

Redemption, Risk, & Red Lights

Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15

CWZepp, BWCOB, September 29, 2019

A few years ago, we were visiting our extended family in Pennsylvania. The kids were outside playing in their cousins' driveway, and I was the supervising parent for all six of them. I don't remember the specific occasion for the visit or exactly how old the kids were...I am guessing that Shylah was about 4 and Tristan was a toddler. What I do remember was that I made a deliberate and conscious decision to let it happen.

Now you need to know that Naomi and Mark's house sits down from the main road, and their driveway is fairly short, but remarkably steep – you turn off the road and then go nose down straight toward their garage. And this is not the only driveway incident to have occurred there – at least twice we have gotten word of a car having gone through a part of the garage, remarkably, neither of them involving ice or snow.

But this incident involved neither an automobile nor the destruction of any part of Mark and Naomi's home. Instead, it involved Shylah, her face, and one of those push-from-behind toys that almost all kids love. I don't remember what the rest of the kids were doing that afternoon, but Shylah – as is her way – was testing her limits. She had taken this push-toy – which I am going to say was a firetruck, though I really have no idea – gone to the very top of the driveway, and gone straight down the driveway toward the garage. After a time or two at a fairly reasonable speed, she walked back up the hill, got behind the truck, and tried it faster. And then faster. And I just watched it.

It was pretty obvious what was going to happen. If you looked out a window and saw Shylah hauling it down the driveway behind that plastic firetruck, you probably would have gone to get the first aid kit. Or, if you were her mother looking out the window, as Amanda happened to be, you would be thinking, "Surely her father will put a stop to that before she gets hurt!"

Nope. I don't know how many times Shylah ran down the hill behind that firetruck, but it was more than I thought she would get away with. The whole time I was watching her, I knew it was inevitable. And when she finally took a header down that driveway, there was no surprise, just compassion. But with blood streaming down her face and wailing at the top of her lungs, she ran to her mother, who burst forth from the front door having watched the whole thing go down from the window. And let's just say I was not winning any parenting awards that afternoon.

I was thinking about this story as I was studying today's scripture from Jeremiah. The plot of this particular movement in Jeremiah's life is not very complicated. Jeremiah buys a field. That pretty much sums it up. In fact, that is how the *NIV* and several other scripture translations descriptively title this section. But that is like saying all you need to know about the story I just told is "Shylah fell down." In both cases, the context makes all the difference.

In today's scripture lesson, we learn the essential context for understanding what follows in the first two verses of chapter 32. Jerusalem is under siege by the Babylonian army. And Jeremiah was in prison in the royal palace by the king's orders. A very small amount of digging – even simply looking into the verses skipped over in the lectionary reading – reveals the reason for Jeremiah's jail time. Jeremiah's latest prophecies had featured the defeat of the

kingdom of Judah, the fall of Jerusalem to Babylon, and the exile of Zedekiah to Babylon, all according to the “word of the Lord.” In a time of war, such public rhetoric amounted to sedition, so the king had thrown Jeremiah into the slammer.

So we can't say that Jeremiah didn't know what he was doing. He had said himself that the Judean war effort was doomed, that the Babylonians were imminently going to be taking over the land, and he was already paying the price for having the audacity to speak that truth out loud to the king and to the people. And so we have to ask ourselves – why in the world would Jeremiah lay out some cash for a deed to a piece of land that was well on its way to being worthless, especially when he was already in a bit of a pinch himself? Why would Jeremiah take such a risk? Why did the guardians of rationality not throw up a red light in Jeremiah's path, and beg him to stop before he did something stupid?

Why didn't I give Shylah a red light? Should I have?

Consider also Jeremiah's history with buying things for prophetic purposes. In chapter 13, the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah and instructed him to buy a linen loincloth. He did so, and put it on according to the Lord's instructions. When God told him to take it off and hide it in the cleft of a rock by the edge of the Euphrates, he did so. And when God then told him to go and retrieve it, he did, and – surprise! – found that it was ruined. That ruined loincloth, said God, was like what God was going to do to the pride of Jerusalem and Judah. It would soon be like that loincloth – good for nothing. And then in chapter 19, the Lord again tells Jeremiah to buy something – this time a potter's earthenware jug. As per divine instructions, he is told to buy the jug, gather a group of elders and chief priests, and then break the jug in front of them, proclaiming that so will the Lord break the city and its people.

