

Sermon for September 25, 2016 – “God’s Economy”

26th Sunday in OT, Year C – Text: Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15

You’ve heard me mention and quote Dietrich Bonhoeffer a number of times. I’d like to go into a little more depth about him this morning. Bonhoeffer was a German Lutheran pastor and theologian. His writings on Christianity’s role in the secular world are widely read and have become widely influential and many (myself included) consider “The Cost of Discipleship” a modern classic. Apart from his theological writings, Bonhoeffer became known for his staunch resistance to the Nazi dictatorship. He was one of the first to speak out against Adolf Hitler, doing so in a radio address two days after Adolf Hitler was installed as Chancellor in 1933. He was highly critical of Hitler and warned Germany against slipping into an idolatrous cult of the Führer. In May of 1934, he became a founding member of the Confessing Church which also included the great theologian Karl Barth. Briefly stated, the Confessing Church was a movement within the Protestant Church in Nazi Germany. It arose in opposition to Nazi-sponsored efforts to co-opt the Church. Among other things, it gave us one of our Presbyterian confessions, the 1934 Barmen Declaration. To Bonhoeffer, wrote one biographer, the Barmen Declaration “re-clarified what it (the legitimate...German Church) actually believed and stood for.” It rejected the “false doctrine” that the Church could change according to “prevailing ideological and political positions.” But his opposition to the Nazi’s did not stop with simply speaking out and helping draft a document. As important and as risky as these things certainly were, Bonhoeffer also became involved in plans to assassinate Adolf Hitler. He was arrested in April 1943 by the Gestapo and executed by hanging in April 1945. This just two weeks before the liberation of the camp and 23 days before the German surrender. In January of 1943, three months before he was arrested, Bonhoeffer had this to say about Christian hope and faith when times are dark. He wrote: “There remains for us only the very narrow way, often extremely difficult to find, of living every day as if it were our last and yet living in faith and responsibility as though there were to be a great future. It is not easy to be brave and keep that spirit alive, but it is imperative.” These words which Bonhoeffer wrote some seventy years ago are stark, bold and jarring. They were written in response to a dark moment in human history and they’re words which conjure up not the warm, reassuring spirit of our **grace-filled** faith but the difficult and scary components of **prophetic** faith. One that is not afraid to speak the truth to power. Bonhoeffer calls us to that kind of faith...Faith not simply of social benevolence and charity, but faith which calls the powers and principalities of the day to account.

This is a faith which can leave us alone and at odds even with people whom we thought we knew so well. Indeed, in the end, Bonhoeffer’s faith left him alone, imprisoned at Flossenburg concentration camp, waiting for his death. Now in the same position, what would we write? If we were to find ourselves in a prison cell, if we were alone, waiting for our impending death with war and social upheaval raging outside the prison walls. What would we do? What would our word be to the world? What would we do as a testimony to the world that the darkness of the times was not going to prevail? What would we do to inspire future generations?

In regard to these questions, it’s clear that Dietrich Bonhoeffer had much in common with the Prophet Jeremiah. In 588 BC during the Babylonians siege of Jerusalem, Jeremiah found himself imprisoned in the royal palace of King Zedekiah of Judah. He’d been charged with desertion and treason and insurrection. And on some level, the charges had merit. Jeremiah had been forcefully pleading for Israel to turn from their ways. He saw the gathering storm of Babylon coming from the north.

He spoke God's word of judgment and divine condemnation of social injustice and idolatry. So, King Zedekiah had good reason to lock Jeremiah up in the palace. Jeremiah simply didn't tow the royal line. But then, as our reading this morning tells us, with war raging and despair undoubtedly growing Jeremiah gets a new word from God. And this word, as one might expect, is different. This word has to do with some family business. A plot of family-owned land needs to be purchased. And by the right of redemption, a law found in Leviticus 25 which prevents the loss of family property, Jeremiah's cousin, Hanamel, asks the prophet to buy the family field in Anathoth. In this particular context it was an absurd request. It was the wrong time to invest in real estate. It was the wrong time to invest in the future. It was a time to panic about the present. I mean, war is raging. Terror is threatening on all sides. Exile is coming. And, for Israel the future looks pretty bleak. But Jeremiah doesn't watch the news. Jeremiah doesn't listen to the prophets of doom on TV or talk radio. Jeremiah knows that King Zedekiah doesn't run the world. Neither does King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. Jeremiah knows that it's God who runs the world. Jeremiah knows that it is, in fact, God's world. That God gets the last word, and the last word is **not** destruction. God's last word is **never** destruction. God's last word is **renewal**. God's last word is **always** renewal.

