

A Bullfrog in a Bear Market

^{NRS} **Jeremiah 31:31** The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ³² It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt-- a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. ³³ But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴ No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

^{NRS} **Jeremiah 32:6** Jeremiah said, The word of the LORD came to me: ⁷ Hanamel son of your uncle Shallum is going to come to you and say, "Buy my field that is at Anathoth, for the right of redemption by purchase is yours." ⁸ Then my cousin Hanamel came to me in the court of the guard, in accordance with the word of the LORD, and said to me, "Buy my field that is at Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, for the right of possession and redemption is yours; buy it for yourself." Then I knew that this was the word of the LORD. ⁹ And I bought the field at Anathoth from my cousin Hanamel, and weighed out the money to him, seventeen shekels of silver.

You know, sometimes you have to do things you don't want to do, but you do them anyway. And not because you figure out a way to trick yourself into liking it- but because you know it's just the right thing to do.

I think the first I learned this, really learned this, was when Rigby, our black lab, came into our life. We got Rigby when she was just a wee little thing, and one of the things I didn't really know about puppies, is when they are that little, they don't sleep through the night. No, they get up four or five times a night for a few months. Now, I'm not sure why I didn't know this when we signed up for this dog, but I didn't. And since I didn't have any little brothers or sisters- this was really the first time I was responsible for another living thing. And some of those nights- it was not easy.

Now we had an adult size crate for her- we didn't want to have to buy two. And when they are puppies, if they have enough room in their crate, they will poop in there if

you don't let them out. Yes, you can say poop in church- it's ok. Now, I tried all sorts of things- I tried putting boxes in there. She actually managed one time to get her bottom squeezed in between those boxes once- it was amazing.

Well, one night it had been snowing. It was cold. And it was still snowing. And Rigby started to whine. And Melis and I, we were doing that thing couples do, that game of chicken, where you both pretend to be asleep waiting for the other person to make the first move. Well Melis beat me that night. I reluctantly got out of my warm, warm bed, and got the dog out and walked her out to the pooping grounds.

In our student housing one of the things they are adamant about was the bathroom area for the four legged members of the community. And our housing complex was like one big rectangle, and we were like at the farthest corner away from this doggie outhouse area. And in the summer, when it was warm- this wasn't so bad. But let me tell you that night, with the snow coming down- it just was no fun.

So we get out there, and instead of just doing what she needed to be doing- she started to kind of play in the snow. Hopping all around. Wagging her tail. I kept telling her, first in a happy voice, then in an increasingly annoyed voice to do her business. Nothing. She just kept playing while I was getting increasingly frozen out there. And then something inside of me kind of snapped. I remember picking her up, and I didn't do it hard, but I squeezed her. I squeezed her like she was a tube of toothpaste saying, "Do your business!" But then the way she looked at me- well I realized I had crossed a line. So we just headed back to the apartment- only to go back to the field a little bit later. And after squeezing her, I knew I probably deserved it.

Oh sometimes there are things you don't want to do, but you know you have to do. And when you finally bring yourself to do it- it's not because you've figured out a way to like it- you do it because you know it's what you're supposed to do.

Now there is nobody, **NOBODY**, who knows this better than the prophet Jeremiah, the guy we hear from this morning. Jeremiah lives at one of those nexus points of history- he lives and writes during Babylonian exile, the time when Babylon comes in and all but wipes Jerusalem off of the face of the map. It is one of the worst times in the history of the world- and it's particularly hard for Jeremiah, because his job is to warn the people about what's going to happen if they don't mend their ways- and that just isn't a pleasant job. No one wants to hear that message, right? We like it when people say nice things about us. We like our job reviews to start with all the positive things we're doing- only after that do we want to hear anything critical. And even then there better not be much. But Jeremiah isn't able to do that. Because the people had grown powerful and rich and sloppy. They were used to gain they didn't work for. And they had started to think of themselves as too big to fail. Sound familiar? So they didn't like Jeremiah calling them back to narrow pathways- calling them back to the hard work of justice.

The leadership sure didn't appreciate it. In a great scene we see the king Jehoiakim hanging out in his winter palace. We always joked in my house growing up that we summered on the front porch and wintered on the back. Well this guy really has his own winter home. So there he is, and he's warming himself in front of the fire. And he's ordered his men to read from the scroll Jeremiah sent him. And after every line he laughs and he takes his knife and he slices it off, he wrinkles it up, and he tosses it into

the fire. And then he says, “Oh, it’s getting chilly. Read another line.” Oh the king hates Jeremiah- always sticking his nose in where it doesn’t belong. And it would have gone a lot better for Jeremiah if he would have. His life would have been a lot easier. But he couldn’t. It wouldn’t have been right. And so even though he didn’t want to keep saying the things he was saying- he did. He had to.

But the people don’t like him either. Because Jeremiah is saying God is going to use Babylon to punish them- to everyone living in Jerusalem, it really just sounds like Jeremiah is sympathizing with the enemy. And of course he’s not- he loves his people. What he wants more than anything is for them to clean up their act. But when a nation is at war you’re either ‘fer us, or your ‘agin us. And so the people hate Jeremiah- they have him arrested and locked up. They even try to murder him at one point and throw him down a well. And if it wasn’t for a kindly Ethiopian eunuch named Ebed-melech passing by, Jeremiah would have drowned. An Ethiopian eunuch. Don’t you love the Bible? Maybe that’s what our economy needs- an Ethiopian to pass by and pull us out of the muck.

