family knows a young woman who got her PhD in Physical Therapy. She's knowledgeable, skillful and caring. But due to test anxiety, she failed the licensing exam, by just a few points. So she took it again, and failed. We all prayed for her, she went to a prep class, took it again, and still didn't pass. She was so depressed, even beginning to give up on her dream. So I went to a wine shop and asked them to show me their most expensive bottle of champagne. They did. I said, "How about your fourth or fifth most expensive bottle?" I bought for her an astonishingly expensive bottle of champagne, took it to her, made sure she knew how much I'd spent, and said, "We will drink that together when we celebrate you passing the test." She cried. It's one thing to for someone to *have* hope in you; it's another thing to have someone *invest* in that hope.

--There were people here at Maple Grove years ago, who sacrificed and gave an almost unimaginable amount of money to build this sanctuary we enjoy today . . . and the education rooms . . . and offices. One extension alone, the one approved in 1953, cost \$225,000—which would be \$1.8 million in today's dollars. They hoped to reach so many people for Jesus

that they would need more and more seating. And they not only *had* that hope; they *invested* in it.

--Even right now, Bible School attendance was up this year, two days a week we're hosting a wonderful day camp sponsored by CRC, and I for one have dreams of this place just swarming with children. And I've just found out—did *you* know?—that some people have given money especially for Children's Ministry here. In these hard financial times, it's how we're supporting our programs for young people. These are people—and I don't know who any of them are--who not only share my hope for children in church, they have *invested* in that hope.

It's one thing to *have* hope; it's another thing to *invest* in that hope. If you really had hope, if you truly believed in the future, what would you do? What field would you buy, to make dreams come true?

¹ For this story, see Joe A. Harding and Ralph W. Mohny, *Vision 2000: Planning for Ministry into the Next Century*.