The **new** covenant articulated only a chapter earlier in the book of Jeremiah, lays it out pretty clearly: **"The days are surely coming, says the Lord...When I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah."** It won't be like the old one, says God. They, that is the people, didn't get that one...That is, the old covenant. They didn't understand. This time, God says: **"I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts...And I will be their God and they shall be My people..."** **"For I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more."** So in the spirit and promise of the future – Jeremiah buys the land, land where houses and fields and vineyards will, yet again, flourish.

When Dietrich Bonhoeffer was in prison, he wrote a letter to his fiancée Maria von Wedemeyer. He wrote: "When Jeremiah said in his people's hour of direst need that 'houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land,' it was a token of confidence in the future. Our marriage must be a 'yes' to God's earth. It must strengthen our resolve to...accomplish something on earth." Bonhoeffer's words inspired by the prophet Jeremiah are as true today as they ever were.

It seems, sadly, that we live in a world where the bad news of the day is both a source of despair and in our 24-hour news cycle, a source of entertainment. And as a result, we're tempted to react to the tragedies and social unrest of our day with one of two things. Either 1) a self-absorbed denial, or 2) a self-absorbed hedonism. But the people who have Jeremiah as their prophet, those who have Dietrich Bonhoeffer as their martyr, those people who know God as the source and power of their lives, those who have Jesus as their Savior...Well, guess what? **These** people do not despair. **These** people do not live lives of denial. **These** people do not live lives of self-indulgence. **These** people live lives of radical hope. A hope which isn't simply some sentimental feeling, but a genuine hope and orientation which is committed to **action**. An orientation which allows them to see the world differently. An orientation that calls them to bring that hope-filled vision to life. An orientation which encourages and empowers them to take risks. And here, brothers and sisters, is the thing...We in the church are those people! We're the ones who have been called by our baptism to bring hope to the world. We're the ones challenged to buy land when all the "experts" of the world say "not now..." "The market's not good..." "You'd be foolish to buy now."

The Jesuit Priest and modern-day prophet Daniel Berrigan reminds us of the critical importance of Jeremiah's field. Berrigan writes: "Jeremiah's field collapses time. It symbolizes promise, and gift, and an entire land restored. Is the land blood-ridden and desolate now? Perhaps, but it shall be again a land flowing with milk and honey." Do we believe this? What, then, are we to do? How shall we live? Jeremiah says to us today, go ahead, buy the land, invest in the church, take stock in God's kingdom, build up God's reign of justice and righteousness and peace, break ground and lay a solid foundation for the future. Show the world that God's spirit is alive and well here on earth. Why? Because the future of our lives, the future of our churches, the future of our world is **not** pre-determined. But, make no mistake, they most certainly hang in the balance. Both Bonhoeffer and Jeremiah understood this. What's more, they risked everything – even their very lives – to make these things known! Though we may not be required to give our lives, we are nevertheless charged with the very same task. We are charged with telling others that it is, in fact, God's world and that God will indeed have the last word. That there is hope – even in the face of death and despair. That there is peace in the face of terror. That there is love in the face of apathy...Stop me if you've heard this before...**"For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord..." "Plans for your welfare and not for harm..." "To give you a future with hope."**

Brothers and sisters, in God's economy the church is called to make an investment in that future. No matter the cost, No matter the risk, No matter the bad news of the day!

There is a marker on the site that was once Flossenburg prison on the spot where Dietrich Bonhoeffer was hanged...It contains a verse from 2 Timothy, which reads: **"For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love, and of self-discipline.** May we, the church of Jesus Christ, have that spirit... May we have the courage, strength, and faith...To make that investment now!

Thanks be to God!

Amen and amen.