

**Extravagant Hope** (part 3 of 4 in *Extravagant Hope, Extravagant Generosity* series)

Jeremiah 32:1-15

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Rev. Elizabeth Ingram Schindler

I've had some interesting conversations with church members, colleagues, and others over the last several weeks about the state of the world and the state of our community. These conversations have been important to me because I'm a hoper – I feel like one of the gifts that I was born to bring to the world around me is *hope*. I generally see the bright side. I rarely give up. It's why, even through ten years of losing seasons, I was disappointed at every football loss by my alma mater, every single week – I truly believe that those players could win each and every game. I never lost hope.

But I recognize that everyone is not this way, and especially in the times we're facing now – and have been facing for several years – hopelessness does not only exist, but it is rampant. It isn't something I often experience myself, but through these recent conversations I've been reminded that people all around us feel without hope, as if nothing will ever get any better than it is now, and there is little left to live for. Our economy is in the tank; none of us will be able to sell our homes any time soon; our country is engaged in wars that seem unending; all of us know seemingly "perfect" families that have broken apart; jobs are being lost and cannot be found; and we hear of medical diagnosis after diagnosis that is devastating to us and those we love. Colleagues in ministry have told me they think their whole congregation is depressed. There is no good news to be had, as all over America in mainline churches, attendance is falling, financial giving is down, and churches have no way of competing with soccer games and AP classes and professional football and family vacations. All around us, people have fallen into hopelessness.

And yet the title of our stewardship series this month was intentional – many churches are focusing on *Extravagant Generosity* this year, but we are the only ones I know of who are pairing generosity with "extravagant hope." To the outsider, any suggestion of hope might seem naïve or uninformed, and extravagant hope just ridiculous. But I believe that no matter what is going on in the world around us, or even in our own lives, Christians are called and created to be people of hope – and not just a little hope, but wild and generous, lavish, extravagant hope. Because we are not people of circumstance as much as we are people of promise. We know that everything around us has come from the creative word of God – that God spoke us into being. And that despite our own attempts to run away from the grace being poured out on us day by day, God has kept every promise to bring us to new life. So our hope is not in economics or democracy or education or even family relationships – our hope is in the God who defeated death once and for all and promises us resurrection again and again, in this life and the next.

And so we turn to the story of Jeremiah. Now this might seem a random text at first glance. The first time I read this story I thought, "What does this have to do with *anything*?" But it is one of the greatest stories in the Bible of one who believed in God's promises despite all evidence and assurance around him that the world was careening toward disaster – it's the story of Jeremiah investing in God's promised future exactly when it made no sense in human social, cultural, and economic terms.

Jeremiah is not a small book in the Old Testament – it's 52 long chapters of dense poetry and wordy prose. And most of it is pretty 'doom and gloom.' It's a story of judgment on the people of Israel, because they have abandoned God and created idols for themselves. And when we get to chapter 32, part of which we heard this morning, things have gotten pretty bad: the city of Jerusalem, the very center of Jewish life, is under siege by the nasty Babylonians. Jeremiah is in prison, or at least on house arrest, because he's seen as a traitor – he has prophesied that the great city of Jerusalem will

fall in the next year. We know that he was right – in 587, Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians and the Jewish people were taken into exile, where they were forced to dramatically change the practice and their faith and their understanding of who God was and where God was present. The people’s entire way of life is in the process of being dismantled in this story – the enemy is literally at the gates. And what does Jeremiah do from his prison quarters? He buys a field.

Jeremiah got a word from God to buy his cousin Hanamel’s field at Anathoth, his home town. There was an Old Testament law that said the next of kin could buy property from each other so families didn’t lose their way of life in perpetuity because of one’s misfortune. So when Hanamel showed up to Jeremiah, Jeremiah weighed out seventeen shekels of silver, signed the deed publicly, and **went on record as a hoper**, who believed God’s word that “houses, field, and vineyards will once again be bought in this land.” It was the absolute worst time to buy a piece of property – the Babylonians had *surrounded the city*, and Jeremiah himself had prophesied that Jerusalem would fall. But Jeremiah put himself on the line saying, “I know there’s no way of averting disaster here – things are going to get worse before they get better. But I believe in the God who has always made a way for new life; I believe present circumstances will not be the last word in our destiny as creatures of God; and I have hope that we will return to fruitful living right here on this land, despite everything you see to the contrary.”