So when his kinsmen Hanamel comes to ask Jeremiah to buy his field at Anathoth, according to the word he had already heard from the Lord, it would have been perfectly reasonable for Jeremiah to put up a red light. What more was to be gained from yet another prophesy of doom? The Babylonians were literally surrounding the city. Jeremiah was already in prison for telling the king that he was going down according to the word of the Lord. It was already clear that this king and this people have no future in Judah. So what was Jeremiah trying to accomplish by throwing away more money to buy something to symbolize the coming destruction of Judah?

What was I trying to accomplish by letting Shylah repeatedly run full speed down a paved driveway behind a plastic firetruck?

Anathoth was Jeremiah's home town, and apparently he was Hanamel's next of kin. As such, it was his responsibility to execute the responsibility of a redeemer – to bail a relative out of financial difficulty. This “right of redemption” was detailed in the Torah in Leviticus 25: 25-28, a legal provision that was designed to protect a family inheritance or allotment of land from permanent loss, thus depriving the family of its means of production and financial support. And so it is that Jeremiah is approached by Hanamel to do his duty as next of kin.

So what is a redeemer to do? The cards are stacked against Jeremiah – there is no rational reason to believe that the present situation would warrant investing in the future of Judah. Siege, defeat, and exile are the present realities.

So why bet on the future? Not the immediate future – that seems beyond debate. But the long view – the future that seems beyond reach, and beyond hope.

That is just what Jeremiah does. He proceeds to execute, complete with witnesses and a public record, a detailed property transaction that surely seems the height of folly, given the imminent takeover of the land by the Babylonians (which Jeremiah has himself foretold!). The records of the transaction are signed and sealed and delivered to another one of those earthenware jars – “in order that they may last for a long time.”

And so it is that Jeremiah makes a down payment on the future – a risky and uncertain future that by nearly all accounts would warrant a giant red light, demanding the prophet to stop – to give up all his foolish nonsense and accept the realities of his present situation. Instead, he literally put his money where his mouth had always been – on the truth and promises of the word of the Lord. Jeremiah paid out real money in front of witnesses and in public, and he preserved the deed for the land that was his by redemption – a real event, real money paid for practically worthless land in front of an audience – all in the midst of the imminent demise of Judah and the exile of its people.

And I watched Shylah as she predictably face-planted on the pavement. I could have given her a red light – made her stop her risky behavior – but I didn’t. I allowed it to happen.

Jeremiah couldn’t do anything about the imminent destruction of Jerusalem. Yet he still took the risk of banking on its future. And he made it clear to his witnesses that he wasn’t just crossing his fingers and hoping for better times. Because while the word of the Lord promised destruction and judgment for Judah, it also promised a future: “For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.”¹

Despite all evidence to the contrary, despite all the risk and the red lights that insisted redeeming the land of his cousin was foolish, Jeremiah went “all in” on that promised future. He took the long view, placed the deed for his redemption securely in a safe-deposit jar, and then got ready to weather the coming storm. While his previous prophetic acts of buying things were all symbols of the coming judgment, here things change radically, and Jeremiah buys something to symbolize God’s promise to provide a future beyond the present judgment.

As Shylah was carried crying and bleeding into the house by her mother, I wondered whether I had done the right thing. I knew what was going to happen. And I did nothing to stop it. I let it happen.

I have to believe that Jeremiah also had such doubts as he weighed out seventeen shekels of silver for the redemption of Hanamel’s land. Was he doing the right thing? Were the naysayers right in calling him a fool? Was he just gambling with the future inheritance of his family? Or was his confidence well-founded?

