

## **Fidelity Investment**

A sermon by Louise Westfall  
Fairmount Presbyterian Church  
Cleveland Heights, Ohio  
26 September 2004  
**Text: Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15**

*Have you at times felt that God is particularly close to you?*

A broad sampling of United States' children and youth were asked this question as part of a recent national research project on religious experience in childhood and adolescence. *Have you at times felt that God is particularly close to you?* A whopping 84% of the first-graders surveyed said yes. And then the numbers descend like a staircase: 69% of fifth-graders said yes. 57% of seventh graders, and by eleventh grade, fewer than half—47%—said yes, they had at times felt that God was particularly close to them [K. Tamminem "Religious Experience in Childhood and Adolescence," in the *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 1994].

Any number of conclusions can, of course, be drawn from those findings. At least one possibility is that the older we get, the more life experiences we have both good and bad, the harder it is to feel the presence of God in a personal way. I wonder if the "yes" responses would continue to decline if the study had included young adults, middle-aged folks, and elderly persons. It wouldn't surprise me if they did—sometimes it is hard to think of God as closely involved in the world we inhabit; a world of warfare, violence and terror; a world in which children die every day from hunger; a world that despite its shrinking size feels ever more divided by economics, religion, ethnicity. Even our personal worlds don't readily nurture a sense of the Divine: stress and overwork, the frantic pace of life today, leave many exhausted and anxious, without focus or purpose.

The story of our faith reveals that it has been so since the beginning. At times, the people marveled at God's presence and power, in liberating them from slavery in Egypt, for example, in bringing them to a land "flowing with milk and honey," in establishing rulers who would guide the nation into paths of justice and peace. At other times, however, the people forgot about God, neglected worship, institutionalized injustice, and bowed down before false gods. The people's infidelity is contrasted with God's faithfulness. Despite their idolatry and rebellion, God kept insisting "I will be your God, and you shall be my people."

The context for today's scripture reading is one of those low period's in Israel's history, when God seemed far from them. The prophet Jeremiah had for some time proclaimed God's intent to judge the nation, calling them to return to God's ways. Jeremiah's reputation as a prophet of doom was well-deserved: he predicted that God's judgment would take the form of military defeat; Jerusalem would be conquered. For delivering this message, in an effort to silence his bad news, he had been arrested. Meanwhile, powerful Babylonian armies had assembled at the gate, surrounding the city and breathing fire. Against the backdrop of this crisis, Jeremiah hears God's word, calling him to a strange task: to buy a piece of property, a field currently occupied by enemy Babylonians. A little piece of land speculation. An investment in the future? Listen for God's Word to the church today, in the reading from the Hebrew Scriptures, the book of the prophet Jeremiah in the 32<sup>nd</sup> chapter at the first verse: [32:1-3a, 6-15]

The enthusiastic coach was inspiring his team in the locker room. "Okay, guys," he began. "Here we are—undefeated, untied, unscored upon—and ready for our first game!" Talk about optimism! Or is that wishful thinking? Perhaps there are some among us who can begin each day with such an attitude, but most find it increasingly difficult. We have had a good look at our opponents, and figured out that our perfect record won't take long to blemish.

What gives you hope? What makes you confident about the future, despite compelling evidence to the contrary? In the morning text, Jeremiah's purchase of a field around besieged Jerusalem was a symbolic act of hope, a gesture that said the nation was going to have a future. Certainly at the time, Jeremiah's action would have been seen as throwing good money after bad; a foolish venture without a prayer of succeeding. A fool and his money are soon parted, as the saying goes! It's not enough that Jeremiah buys the property; he goes to a great deal of trouble to make the transaction highly visible. Elaborate steps are taken in public to exchange the money and execute the necessary legal documents. Then the prophet orders his assistant to store the documents in a place where they will be safe "for a long time." Without saying it in so many words, Jeremiah dramatically witnesses to the goodness of the future, and is sure enough about that future to invest in it.

What made him do it? Jeremiah's reputation was not built on his cheery outlook. Wordsmiths among us know that his stern rhetoric has even been given a name --"jeremiads"-- and come to mean an entire genre of protest literature that laments the human condition and decries our fallen state.

