

This is the second time I have journeyed through the three years of the lectionary cycle, and sometimes what stands out to me when I do the initial reading again comes as a surprise. This year, it was the question asked of Jeremiah which then became the title of today's sermon. There are several things about this question that seem somewhat curious when viewed in the context of the lectionary reading as given. In the context of what is happening in Israel, the question asked of Jeremiah is related to what has landed him under guard in the king's courtyard. That seems very different from what the remaining portion of the lectionary text is leading us to consider about Jeremiah's subsequent actions which in the light of the surrounding siege conditions might easily provoke a why question. Yet clearly Jeremiah's response to the question would be the same for both situations: "This is what Yahweh says." Jeremiah's call to bring the word of the Lord has from the beginning involved a message of judgment; the Lord is not pleased with how they are violating the covenant. He was told that he would carry a message about "plucking up" as well as "planting". Until now the message has been about the plucking up. When today's passage begins, it is actually a reprise of what has happened before; the message of judgment. Jeremiah told the king of Judah, Zedekiah, that he should not begin join the Egyptians in a move against the Babylonians, but he did not listen. The warning was that the move would fail and then Jerusalem would fall to the Babylonians resulting in Zedekiah being taken to Babylon. This is exactly what happened. In our text this morning, this passage repeats warning, Zedekiah's question to Jeremiah, and the fact that Jeremiah was put under house arrest in the courtyard until the time of the siege of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. The lectionary reading actually skips verses 3b-5 which repeats those details of what Jeremiah has said which so angered the king of Judah. But Jeremiah, while under arrest in the king's courtyard, receives another message from Yahweh while Jerusalem is under siege. The message is that a first cousin, Hanamel, will come and visit him, asking him to buy a field that he owns in Anathoth, which is in the land of Benjamin, for the right of redemption is yours to buy it. Now this message that his family was going to come offer him a deal probably came as something of a surprise to Jeremiah because his earlier in the chain of events told in the text his family has rejected him. They basically disowned him and considered him a traitor because of his pronouncements about the Lord's judgments on Judah. But indeed, following receiving this word, his cousin does show up with this real estate deal of a lifetime offering to sell him the family land. This offer to redeem an inheritance which is based on a tradition established in Leviticus 25 was designed to protect a family's ownership during

times of hardship. This practice is mentioned in other places within the Hebrew Scriptures because of its importance in preserving inheritance within a family's lineage if the owner falls upon hard times and cannot retain ownership—the next of kin is responsible for purchasing it—redeeming it to keep it within the family. It seems that Jeremiah himself had some doubts about the message until his cousin showed up because at the end of the offer from the cousin Jeremiah tacks on the comment: "Then I knew that this was the word of Yahweh." In general, with Jerusalem being under siege, the Babylonian army essentially knocking on the door, buying real estate in the area does not seem like a wise investment—which is the point of what God is having Jeremiah do. Jeremiah not only buys the land for the 17 shekels of silver, he publicly and carefully weighs out the money in the balances, signing the deed and sealing it while calling witnesses. The details of this transaction are as public as Jeremiah can possibly make it—there is more than one copy of the deed—one sealed with terms and conditions and one open, and the witnesses are not only those required for the signatures but it is also done "before the eyes of all the Jews who sat in the courtyard of the Jews." Jeremiah orchestrated quite a ceremony for this purchase...and then he concluded it by commissioning the clerk Baruch to carry out a further message from the Lord: "This is what Yahweh of Armies, the God of Israel, says, take these deeds, this deed of purchase that is sealed and this deed that is open, and put them in an earthen vessel, so that they will last many days. For this is what Yahweh of Armies, the God of Israel, says: houses and field and vineyards will yet again be bought in this land." Even with just a cursory understanding of the situation, that Jeremiah bought this field seems like taking an optimistic view since Jerusalem is under siege—but this is more than optimism. What is strangest about this purchase is never mentioned in this text because those reading it in exile would have known it. This piece of real estate which Jeremiah had just purchased was located just a few miles northeast of Jerusalem; it was in the direct path of the advancing Babylonian army which burned the fields, torched the houses, killed the livestock, scattered the population and completely disregarded Jewish real estate law or claims upon land. His cousin was probably fleeing to Egypt and would use the 17 shekels to finance the journey. Jeremiah and those remaining in Jerusalem would soon be taken off to Babylon in the great exile. Life as they knew it was about to come to an end--in the immediate future, the field that Jeremiah bought would be utterly and totally worthless. So why would Jeremiah do this seemingly irrational thing? He knew he himself was not going to be able to take possession of that field. Jeremiah tells his assembled

witnesses in his commission to the clerk Baruch that the deeds must be placed in earthen vessels, in other words, somewhere safe for “many days” so they could be retrieved later. What is being offered through this purchase is not an optimistic view of the situation, but a hope for the future because Jeremiah now has a message about the planting that is to come: “For this is what Yahweh of Armies, the God of Israel, says: houses and field, vineyards will yet again be bought in this land.” Hope is not spoken in this passage; hope is enacted in what is done here. This is a theologically symbolic real estate purchase. It was hope that motivated Jeremiah, not optimism. Optimism would have been just purchasing the field. Hope is having the deeds placed in the earthen vessels for that future trusting in the promise that the Lord has made that houses and fields and vineyards will again be bought in this land by these deeds. Hope is not really the same thing as optimism. Both are good things to have, but they are not quite the same thing. Optimism is a nice virtue; a good attitude to have whether it comes naturally or based on intellectual reasoning. But it is essentially a human attitude about life. It is usually focused on the short term experiences and expectations. It may or may not have anything to do with faith in God. Hope, on the other hand, is not so much in me as it is trust in God and what God will do. Hope is the confidence that I have that a loving God presides over the long arc of both history and of my own life. That doesn’t mean that I expect there won’t be struggles—maybe I felt that way when I was in my twenties—but although I am still optimistic most mornings—when things don’t always work out the way that I plan—that doesn’t affect how I view that distant future that is in God’s hands. Hope is the theological trust that things will work out, somehow, someday, in the long run simply because the end is in the hands of the God of love. Hope admits that things will not necessarily work out the way that I want them to on a day to day, week to week or even year to year basis. Hope trusts that there is a purpose which transcends my plans and desires. Hope trusts in a God whose purposes are, in some intricate and less than simple way, woven into the long arc of both life and history. Hope trusts that even though things may not work out my way, they will ultimately unfold in a way, that by the grace of God, will be blessing shaped. We don’t know if Jeremiah thought he might see the redemption of that deed. Scripture doesn’t tell us that. We only know that Jeremiah knew that the word of Yahweh told him that the deed would be redeemed at some time in the future and on that basis he purchased the field and preserved the deeds demonstrating publicly the promise to those who witness the transaction. Today we live in a world which seems to be dominated by words and acts of hatred and

violence toward those who are “other”. We have a message within our scripture which we proclaim as the good news. That message is that we follow a God of love and mercy who came and dwelled among us to demonstrate that love and caring, to include the outcast, to minister to the poor and those considered unclean and unloved and told those who wanted to be his disciples that they were to do the same. We often think of the word prophesy as telling the future, but in the ancient and biblical sense, the prophet was the one who brought the Word of the Lord. And so to the question of why do I preach the word that I do? My answer is the same as Jeremiah’s: We follow the Jesus Christ, who came to the world not to condemn it but to redeem it; the God of love and mercy who call us to follow in his footsteps. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.