In the verses following today’s scripture reading, we can see Jeremiah wrestling with just such questions as he prays to God after giving the deed of purchase to Baruch. He recites the history of God’s faithfulness, affirming that “nothing is too hard for you!”² And yet as he goes on, you can almost hear the honest doubt start implicitly creeping into Jeremiah’s prayer, until

¹ Jeremiah 32:15

² Jeremiah 32:17

he finally concludes with the words, “Yet you, O Lord God, have said to me, ‘Buy the field for money and get witnesses’ – though the city has been given into the hands of the Chaldeans.”³ And God answers, essentially – yes – in the short term, it is going to be bad. Judah is going to get what is coming to it. But then...one day in the future... “I am going to gather them from all the lands to which I drove them in my anger...I will bring them back to this place, and I will settle them in safety. They shall be my people, and I will be their God...Fields shall be bought in this land...for I will restore their fortunes, says the Lord.”⁴

About 10-15 minutes after she was taken into the house, Shylah re-emerged, now sporting a nice fresh band-aid across her face. To nearly everyone’s surprise, she went straight for the plastic firetruck. Once again she trudged up the driveway with it, and once again she stood poised at the top ready to push it down the hill. And with baited breath, we all watched as she began her descent. But this time, she took an angle. Partway down, she switched back and sped diagonally down the other way. And then she switched back again before skidding to a stop in front of the garage. And I couldn’t help but smile. For I had just seen my confidence in my child pay off.

Jeremiah did not live to see his whether his confidence was warranted. But his risky redemption likely did paid off, for the people of Anathoth were among those who Ezra and Nehemiah note returned from the Babylonian exile to resettle in their homelands a few generations after their ancestors were exiled.⁵ We don’t know for sure if one of them brought with them a deed of purchase retrieved from an earthenware jar, but why not assume that they did?

Betting on the future is always a risk. Redemption always requires faith. And there are always plenty of reasons and ways that life throws up red lights in our path and begs us to reconsider. But like Jeremiah, if we can see past the immediate turmoil, there is a future that is worth the risk, redemption that calls for us even after we have counted the cost, and a hope that beckons us to journey on despite the red lights that stand in our way. Our history as a church is filled with stories of people who looked beyond their present realities to faithfully bet on the vision that God had shown them. And I pray that our future will be filled with stories of the same. May it be so...

BENEDICTION

The Good Book tells us that “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, and the conviction of things not seen.”⁶ So even if we can’t see it, do we have faith that beyond this day, there is a future filled with God’s promise of justice, love, and peace? Are we willing to count the costs, and take the risks, to help usher in that future? I pray so. May it be...

³ Jeremiah 32:25

⁴ Jeremiah 32:26-44

⁵ Ezra 2:23, Nehemiah 7:27 and 11:32

⁶ Hebrews 11:1

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE ~ *Earle W. Fike, Jr., adapted*
 (From *Please Pray With Me*, No. 34)

Lord God,
 when we stand on the edge of our own wilderness,
 deciding whether to go forward or fall back,
 who stands with us?
 Who protects us in our wanderings;
 who guides us when the way is uncertain;
 who sustains us when we are weary and discouraged;
 who cautions us when we are ready to betray ourselves and others;
 who strengthens our hand when we are weak?
 Surely only you, O God, our refuge,
 faithfully meet us at life's busiest
 and most crucial intersections.
 We confess how important you are in our lives.

Lord God,
 who makes our soul to sing with little melodies of pleasure; who gives the joy of colorful
 sunsets and soft nights;
 who blesses our spirit with the wonder of musical sound;
 who touches us with the grace of human love in families or friends;
 who generates within us the goodness of a thankful heart;
 who inspires us to compassion and care of others;
 who helps us applaud those moments when we are our best selves?
 Surely, only you, O God, our sustainer,
 faithfully meet us at life's most happy and blessed experiences and regularly encourage us to
 celebrate the goodness of life.

Lord God,
 our prayer reaches out to those around the world who do not have their daily bread.
 We pray for all those who live each day in the middle of violence.
 We pray for all those who are oppressed and betrayed by power and politics.
 We pray for all who are bowed down with pain and disease.
 We pray for all those worn out by the same problems they had to bare last week...last year.
 We pray for those who are unhappy with themselves and don't know how to fix their own lives.
 O God, stand with all your frustrated and suffering servants on the edge of some promised
 land,
 and when it is our turn to stand there, let us not turn away in fear or anger.
 Let our footsteps neither falter nor stray.

You are with us. Who can be against us?
 You guide our steps, who can mislead us?
 You point our way, who can lose us?
 Lord God, thank you for giving us the potential of new life in the disguise of risk;
 new opportunity in the offer to leave the old;
 and your presence to go with us and guide along our way.
 You renew our hope and our purpose. For this and so much more, we thank you.
 In Jesus' name, Amen.