

**Staking Our Claim**  
**A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church**  
**Bob Stillerman**  
**Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15**  
**September 25, 2016**

One year ago Saturday, Jacqueline and I strolled into our real-estate attorney's office to sign closing papers for our house. After about forty-five minutes and three dozen signatures, the house was ours.

"What's the big deal?" you might ask. "There's nothing special about a closing – as a matter of fact your attorney probably closed several properties that day, and thousands over the last year."

And you're right, he did and he does. But there's a story behind the signing of this deed. When we signed these papers, we were staking a claim to our future: a new city, two new jobs, a new church, a new home, and little did we know, a new daughter. By writing our names, we formalized our future, and we declared that 330 River Banks was our home.

Nearly three decades ago, the people of this church performed a similar act. They purchased a plot at 5811 Sardis Road. And somebody (BLESS THEM!), had a vision. There was no steeple. No Meeting House. No fancy sign. And yet still, these women and men surveyed this plot with purpose. And they pointed to a certain patch of grass under a tall oak. And they said, "There! Right there! That's the spot. Can you see it? This is our church! This is our future!" They signed their names, and they staked their claim to the future: A collection of God's beloved, walking together under a new banner called Sardis Baptist Church. And I wasn't there to witness it, but I'm sure they celebrated with a potluck supper.

In today's lection, Jeremiah stakes a claim to Israel's future. If you read too quickly, or if you dismiss the details, you might ask, "What value is there in a piece of scripture that describes a real estate transaction?"

But if you DO KNOW the details, it's a passage worth remembering. Jeremiah buys this plot of land in the middle of a Babylonian siege. King Nebuchadnezzar's army has sacked Jerusalem, and exiled its most vital civil servants to Babylon. All that's left of the once-proud city are its most vulnerable citizens. And to make matters worse, Jeremiah is sitting in a prison for treason. He angered the king by telling him to accept Babylon's inevitable rule.

It's under these circumstances, in a time and place where'd we'd expect the worst of Jeremiah, that we find him at his best. He buys a plot of family land.

Remember last week, we talked about weeping Jeremiah. The prophet wept for a country that had lost its way, a country that no longer lived into YHWH's covenant.

Jewish law valued land, and especially family land. A person had an obligation to keep family land, so long as it didn't prevent their ability to make a sustainable living. Jeremiah's cousin offers him the land of his uncle as next of kin. Jeremiah accepts, and buys a piece of land he'll most likely never have the chance to enjoy.

But the act is symbolic. It says, "I'm going to live into God's covenant. And I believe that better days are coming. And I believe, that even in the midst of exile and destruction, God's got a future planned for

Israel, a future where one day, houses and fields and vineyards will be bought in this land.” Jeremiah says, “I’m staking my claim to the future!”

When Jeremiah buys his plot, he asserts that Nebuchadnezzar’s cruelty will not be the final word. God’s love will be the final word. Jeremiah’s knows that every increment of covenant-living has exponential effects. When people love God and love neighbor, eventually, houses gain a fresh coat of paint, and fields begin to sprout new crops, and vineyards produce sweeter batches of grapes. And God’s Jubilee, or God’s kingdom, as Christ calls it, comes a little nearer.

I have a plot of land. And on that land, I will seek to keep God’s commandments on my lips and in my heart, and teach them to my children, so that my home will become shelter for adversity: surgeries, deaths of loved ones, really hard school years, IB homework and exams, growing pains, career changes, family drama, empty-nesting, and other cycles of life will come and go. But a home that lives in God’s covenant will weather the storm: our prayers, our discipline, our love and care for another, reveal God’s presence in our lives, and offer hope for better days.

And here at Sardis Baptist Church, we too own a plot of land. Our charter members believed that God’s possibilities could be revealed right here in this place. And in three decades we’ve seen our share of bad times: Hurricane Hugo, 9-11, and several economic crises. And this week, not a new crisis, just the festering wounds of a city still struggling with the effects of institutional racism and poverty.

And it seems to me, we have a choice to make: We can choose to let the “isms” be the final word. We can choose to surrender to the inevitability of every Nebuchadnezzar that comes along. We can choose to believe that God is absent or irrelevant or outdated. We can choose to be swept into a future without hope.

OR. OR we can choose to be like Jeremiah. We can choose to believe that living into God’s covenant, minute by minute, hour by hour, day by day, week by week is a process that bears fruit. We can choose to believe that God’s goodness is the final word. We can choose to believe that hope is not a falsehood, but is instead, our reality, our purpose, our truth!!!

Here’s what I think. Walking in CROP Walk; filling William’s grocery bags; making sandwiches for neighbors; praying for God’s guidance; discerning scripture; spending hours and hours and hours (and even more hours) in dialogue with neighbors who have different views of the world; telling our children about a good God who loves everyone; reflecting on our sense of privilege (even when, especially when it’s painful)...each of these things is inherently important.

There will be days when such actions feel like Jeremiah preaching to a people who will not listen, who can’t slow down enough to see the urgency of God’s purpose. But such actions are not a waste of time. They are the seeds of hope. And when we invest in these seeds, we stake a claim for our future: God’s Kingdom come near.

May it be so! Amen.