

The other day I had a conversation on the phone with a friend of mine. We've known each other since college. She's smart, has very successful in her career. She works for a prestigious company and she has direct oversight of several employees. She's very good at what she does, capable, positive, handles stress well, adaptable. When the stay-at-home orders began, she got her team up and running remotely without a blip and helped them do the same for those folks they were responsible for.

And she told me she's really having a hard time lately. She was fine at the beginning of this lockdown, putting all her skills at work, staying up and running, watching out for her team. But once that immediate response was made she said, "I just feel like my energy is gone, my head isn't working right, I'm not sleeping well and I feel this deep sense of dread. My whole being aches. I keep hearing that song in my head: It's the End of the World as We Know It.

She went on to talk about her fears about the COVID-19 epidemic, these long weeks of isolation, the new cases now rising as more states are opening up their economies, the polarization of our country politically and the grief she feels of an America that can't come together and work for the common good. She supports the protests and hopes for changes to address systemic racism - but she is frightened and grieved by the riots. She said, "I spend a lot of time keeping my team's spirits up but my spirit just draining. I feel like the world's on fire. It's like we're living in the Old Testament: Fire and Plague - It's the End of the World as We Know It."

It made me think of the Prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah would have understood exactly what my friend was talking about. Many people in his day didn't think they were going to last much longer, either. Theirs was not a plague. In their case, it was a war that threatened them. Their everyday lives had changed dramatically. In Jerusalem, most of the trees in town had probably been cut down for weapons. Water was either unfit to drink or being rationed because there was too little of it. Trash and garbage were piling up because no one dared go outside the city gates to dump it. It must have felt like the end of their world, too, the end of life as they knew it, the end of their civilization, the end of their nation, the end of their very lives for some of them.

And Jeremiah *particularly* was not encouraged. "A horrible shocking thing is happening in the land," he said, "for we have defiled it. The ground is cracked and barren and pastures lie parched and withered. The whole land lies in ruins and the people groan because there is no bread...Now even death itself is climbing into our windows and has entered our fortresses."

It was not a pretty picture. In fact, it was one of the most bleak pictures the people of Israel had ever faced. But fortunately, God apparently had other ideas. God says to Jeremiah, "Your cousin is going to come to you and offer to sell you a field in Anathoth. Take it. When your cousin comes, I want you to buy that field. Pay him whatever he offers. Do whatever you need to do, but I want you to buy that field."

Now, Jeremiah probably thought that it was a pretty stupid thing to do, especially given the circumstances. At the time God came to Jeremiah with this strange request, the country was at war with the worst, most ruthless superpower of the ancient world, Babylon. And things weren't going so well. In fact, the capitol city of Jerusalem was under siege and daily life was getting harder as blockades and hunger began taking their toll. Everything was crumbling in around them. Their whole life, their whole society was falling apart.

And in the midst of it all was Jeremiah. He'd already spoken out against the war - several times, in fact. He'd already told the king what he thought about the situation. But no one had

listened, and now there he was, sitting in the palace jail, arrested for having told the truth about how badly the war was going.

As he sat there in jail, reflecting on this latest and most outrageous of God's requests, Jeremiah must've wondered what in the world buying that little field was going to accomplish. He probably thought it was a dumb idea. What good was buying a field going to do - especially a field that was currently in enemy hands, in occupied enemy territory. "What good is that? Our whole world is being destroyed and God wants me to buy a field? It's insane!" Jeremiah probably thought.

And on the face of it, it does seem like a pretty foolish gesture. Buying that field looks so insignificant in the mess of everything else going on. It was such a puny gesture, so inadequate, so futile, so utterly hopeless...And yet, God said, "I want you to buy that field. I don't care how crazy it looks. I want you to go and buy it."

And so he did. Jeremiah bought that field. As silly and foolish as it sounded, and no doubt feeling silly and foolish and all the rest, Jeremiah buys that field in Anathoth. And not only that! He makes a big production out of it. He weighs out the silver - coin by coin. He publicly signs the deed with a flourish. He even has the deed placed in a sealed jar for protection, to say that the proof of this transaction was going to last a long, long time.