Jeremiah was hardly a Pollyanna who traced the rainbow through the rain. I was surprised to be reminded this week that ancient Greek mythology spoke of hope as one of the plagues released from "pandora's box" as punishment for human pride. This view held that hope deceives humankind with illusion, thereby intensifying suffering by suggesting another possibility, always just ahead, around the corner, beyond the next horizon. I have read repeatedly that President Bush exudes unbounded optimism, and that voters are attracted to this positive worldview. I think we desperately want to have hope, to believe that the best is yet to be; at the same time I wonder if much of what passes for hope is indeed illusion; a misplaced optimism in human effort and good intentions.

What we see demonstrated in the biblical witness is quite different. Jeremiah's hope was rooted not in human strength or wisdom, but in God's faithfulness. Jeremiah's God was not interventionist; the city DID fall, and the temple itself was destroyed. Instead, Jeremiah believed that something other than powerful human armies and governments would prevail; God's redemptive purposes would have the last word. Evil would be countered by God's compassion. God's promises are utterly reliable. And Jeremiah bet the farm on their fulfillment.

Here's what I find most amazing—and most gracious-- in this text: the future God intends for humanity comes to light through human effort and choices. Jeremiah bought the field at Anathoth. We no less than Jeremiah are called to invest in the future: God's future. And friends, this future is eternal, but it is for this world as well as the next. As one theological pundit noted, "Heaven's in great shape; earth is where the problems are." [*John Dominic Crossan, quoted in Marcus Borg, "The Heart of Christianity," p. 133*] The fields we are to purchase lie on this side of the grave, because that's where God's presence needs to be experienced more fully and more widely. This is the place where hope makes a difference.

What gives you hope? I asked that question to a number of you this week, and got a number of responses: children....the concept of "wait till next year" (that one obviously from a baseball fan!)...the individual acts of kindness and thoughtfulness that seem to happen just at the moment you need them...the goodness of people I know...and this, from one of your leadership team: Fairmount's Mission Statement. How's that again? ...to worship God, to seek the way of Christ, to grow as an inviting, caring, and challenging community of adults, children, and youth, in God's unconditional love transcending all human distinctions, which summons us to make a difference in the world. The person explained simply, "I believe God's love HELPS us make a difference in the world."

You know what? So do I. Our faith sets us on a path, a “way” that leads to a magnificent future God is preparing for the whole world. In the final analysis the important question may well be—not “do you feel God close to you” but rather, “do you feel close to God?” Faith will set us on the path, but it is hope that will keep us there—a conviction that God is faithful and will bring it to pass. So invest in the future, friends! Make an investment in hope with your vote in the upcoming election, by carefully listening to the visions painted by each candidate, and determining which seem more consistent with God’s future. Make an investment in hope with your presence at the Northeast Ohio Alliance for Hope public meeting, countering the economic disparity of our region with a vision of equity and justice. Make an investment in hope in the lives of our community’s youth by pledging support to one of the youth programs currently being pursued by our church. Information about “Open Doors,” the after-school program for Roxboro Middle school students, needing space in our building, is displayed in the glass case in the hallway off Andersen Hall. The only thing that stands between us and this outstanding opportunity for young people is money—some 25,000 dollars we don’t have in the operating budget right now. You’ve heard about Fairmount’s leadership in a community effort to buy the closed Heights Presbyterian Church and turn it into a Boys and Girls Club for youth ages 6 through 18. There are a few roadblocks: it’s going to cost a lot of money; there are parking concerns; some residents worry about loitering, delinquency, property values. This week Fairmount members Barbara and Mal Mixon have pledged to match dollar-for-dollar every Fairmount contribution up to one hundred-thousand dollars toward this project. An investment in hope, despite some evidence to the contrary; having faith that it is only through such investment that the evidence has any chance of changing.

Invest in hope friends. Christians have a pretty good example of that, against all odds. Where the world crucifies, we say, wait three days. The best is yet to be. THANKS BE TO GOD!

**Rev. Louise F. Westfall, D.Min., Pastor**