Now the amazing thing about Jeremiah is he doesn’t just go up against the king and the people. Part of what makes Jeremiah truly great and unique among the prophets is that he even God, too, he gets in God’s face over what was happening. In Chapter 12 he writes: “You’ll be in the right, God, when I charge you, but let me put my case to you. But why DO the guilty prosper? Why DOES the way of the treacherous thrive? YOU plant them and they take root...you are near in the mouths, yet far from their hearts.” Jeremiah is so frustrated with what’s happening he even lashes out against God. And you KNOW it wouldn’t been easy for him not to do THAT. But he can’t. Jeremiah is the

guy who time and time again does the hard thing, says the hard thing- not because he likes it, but because he knows it needs to be said.

It reminds me so much of a friend I made back in Austin, Bill Jones. He was a pastor turned story-teller, and I heard him talking once about doing the things you don't want to do. And he was remembering back to when he was in college. It was in the early 60's, and he was in ROTC, training to be an officer. And he liked a lot of things about ROTC- he liked the friends he made, he liked the structure. But there was one thing he absolutely hated. Giving blood. One of the many duties of a ROTC cadet is to give blood- as often as physically possible. They didn't ask whether he wanted to do it- it was an order. It was just one of those things he didn't want to do- but he had to do. And he hated it. He absolutely hated it. He hated the needles. He hated the smell of the hospital. He hated everything about it. But about every two months, he would follow his orders, and he would march over to the little clinic on campus, and he would roll up his sleeve and grit his teeth.

Well, an interesting thing happened. As everyone was starting to hear more and more about a country in Southeast Asia most folks never knew existed, Bill was less and less sure he was on a smart path. And so in his senior year he decided to take his chances with the draft and to quit ROTC. And because of this there were a lot of things he stopped doing. He stopped getting up in the morning for the drills and the calisthenics. He stopped going to the study sessions and the ROTC gatherings. But do you know what kept doing? He said it was the strangest thing. After he left, he remembered he was walking around campus one day not really paying attention to where he was going. But

he found himself standing at the steps in front of that little clinic he had so hated going to during ROTC. And he realized it had been about two months since he was there. And not even really knowing why, he walked up those steps and went in, and sat down, and rolled up his sleeve.

Now, it's not that anything had changed, really. It's not that he somehow started to like giving blood. He still didn't like the smell of the place. He still hated the needles. But he did it because he knew it was the right thing to do. He did it because he knew none of his misgivings really mattered all that much in the face of doing something that, while small, was so vitally important.

And this is so much like Jeremiah- this way of just putting his nose to the grindstone and doing what needed to be done. But you know- if this is what we respect about Jeremiah, I don't think it's why we remember him. I don't. I don't think his perseverance is what makes him great. What makes him great is what we hear him say in the text this morning.

See, after railing against the king and the people for so long, after all his suffering- what he says finally comes to pass. Babylon finally does come in- and they are destroying the place. And it's unspeakably awful. And do you know how Jeremiah responds? Does he twist the knife? Does he say- see I told you so?

No, in the midst of siege, in the midst of unspeakable pain- at the very lowest point of Israel's life- Jerusalem keeps doing what he's been doing, he keeps saying things no one wants to believe or hear, but this time they are words of such pure, pure hope.

Imagine the scene. The temple is destroyed. The palaces are on fire. Babylonian soldiers are committing unspeakable atrocities. Jerusalem is in chaos, in ruins. And Jeremiah. He tells the people he God is going to make a new covenant with them. He tells them the old one is broken- sure. They can see that. But God is not done with them. There's another day coming. And God is going to make a new covenant with the people- and it's not going to be like the last one. It's not going to be external- posted up on stone plaques everybody looks at and nobody does. No, the new covenant, the new relationship- it's going to be inside of us, written on our hearts.

In the darkest chapter of Israel's history Jeremiah tells the people God isn't through with them. And the way forward isn't going to be in wearing religion on our sleeves and talking about God this and God that- it's going to be in listening to what's in our hearts- to what we know is right inside, because of what God is saying to our deepest parts.

And it's more than this. Jeremiah isn't just talk. He isn't just talking about hope. In the very next chapter we hear how his cousin Hanamel comes to him offering to sell him some land. Now friends- mortgage backed securities could not have been less attractive. I mean this is land in a war zone- land that no one knows who is going to be ruling the next day or the day after that. But Jeremiah tells Hanamel to get him the closing papers, because he is buying that field.

It is the stupidest thing in the world to do. Jeremiah needs all the money he can get to get him the lean days ahead. And the land he's buying- he's just throwing his money away.

But to Jeremiah it's the best investment he can make- because he knows, he knows that God is not through with them yet. And even though things don't look good, he believes another day is coming. And he may not even live to see it- but he isn't thinking about himself anyway, he's thinking about his people, he's thinking about the great community of saints- all those who lived before and who will live after him.

This. THIS. This is why we remember Jeremiah, I believe. Because at the hardest moment in the life of his people- he had the courage to believe, and the courage to dream a new dream.

Friends, our world isn't quite as bleak as Jeremiah's. But it is dark out there. Every time you start feeling better about things, you open the paper or turn on the news, and then you wished you hadn't. And even if we are on the right track- we sense it's going to get worse before it's going to get better.

But that's why now is the time to hear Jeremiah's words and to drink them in. To hear these words of a new covenant- one that's written on your heart. Because the way forward isn't going to come from some program somewhere, some acronym someone dreams up. The way forward is going to come by each of us listening to what God is saying to us, to our hearts, and by doing what Jeremiah did day after day after day- doing the things we may not want to do, but the things we know we need to do.

What is it you know you need to do this week, but you've been putting off? What is it that you'd like to avoid because it's hard or unpleasant? Well in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit- do the hard thing, say the difficult word in love,

get up at 3 in the morning with the dogs, and confuse the world by buying that field no one else believes in. **Amen.**