

“Staking a Claim” -- Message for “Five Practices” series on Intentional Faith Development

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Text: Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15

Without some historical background, the theological significance -- the message and application of this story -- could easily get lost in the strange words and names. It's been a while since we've delved into the ancient story of the prophet Jeremiah from the Hebrew scriptures, so let's take some time to paint a setting. If you're a history buff, this may be interesting to you -- and you may be able to correct my errors and fill in my abbreviated explanations. If you're not, I hope you'll bear with me, and trust that I'm trying to paint in broad strokes.

Jeremiah heard a call to ministry in the year 626 B.C.E., the year that Nabopolassar, the first of the Babylonian kings, came to power in what is now Iraq. Prior to that time, the Assyrians, Babylon's northern neighbors, had been in control of the region, and Egypt was their chief rival. Old Nabopolassar and his successor, Nebuchadnezzar II, had a thirst for power and land, and each king set about conquering more and more territory. The Babylonians defeated Egypt in 605, establishing themselves as the dominant power in the middle east for the next 70 years.

The tiny kingdom of Judah was caught in the middle of this struggle as it played out. When Jeremiah first started his call as a prophet (a spiritual advisor to the king), Judah was under the reign of Josiah, the last of the of “faithful” kings in Jerusalem.

While Josiah instituted a number of religious reforms, his political calculations weren't as astute; he was killed by Necho, king of Egypt, in 609. He was followed on the throne by his son Jehoahaz, who reigned only three months before Necho came back, captured him, and took him to Egypt, leaving another of Josiah's sons, Jehoiakim, in charge as a vassal of Egypt for the next 11 years. Following his death, Jehoikim's son, Jeconiah, reigned for three months (do you see a pattern here?) before he was defeated by the Babylonians and carried off with the entire court to Babylon. The Babylonians set up a puppet king named Zedekiah, who seemed to think he was in the clear. But he, too, would be deposed by the Babylonians after he tried making nice with the Egyptians and attempted to stage a revolt with their help. In a rage, Nebuchadnezzar swept in, captured Zedekiah, had his sons murdered in his presence, put out his eyes, and imprisoned him in Babylon, where he died. The city of Jerusalem was levelled, the temple destroyed and nearly all that was left of Jerusalem's people were carried off into exile.

Jeremiah was an advisor to all these kings, encouraging them, often in vain, to abandon their political strivings and to listen to, and trust in, the voice of God. Because Judah and its kings had been so headstrong, turning to political maneuverings to find security, Jeremiah predicted Judah's fall and the resulting exile. He urged the kings to submit to the consequences, which he saw as the judgment of God on them for their refusal to listen to and obey God alone. The kings didn't like to hear this, so Jeremiah was often persecuted.

In the passage read for us this morning, it's nearly curtains for Zedekiah; Jerusalem is under seige, and the end is near.

Jeremiah is under house arrest, his movements restricted to the royal courtyard, and Zedekiah is still grasping at straws.

Jeremiah's word is: "Don't fight Babylon; if you resist, you will fail." It was advice Zedekiah would not heed.

And in the midst of this, we have this strange story in which Jeremiah is commanded by God to purchase a field. And we have this interesting little interchange where we learn about how property was bought and sold in those times, with witnesses and a copy sealed in a clay jar and buried.

Why is it here?

Jeremiah was not the only prophet who was sometimes ordered to do something to demonstrate a message from God -- an object lesson, as it were. Many of these actions were pretty bizarre: Ezekiel laid on his side for for 390 days (Ezek 4); Isaiah went naked and barefoot for three years (Isa 20). In comparison, buying a field doesn't seem quite so wild. But consider the times: the enemy is at the door. Supplies are scarce; food and water is running low. Jeremiah's already known and proclaimed that Jerusalem is going to fall. He's written to the exiles already in Babylon, instructing on God's behalf: "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper" (Jeremiah 29:5-7, NIV). In other words: "Face it. You're in for the long haul."

Jeremiah buys a field he will never plant, a field from which he will never reap a harvest. After Zedekiah's demise, he will flee to Egypt and live out his days there, never to return to Judah. Why does he tell the exiles to lay down roots in Babylon, on the one hand, and himself buy a field in Judah, on the other?

And, you may be wondering, what does this have to do with Intentional Faith Development?

I believe it's all about staking a claim and keeping God's bigger picture in mind.

Buying a field was Jeremiah's way of saying to a people living in desperate times: do not fear; live in hope. These hard times will not last forever. God is tough, but God is also gracious. There are consequences for disobedience, to be sure. But as harsh as those consequences may be, as life-altering as the times may be, God is still in charge, and God will see us through. In response to this conviction and this promise, people of faith may do bold things, allowing God to stake a claim on their lives -- and this will be their message of hope for others. These actions will be costly and they will be viewed as crazy and counter-intuitive. But as God will be God in the end, the charge of the faithful is to pass on hope to those who follow.

