

**“When We Want To Give Up” Rev. Michele Ward Jeremiah 32:1-15
Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church Baltimore, MD**

Jeremiah 32:1-15 (NRSV)

The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord in the tenth year of King Zedekiah of Judah, which was the eighteenth year of Nebuchadrezzar.

At that time the army of the king of Babylon was besieging Jerusalem, and the prophet Jeremiah was confined in the court of the guard that was in the palace of the king of Judah, where King Zedekiah of Judah had confined him. Zedekiah had said, “Why do you prophesy and say: Thus says the Lord: I am going to give this city into the hand of the king of Babylon, and he shall take it; Jeremiah said, The word of the Lord came to me: Hanamel son of your uncle Shallum is going to come to you and say, “Buy my field that is at Anathoth, for the right of redemption by purchase is yours.”

Then my cousin Hanamel came to me in the court of the guard, in accordance with the word of the Lord, and said to me, “Buy my field that is at Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, for the right of possession and redemption is yours; buy it for yourself.”

Then I knew that this was the word of the Lord. And I bought the field at Anathoth from my cousin Hanamel, and weighed out the money to him, seventeen shekels of silver. I signed the deed, sealed it, got witnesses, and weighed the money on scales.

Then I took the sealed deed of purchase, containing the terms and conditions, and the open copy; and I gave the deed of purchase to Baruch son of Neriah son of Mahseiah, in the presence of my cousin Hanamel, in the presence of the witnesses who signed the deed of purchase, and in the presence of all the Judeans who were sitting in the court of the guard.

In their presence I charged Baruch, saying, Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: 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.

For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

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Prayer

Sing:

O God, you are closer than we are to ourselves

Draw us closer to you.

When I bought my house in 2019, it felt like a Jeremiah moment. The stats in Baltimore City for home values, neighborhood safety ratings, walkable proximity to banks, libraries, grocery stores and post offices were all scant. The decades of disinvestment and redlining had taken their toll, and my neighbors were still living in the upheaval of those injustices.

But I was captivated by the promise of renewal that I was seeing in my neighborhood, Greenmount West. I was captivated by the people I know who stayed in Greenmount West because it was their home. They never believed it didn't have a future. Or the ones who moved in during the 90s and early 00s to build an artists community in old factories and warehouses. Or the first time home owners, like myself, who saw a previously vacant home as an opportunity rather than a liability. ReBUILD Metro's investment in communities like mine, along with Oliver and Johnston Square, were paying off. Hope attracts hope. The spark of restoration in the eyes of my neighbors reminds me every day that nothing is lost. The gardens that are growing, the children that are playing, the murals on the sides of row homes, the elders sitting on their stoops in the cool morning air, the drum lines at our back to school block party – all of them show me life is here in a place where I heard whispers over and over again that no life existed.

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I am finding comfort in the renewal in my community while my heart has fallen apart because of Michael Britt’s sudden illness and death. I hope you are finding some solace in the midst of this unthinkable loss for us all. This is my first Sunday back in this sanctuary since Michael died. I have been so anxious about returning to this space because the entire sanctuary reminds me of Michael. I can see him sitting in his favorite rocking chair in the back near the narthex. I can hear him teaching the confirmands about the organ. I can feel his warm handshake during the passing of the peace. And yet, I believe that what I need right now is to be here in this room with all of you. I can’t begin to assume what you might need in your grief or what you are feeling right now. Whatever it may be, I want you to know that you and your grief are welcome here - right here, right now, in this congregation, in your body, in your mind, in your heart, and in your spirit.

You may remember that two weeks ago Andrew spoke during the announcements about the CREDO pastors conference, the one that was delayed three years due to covid. *Credo* means “I believe” in Latin- it is the first word in most of the creeds from the early church. I spent a week contemplating belief, but not about what I believe in a theological or religious sense. I spent a week contemplating all the layers of well being that are needed for a full, balanced life as a person and a pastor. It was a gift of grace and rest at a time when my heart was aching and I wanted to be with you all so much.

My heart is still aching and angry, and I know it will for a long time. I imagine yours might be aching and angry for a long time, too. I wrote a set of

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belief statements for my personal life that covered everything from spiritual to financial wellbeing, and then I shared it with the 16 other pastors from around the country on our final day, taking communion and receiving the stole that I am wearing right now. It was a holy week and a holy time.

I felt a bit like Jeremiah, making promises to myself for a future I could not see or experience yet. He bought a piece of land while imprisoned by his king while the Babylonian army attacked his city. And he dared to say that the city and the land would flourish again rather than fall into despair. My city and my country were not besieged like his, but my heart and spirit felt attacked from all sides when Michael fell ill and died. I could hear God saying to me, “Come and dwell with me. Come and believe that life will come back to you and to your beloved congregation.” I was resistant, skeptical. How could I write a rule of life in the midst of shock, grief, and anger? How can we live out our communal values in the midst of Michael’s death?

I came to understand then, like I understand this morning, that we must “live the questions now” as Rilke writes. A way of life is aspirational, not unattainable. A way of life is hopeful and defiant. A way of life shows us what we will proclaim and commit to boldly without compromise - even when we feel weak, uncertain, or vulnerable. None of us can bring Michael back, as much as we want to do that. Jeremiah cannot stop the siege of Jerusalem, as much as he may want to do. But I can honor his life by living mine with purpose, with kindness, and with deep hope.

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Now, I want to bring a little bit of CREDO to you this morning. In the pew in front of you, you will find a prayer card. If there are not enough prayer cards, I invite you to turn to the notes section of your bulletin. Write down four categories: Spiritual, financial, emotional, physical. We will spend the next 5 minutes writing down what values guide us in our personal lives. There are no right or wrong answers here. Only the ones that come up from inside of you. As you reflect on these categories, I want you to imagine that you are like Jeremiah, making promises to yourself for a better future, for leaving your community better than you found it when you arrived, for believing that a war torn city will flourish again.

You will know that the five minutes are up when the music for the sermon hymn begins.