

Sermon "Part of our Story"

Kirk of St James

Sunday October 18, 2026

Rev. Amanda Henderson-Bolton

A year ago, we were at the crux of our 200th anniversary celebrations. October was so busy last year it was difficult to catch our breath. Now that the special events are over it has us left us some time to reflect. When we were getting the bulletin information ready for today, seeing that tremendous list of work that has been done, one could not help but think of all the time, work, effort and an astronomical number of meetings that went into it--and we are thankful. We are thankful for all the people that have supported our church in countless ways. Just as we celebrate all the people who for the past 201 years now, have acted in faith and hope.

When the presbyterian women helped fundraise and buy the bell, I wonder if they thought about all the decades, it would ring out over the city. That it would announce weddings, and times of mourning, and Sunday services, and even become part of a famous island ghost story. I don't know that there is much I do in my life thinking it will still have an echo well over a century later. Each of these projects, and ideas together become a part of this community that we know and love today.

Looking at the passage in Jeremiah today it defies belief, at least from the perspective of the prophet. Jeremiah has a number of other pressing issues, one of which is the fact that he is currently imprisoned. The second is that he has already stated that Jerusalem will fall to Babylon and that King Zedekiah and the people of Jerusalem will be exiled. This would be a major blow to the people for whom the land was part of their identity as a nation. Jeremiah is telling them there is going to be a new covenant to replace the Mosaic covenant they have been living under. Trying to imagine such a change would have been incredibly difficult.

Since the time of Moses they have lived in this land, bound together by geography, cultic practices, and tribal traditions. This was the Promised Land their ancestors had travelled through the wilderness for. Their understanding of themselves as a people will change. One of the challenges for the Israelites to overcome will be coming to understand themselves in a new way—not defined by land or geography since they will be exiled but, rather as people who follow YHWH. Understanding their identity as children of God has never been their strong suit. Somehow, they are going to have to learn that how they were once identified as a nation is going to be different and that does not mean that God has abandoned them nor does it change who they are as a people. When fundamental parts of our lives and identities are stripped away it raises questions and doubts about who we are. I can't imagine what their time was like in exile as they tried to reconcile their faith and their current situation—they do though. We know this because eventually they do return to the land.

Land was incredibly important in the ancient world, much as it still is today. It could mean life or death for people in a society that was largely agrarian. It meant food, a place to live, and prosperity for your family. It would have been hard if not impossible to change your station in life without owning some type of land. If we look at the both the Old and New Testament the owning of land is important, and not taking it seriously has consequences. I had never thought of this before but to help put it in context one author gave a number of examples. Abraham bought land as a burial place for Sarah. Boaz redeemed a field in Ruth. King Ahab and Queen Jezebel botched the acquisition of a vineyard. When Judas returned the thirty pieces of silver used to sell out Jesus the priests believed the “blood money” would taint their treasury so they used it to buy a field where people who had no place could be buried. Not to mention when Ananias and Sapphira sold property and under reported their earnings—much to their detriment.

When we come to the purchasing of land in Jeremiah today there is a great deal of significance and the rules that were followed came from a provision in Leviticus. Land could not be sold outside of the family if such a sale would affect a family's ability to sustain itself. In this case Jeremiah has the right to purchase the land from his cousin, and how that sale happened followed the guidelines. How much was to be paid, the weighing of the money to pay for it, the form of the deed that recorded the transfer, and the number of witnesses required all followed what was outlined in the old covenant.

All of these things are part of the sale, but the reality is being told to purchase real estate under such circumstances hardly seems like a sound plan and Jeremiah has some thoughts around that. "I am not sure if you noticed God, but there just so happens to be an army camped on that plot of land, and that is not really what one would call a smart business move. In fact, there are a lot of other things more important and pressing." But God's answer is interesting and to paraphrase "Jeremiah, I am not asking you to buy that land because it is good idea right now, I know there is an entire army camped there. I am asking you to buy it, because sometime in the future the army will be gone. I am asking you to invest in what will be, not in what is currently going on." God's answer is enough, Jeremiah buys the land and he seals the deed into a jar to keep it safe. I believe he does that because he knows that the day the encamped army leaves might not happen for a long time. Therefore, he seals the jar, and puts it away in a safe place, and he faces the current army, the current fight, trusting that someday the reality will be different. It will be about forty-nine years before God's promise comes to fruition and the people return to the land.

It is easy sometimes to lose sight of how long people in the Bible waited--because we know the outcome we know that they are not waiting in vain. I wonder though, how hard it was

for the people doing the actual waiting. So often in the Bible people acted in faith and trust that what was promised will someday come to fruition, only to then go through an incredibly difficult period of waiting. How do they manage to hold on for so long? How do the Israelites hold onto their faith and identity as a scattered people for forty-nine years?

Jeremiah takes a huge leap of faith with the purchase of the land. He shows us what faith can look like—and oftentimes it does not look like a safe bet! Buying land an enemy is encamped on after you have already prophesied that Jerusalem would fall is not a sound business plan. However, as Jesus has showed us time and again God's kingdom is full of surprises, and it often turns expectations upside down.

When we come to a day like to day—an anniversary of our congregation, there is so much to be thankful for. When the original community came to together, they took risks, built a church, overcame times of doubt, fear and uncertainty. They found ways to minister in their context, to reach out to the community, and share love in the world. We are part of that ongoing story today, as we too have done our best to answer God's call, to care for others, and to be faithful stewards of God's gifts. Today we say thank you for those whose past legacy we build on, and for those today who are part of our story. May the bell, who has rung above us for the last one hundred, and seventy-five years continue to mark our time as a congregation.