I've been staking a claim in a way that feels rather risky for me. I've been engaged in a community listening project of sorts. It's a personal stretch because I can be rather shy in strange situations, so it's not just a matter of staking a claim in the neighborhood, it's been staking a claim on my personality and

my leadership. I've been out talking with strangers, setting myself up in front of stores, the farmer's market, and on the street, asking folks if they participate regularly in a worshipping community, and if not, asking why they think most people these days don't, and what they think the greatest needs in our society are. I have had some fascinating conversations. You can read more about what I've been learning in the upcoming issue of our church newsletter, which is due out next week.

The first day I went out, I'd stopped just two people before Frank approached me. He saw the name tag I was wearing and said, "You're a pastor? Are you out here saving souls?" I said I was just out getting to know my neighbors, and asked him the first couple of questions on my clipboard; I ended up listening to him talk for over an hour and a half.

Frank is, by his own definition, homeless. He stays in a rented room and spends his days panhandling in front of Whole Foods because his SSI check can't cover both rent and healthy food; a diabetic (he says he got that way from eating "junk" fast food), he's been working to lose weight sensibly, and he's biding his time until his pension kicks in so he can get the heck outta' Dodge. Frank told me about coming to California and how much he hates it here; the weather is good, he says, but the people are snobby, shallow, self-centered, sometimes mean-spirited, focused too much on appearances. Along with telling me much of his life story, Frank shared a social analysis that is pretty spot-on, if you ask me; his views about big business, politics, folks out for money, a "dog-eat-dog world" are painfully accurate. He's also experienced considerable pain in relationships and felt the rejection and hypocrisy of the Church. I don't know if my afternoon listening to him was a big help, though he started the conversation with "I don't believe in organized religion of any

sort,” peppered the conversation with exclamations of “You must be a saint for listening to me like this,” and ended with a “God bless you,” though I had not given him a dime.

I found myself turning over the details of that conversation in my head for days. In fact, I thought he’d probably do a better job of preaching this sermon than I would. (He did give me his permission to share all this.)

One of Frank’s comments that really struck me was about a hidden blessing of being homeless: it had afforded him the time to really think about the things that matter, to engage more deeply with the world and its problems. “I never thought about these things before I became homeless,” Frank admits. “I didn’t have the time.”

The Disciple Bible Study participants we prayed over just a few minutes ago are staking a claim on their time to think about these things and talk about them in the light of God’s word.

Between their daily Bible reading homework and the class sessions, they will be committing 6 or 7 hours a week to this enterprise. Upon realizing just how much it was going to take, a number of people who earlier expressed interest dropped out before getting to this point. We’ve asked for your prayers for those who remain because I know that the Enemy is going to work on us in the coming weeks. A spiritual battle is going to be waged, because this is a territory issue. When we allow God to stake a significant claim on our lives like this, the Enemy squawks. I’m sure many of you don’t feel comfortable with personifying evil like this; it may be manifested more like feeling tired, or as the internal voice that says, “Maybe I could just skip tonight.” But I tell you, however it shows up, it’s going to be

tough. No one has extra time. Most of us can't easily reprioritize that many hours and not feel a pinch, not find that we need to give up something good for something better and something eternal. (Tithing is like this, too, if you'll permit a sidebar and foretaste of further down this preaching series.) We warned you that these five practices were going to take us deeper as we went along. You're seeing the rubber hitting the road here today as we celebrate the commitment our brothers and sisters are making. Pray for us.

And don't think you're being let off the hook. I have every confidence that this Disciple Bible study class is going to transform this congregation; I've seen it happen before and I know it will happen again. You don't stake a claim like this without lives and communities being changed. But church is not a spectator sport. You can't pay others to do it for you. You're not here just to cheer others on. At some point you're going to have to get in the ring. It may not be today, and it may not be Disciple Bible Study, but God is calling you somewhere to something intentional and meaningful.

You're not off the hook with your pastor going out and talking to strangers, either -- or your Outreach team going out and doing acts of justice and mercy. God is calling you to something audacious, something radical, passionate, intentional, risk-taking and extravagant. Are you scared yet? You should be. I know I am!

These are dreadfully uncertain times we live in. Technological, educational, political and economic achievement are not going to deliver us. You don't need me to tell you that. The community of faith is not a temporary, pleasant escape from painful reality. It's

an exercise in looking at the world and ourselves with God's eyes. Because it's exercise, it changes our souls and alters the shape of our very living. Exercise is no easy practice. If you're like me, you need exercise buddies to keep you going and growing, to get through the moments when you want to give up and go flabby. That's what the community of faith is for.

Staking a claim, letting God grab hold -- of your calendar, your habits, your heart -- is a bright beacon of hope in a world that desperately needs it. Find your stake, lay a claim to hope, and dig deep into the treasures of a life in the Spirit. You won't be disappointed. Amen.