Now Jeremiah wasn’t a fool – he knew it was crazy to buy a field during the Babylonian siege, when they were all about to go into exile. But he also knew that his hope was not based on economics or politics or the strength of armies, but on the character of the God with whom he had been close through the days of despair and would remain close until he saw resurrection with his own eyes. Just after the passage we heard this morning, Jeremiah prays, “*Lord God, you created heaven and earth by your great power and outstretched arm; nothing is too hard for you!*” And a few verses later, God responds, “*I am the Lord, the God of all living things! Is anything too hard for me?*” This is the question that was asked when Abraham and Sarah were to give birth to a child in their *very old age*, when the Israelite people were enslaved in Egypt and God made a way through a raging river for them to cross on dry land, and when God came to earth in the body of a virgin girl to redeem us all from our sin: “Is anything too hard for God?” In buying the field at Anathoth, Jeremiah answered the question, saying God is faithful and God is powerful, and *nothing* is impossible for the one who spoke the universe into being, present circumstances notwithstanding.

And while our present circumstances are not to be compared with those of Jerusalem in 588 BC, we who enjoy relative comfort in our daily lives despite illness and economic uncertainty and potential job loss, we find in Jeremiah an incredible role model. Still, God is saying to us, “Is anything too hard for me? Do you believe it? **If so, put yourself on record as a hoper against circumstance. Invest in the future I have promised.**”

And that is our question: Do you believe that little Browns Point Church can make a difference in your life, in your faith, in your family, in this community? Do you believe God has something more in store for us, despite present circumstances? Do you believe that through God’s power, we can reach families who are already *very busy* and think they have no time for the spiritual life and the genuine community they are longing for? Do you believe that through God’s power, we can ourselves become committed followers of Jesus Christ, whose everyday decisions speak volumes in the community around us about being people of love and joy and peace? Do you believe that through God’s power, we can change the community around us from being one of hopelessness to one of extravagant hope? Because God has promised to do far more than we can even ask or imagine right here in our midst. God has promised to make a way where there is no way. God has promised to bring life out of death not only in some otherworldly future but right here before our eyes. Do you believe that God is faithful and powerful, that nothing is impossible with God? If you don’t, then I invite you to spend

some time getting to know the God of all creation, who has never failed us: there is hope there waiting for you to embrace it, waiting to transform your life forever.

But if you *do* believe, I invite you to put yourself on record as a hoper against circumstance. Invest in the future God has promised in the way that those who came before us on this land believed in the future of Browns Point UMC and invested in you. If you believe that God is still speaking, that the church can still be a glimpse of what the kingdom might look like, that we might make a positive difference in this community and the world, then invest here: your time, your talents, and your treasure. Do what seems ridiculous to the rest of the world in a time when church is competing with so many other cultural institutions, and in our part of the world, losing a great deal of the time. Take a public stand as an extravagant hoper, and respond with extravagant generosity.

I believe that God has things in store for us that we would not believe if we were told. I imagine this church overflowing with people of all ages, people longing to draw nearer to God and each other. I believe this church is uniquely poised to offer the hospitable welcome God calls all Christians to offer, no matter where people have been or what they've experienced. And I want to go on record as an extravagant hoper, willing to invest in God's promised future, despite present political and economic circumstances. That's one reason my family tithes 10% of our income to the church. We could easily make excuses, saying "we give time and energy; that is enough." We could easily do something else with that money: we have a toddler and a baby on the way, a house that isn't fully furnished yet and student loans still to pay off. But we know that all else will fade in this life before the promises of God are broken; that when there is nothing else on which to place our trust, God can be trusted; and that God has promised never to leave us or forsake us. We can feel God's power moving in our very midst, and we want to be part of the work God is doing right here at Browns Point, to invest in God's promised future. I invite you to do the same. God *calls* you to do the same, to go on record as a hoper, not one reliant on the circumstances of this world, but one who **believes** in the God who is making all things new.

Amen.