

HERITAGE AND PROMISE

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Jeremiah 32: 1-15 - Jeremiah buys a field during the siege

Hebrews 11: 39-12:2 - Surrounded by a cloud of witnesses

Today is designated by the United Church of Canada as "Foundation Sunday." That's a whole new thing to learn about, and there's a little insert in your bulletin about it. In addition to having the Mission and Service Fund which gathers about \$30 million dollars a year and is dispersed for various aspects of the church's work at home and abroad, the United Church has now recognized the need to establish a fund which would develop a capital that would never be spent. The capital's proceeds would provide foundational funding for the church in the future. This Sunday, as I mentioned, is designated "Foundation Sunday," perhaps because the story of Jeremiah buying the field came up in today's lectionary. It came to my attention in a particular way because Gladys Smith of our own congregation has been a contributor to the Foundation Fund. She received a letter encouraging congregations to acknowledge Foundation Sunday, and so we are doing that here. Some of you will have read about it in the "Observer" as well. As of June 25 the Fund had raised \$332,000., and the **Morrison** Trust has offered to match the first \$250,000. contributed by December 31. So the Fund, one of the exciting new things happening in our church, is now under way.

When I thought about the Foundation Fund I thought also about the financial crisis in which our congregation finds itself at the present time. Just this past week our Church Council, Finance Committee, and Stewardship Committee met to take stock, look ahead, develop a plan, and solve some problems. Following today's service we have a congregational meeting at which the Property Committee will make a proposal that is very similar to the national Foundation Fund--a proposal to establish a fund for ongoing major development, and for maintenance of this building. At first I wondered if this would be in conflict. How does it feel to go home from church realizing you just got asked for money six times in an hour and a half? We like to think of them as opportunities! But the two funds are not in conflict.

What I want to talk about this morning is how we are foundation-building through all our financial contributions, whether they are through our local funds, through our Property Foundation Fund (if that gets put into place today), or through the Organ Fund. The Organ Fund has done really quite a miraculous thing over the last ten or so years, and is on the verge of coming to fruition with the momentary--I guess that's all we can say at present--delivery and installation of the organ.

And now we come to the story of Jeremiah buying the field. That was at a time when Israel was about to fall--just before the Exile when Israel was about to lose its being, its identity as a nation, its leaders, its land, and to have its people exiled. Jeremiah

was a prophet who could see that coming, and he declared that to the people and to the king. He told the king this was a necessary piece of information for him to have, that the king ought to know his kingdom was about to fall. The king responded by putting him in jail. (Unpopular prophets tended to land in prison in those days.) The story recounts how the king brought Jeremiah before him and said “I don’t get it; how come you keep saying we’re about to be defeated?” The answer? “Because you are!” But Jeremiah, even knowing that the land of Israel was about to fall and people exiled, went out and bought this piece of land. It was for sale, it was in the family, it was his opportunity to buy it. He not only bought it; he drew up the deed and did it very publicly so that everybody could see the idiot that he was! He was buying a piece of land when he was about to lose the whole kingdom. But he was doing that as one of many, many, different and bizarre actions that he and other prophets took to demonstrate a message--to really draw attention to it so that the people would see what he had done. And what he did was to declare his trust, his hope in a spirit that comes to us not only from the past but also from the future, a spirit that is the source of promise in life. So he went out and bought the field.

I think there is some similarity. We live in a time when the church is declining, when it’s kind of shaky and things are changing. We really don’t know what kind of future the church has; we don’t know whether the kind of church we have now is the same as the one we will have in the future. And so what do you all go and do? You buy a \$150,000. pipe organ that is going to last for 80 years! That’s right in the spirit of Jeremiah. Then you establish a fund to provide thousands of dollars when you need to replace this roof, and to do renovations as time goes on and the needs of the congregation change. This is a profound declaration of faith, as is the Foundation that has been established nationally (which is also an opportunity available within our congregation). People can even write the church into their wills. What a profound statement of faith!

Years ago when I was interning in Toronto, I attended a seminar by Canadian Catholic theologian **Gregory Baum** who was talking about death. I want to paraphrase something that I remember him saying: “We die at peace if that to which we have given our life lives on.” And that’s very much what we are about as a church because our endeavours--what we give our lives to, what we give the life of the church to, the results we seek, the successes we look for--are not achieved within the span of our own life time. The church has existed for hundreds of years; this covenant between God and people has existed for thousands of years. And we’re looking not only decades ahead. We’re looking centuries ahead, we’re looking millennia ahead, knowing that the church has changed forms many times over the centuries and will change in the future as well. The one thing we can trust, as Jeremiah trusted, is that God’s spirit is there calling us, calling to us from the future as well as from the past.

So I thought I would also throw in that passage from Hebrews which in its entirety is about two or three chapters long. It’s too long for all of it to be read because it goes right from the very beginning and through all the great people of the Old Testament, through all the stories of the people of faith, and says each one of these people, like Abraham for example, lived by faith. Abraham was celebrated for that faith. He didn’t see the result; he lived by faith because he believed in that promise. And then we have those wonderful few verses that Lucille [Siwak] read. (And by the way, Lucille, you did such a great job that you get nominated for the award for biblical names!) We have those wonderful

words in Hebrews--that all of those people lived by faith. None of them saw the ultimate result of what they dedicated their lives to.

We today are surrounded by this great cloud of witnesses from all these centuries of our faith heritage--story after story, after story, after story, of how God did amazing and powerful things through the lives of these people. And that continued far beyond the time when the Book of Hebrews was written. We have two thousand years of church history full of stories of people who have lived their faith and built the foundation of the church we are today. And even within our own United Church of Canada and Camrose United Church we have the heritage of all those who have given so much--who dedicated, who believed, and who built the foundation for what this church is. That's not just genealogy or sentiment; it's the sense that the spirit of all of those witnesses is still with us, still empowers us, still guides us.

And so, this is a day for expanding our imagination beyond what happened over the last ten years and what we expect in the next ten, to what has happened over the thousands of years that went before us and what is to come for thousands of years. This is a day for getting that sense of the whole sweep of our faith--of what we are really about when we are building and strengthening and maintaining and guiding and envisioning for the church. We are carrying on a heritage that is huge and long and deep, and that inspires and strengthens and guides us today.

And we are living in the hope of a promise that comes to us from God who is in our future as much as in our past. The Book of Revelation was written in one of those times when things really seemed hopeless, and people were looking for something larger and beyond and transcendent as a source of hope. That's when the writer said, "God says this to you: 'I am the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last, the one who is and the one who was and the one who is yet to be.'" In that faith, in that Christ, in that spirit, we live our dedication to this church, a source of life for every one of us and for our community and for this world.

Transcribed by Sue and By Reesor