Jeremiah says, I bought the field. signed the deed, sealed it, got witnesses, and weighed the money on the 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 Baruch, my scribe, in the presence of my cousin and the presence of the witnesses and everybody else who was there watching me.

And I said to Baruch, 'Take these deeds 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."

Jeremiah and his people are on the edge of extinction - they're on the edge of the world as they know it. And yet, Jeremiah went and bought that field. Even though he may have thought it was the dumbest thing he'd ever done in his life, Jeremiah bought that field that was positioned in enemy territory, no less. He bought that field even when he was in prison, when he himself was confined by the palace guards.

He bought that field. God told him to make an investment. God told him to make an investment that was literal, tangible, witnessed, recorded, and preserved.

And he bought it as a sign of hope. He bought that field, he said, as a symbol of hope, a symbol of the future, a future he wasn't sure he or his people would ever see. But, he said: God says fields and vineyards will once again grow in this land, God says gardens and trees and bushes and flowers will once again flourish here. When the siege is ended, when the war is over, when we are taken into exile, and then are able to return here, this land - will once again grow and bloom.

This story reminds us that God is invested in the future destiny of humankind. Always has been, ever since he created the world, which he said was "very good." Even when catastrophe was imminent, God tells Jeremiah to make this - audacious and specific financial act, as *God's declaration* that judgment and destruction would not have the final word. Judah would certainly suffer the judgment that God had announced. Babylon would destroy Jerusalem and carry off its inhabitants into exile. But Jeremiah activates the future in the

present through this symbolic act of purchasing a field. God's people would be restored and would again thrive in the land.

My friends, we may not be a prophet like Jeremiah, or have the wherewithal to buy a field as a sign of faith, but I believe in the same hope that Jeremiah had, the hope that made him go and buy that field in the first place—the hope that somehow or another God has something other than the end in mind for us, something more hopeful, something more healthful, something more beautiful - the hope that God is indeed not finished with us yet.

We have problems we can't solve. When the situation reaches a point where no human resources of hope remain credible, when the world is all about serious outcomes, where human lives are always at stake, God says: invest in this land, this place, this situation, these people. They are all worthy of your investment.

Perilous times require the faithful to put into embodied action the hope that God has announced. Our neighbors, our community, our world is aching. And God has given us a job to do. This is not a time for silence. "Always be ready to answer anyone who asks you to explain the reason for the hope you have, but do it with gentleness and respect." It says in *1 Peter* 3:15.

God has made an investment in us. This is a time where in word and deed, we are called to embody God's vision for this world with the hope of God on our lips and the vision of God is in our actions.

God says I've invested in you. Invest yourself in the work God is doing and the future that you and I can't see, but God can. God would use you to shape our world. That's what we're here for, after all. To invest everything God has given us in the healing of this broken, beautiful world - full of broken, beautiful people. It's more than worth it. Make your investment, because God is invested in you.

NT Wright, the Scholar and Teacher of Biblical Studies says: "Our task as image-bearing, God-loving, Christ-shaped, Spirit-filled Christians, following Christ and shaping our world, is to announce redemption to a world that has discovered its fallenness, to announce healing to a world that has discovered its brokenness, to proclaim love and trust to a world that knows only exploitation, fear and suspicion...The gospel of Jesus points us and indeed urges us to be at the leading edge of the whole culture, articulating in story and music and art and philosophy and education and poetry and politics and theology and even--heaven help us--Biblical studies, a worldview - that will mount the historically-rooted Christian challenge to both modernity and postmodernity, leading the way...with joy and humor and gentleness and good judgment and true wisdom. I believe if we face the question, "if not now, then when?" if we are grasped by this vision - we may also hear the question, "if not us, then who?" And if the gospel of Jesus is not the key to this task, then what is?" ---*The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is*

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.