

SERMON TITLE: "Celebrating Our Tenth with Hope"  
SERMON TEXT: Jeremiah 32:1-17  
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James  
OCCASION: October 29, 2017, at First UMC

### **INTRODUCTION**

To help celebrate our congregation's tenth year here at this location, we've been studying scriptures that have to do with the number 10. So far we've talked about the Ten Commandments and Jesus' parable of the woman who lost and found one of her ten coins. Next week, we're going to reflect on the ten lepers who were healed by Jesus. In today's scripture, the number 10 isn't quite so obvious. But it's right there, in the first verse. In Jeremiah 32:1, the word of God came to the prophet Jeremiah "in the tenth year of King Zedekiah of Judah."

If David had stopped reading after verse one, we might have thought, "Oh, the tenth year. Maybe the Jews were having a celebration like we are. Maybe King Zedekiah's staff was planning an anniversary party. Maybe they were going to have a royal ball." But the situation in Jerusalem wasn't that festive. There was conflict and stress, and something really bad was about to happen. But, just like today, God never leaves his people without a spark of optimism. Let's dig into this story of Jeremiah and find out how that piece of Jewish history can inform how we go about celebrating our tenth with hope.

### **1—JEREMIAH'S HISTORICAL SITUATION**

Jeremiah 32:3-5 reminds us of the background of this historical situation. Speaking on behalf of the Lord, the prophet Jeremiah had proclaimed that the Babylonians, or "Chaldeans," were on their way to conquer the city of Jerusalem and take their King Zedekiah captive to Babylon. In fact, in chapter 25, Jeremiah had said the Babylonians would utterly destroy Judah, turning its land into "a ruin and a waste" and making its people the "object of horror and of hissing." Jeremiah had said these things not because he was a killjoy, hateful, or mean. He spoke these words because God told him to warn the people so they could change their ways before it was too late.

Of course, people don't usually like to hear bad news. Oftentimes, we'd just rather bury our heads in the sand. Other times we outright deny the truth that is presented to us because bad news is usually delivered with the expectation of change. People who've been benefitting from the status quo don't usually want to make changes. Sometimes even when we're not benefitting, we still don't like to make changes. And honestly, people don't usually like anyone, even a prophet of God, telling them what to do. In 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE Jerusalem, there was no first amendment right to free speech, so the consequences were heavy. King Zedekiah confined Jeremiah to the court of the guard, where the prophet's gloom-and-doom message would be contained.

Unfortunately for Zedekiah, silencing God's messenger wasn't going to change the outcome. According to verse two, the Babylonian army was already there besieging Jerusalem. Historians tell us that, by 587 BCE, they had destroyed the temple and the city and had taken the king and a large number of Jewish citizens into captivity in Babylon.

But that's jumping ahead of the story. Here in chapter 32, King Zedekiah was still in Jerusalem, and Jeremiah was still confined in the palace court. And that was a problem, because Jeremiah had more to say. The message from God wasn't just bad news about the pending destruction and devastation. In the midst of that now-inevitable demise, God also had a good-news message of hope. And God had to get that message of hope out to the people.

Fortunately, Jeremiah was well-tuned to God's communications. And the situation unfolded just as God had explained it to Jeremiah in advance. Jeremiah's cousin Hanamel came to the prison and told Jeremiah that he had a piece of land for sale. Hanamel probably wanted to get whatever money out of it that he could before the Babylonians destroyed everything and made it worthless. Since Jeremiah had been predicting the Babylonian invasion, Hanamel probably didn't really expect Jeremiah to buy the field. But, by Jewish law, the land should be kept in the family, if at all possible. So, Hanamel offered the field to his cousin Jeremiah, who by law had first right to buy it.

And, surprisingly, Jeremiah did just that. With assistance from his friend Baruch, Jeremiah was able to weigh out the seventeen shekels of silver, get witnesses to sign the deed of purchase, and put the sealed and unsealed copies of the deed into a clay jar for safekeeping for a long time. The Babylonian army would wreak all kinds of devastation on the land in the near future, but in time, God would restore Jewish life there. The carefully-preserved deeds of purchase would be proof of God's promise that "houses and fields and vineyards [would once] again be bought in [that] land."

## **2—HOPE GETS US THROUGH DARK TIMES**

So, there's the biblical story. In the tenth year of King Zedekiah, the situation looked pretty grim, but God also provided a message of hope for the people. Even in the gloom and doom that Jeremiah himself was predicting, there was reason for celebrating with hope.

Hope is what gets us through a lot of dark times. On Friday, Gary Phillis told me a story. Several years ago Gary and his wife Barbara were celebrating their anniversary. Gary couldn't recall which year it was exactly, but it was one of those numbers in the low 40s. Did they celebrate by going out for dinner? To a movie? Dancing? A cruise? A get together with family or friends? Nope. Gary and Barbara celebrated their anniversary by both going to get colonoscopies on the same day.

Any of us who've ever had to drink that awful prep and make our runs to the bathroom might imagine that two people doing that in the same house at the same time would be pretty grim. Even the going home afterward with husband and wife both under the influence of anesthesia wouldn't be all that fun. I really can't imagine anyone thinking that a colonoscopy is a good time, and certainly not two in one family on the same day.

But, hey, we all know the saying that "misery loves company." Even under the best of circumstances, husbands and wives go through a lot of hardships together. During some of those times, at least, we have the power to offer each other considerable comfort. And, of course, there's the reason we undergo such gruesome procedures. The risk of colon cancer is real and deadly and scary.

Thus, we drink the potion, clean out our bowels, and allow the doctor to cut out our polyps. We do this to bring some light into the darkness. We do this to extend our life into the future. We do this to offer ourselves some measure of hope.

Most of us won't celebrate our anniversaries by scheduling colonoscopies for couples. But it's good for us to remember that, even in the darkest times, we can celebrate that God always provides some ray of hope.

### **3—A MESSAGE OF HOPE FOR OUR CONGREGATION**

So, now that we've established that God provides hope for us even in difficult times, how can we apply this story of Jeremiah to celebrating our tenth year here at First United Methodist Church?

Fortunately, we don't have a Babylonian army marching toward us. But every congregation today is up against powerful forces of our society and culture that pull people and resources away from the church. Our First United Methodist congregation is no exception to that trend. No matter what we do, and no matter how well we do it—our numbers in worship, Sunday School, and youth fellowship are diminishing. It's a dark cloud over the church.

Fortunately, though, God has also given us many reasons for celebrating our tenth with hope. More people than ever participated in our Veterans Tribute Run & Chili Cook-off a couple weeks ago, and we had good crowds at our Craft Bazaar this week. Those programs allow us to improve the quality of life in our community and the world. Other ministries and mission activities have been successful too: our Vacation Bible School, our garden vegetables for the Lantern House, our preparations for a future youth mission trip, our beekeeping and honey sales which enable us to help support an agricultural missionary in Africa, and our strong participation in Hometown Mission Week. All these ways we live out our vision give us reasons for celebrating with hope.

As the pastor of this church, part of my responsibility is looking ahead into the future. Once Intermountain Healthcare begins to construct its new hospital at the interchange of I-15 and 400 North,

we can be pretty sure that the alfalfa fields east and north of our property will sprout buildings that could easily block visibility of our church. Our sign out on the street—our sign that is already severely compromised by rose bushes, trees, utility poles, and municipal rules—will not adequately convey our location. Less and less people will be able to find their way to our church.

Some of you probably get tired of me talking about this, and maybe you even wish you could put me in the court of the guard to contain my message. But I really do think we need to prepare ourselves to buy the land between our church and 400 North. Like God told Jeremiah to buy a field as a sign of hope, it seems to me that we also need to buy this field. The difficulty, I know, is how. We're stretched financially just paying for the mortgage and upkeep on this lovely building and property that we already have. How could we possibly take on more debt?

So I've been wondering if it might be possible to develop a United Methodist assisted living facility that would be a win-win with our ministry, that would fit well in a hospital neighborhood, and that would pay for its own mortgage. It's way too early to know if it would be feasible. But for now, as we're celebrating our tenth, the exploration of this idea gives us some positive steps we can take. Rather than sticking our heads in the sand, denying the reality that's coming, or throwing our hands up in despair—we have an opportunity to pray for God's guidance and take initiative that could position us for a positive future. When the Golden Spike equine veterinarian calls me up some day and says he's finally ready to sell, I want to be ready with a response. Like Jeremiah was prepared to act when his cousin Hanamel showed up, this could be a sign that we're celebrating our tenth with hope.

### **CONCLUSION**

In the meantime, however, we're seeking your 2018 pledges. A strong operational budget is the foundation of all that we do. Your pledge card will be arriving in your mail in the next couple days. Please pray and listen for God's guidance before you fill out your card. Then bring it back to worship next Sunday when we will all carry them up to the front of the sanctuary and consecrate them in prayer.

Making sure our important ministries are financially supported is essential for celebrating our tenth with hope.