

“Baptism: a seed of home and hope”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Romans 6:3-11 and Jeremiah 32:1-2, 6-15

By Rev. Patrick D. Heery

I heard this story recently about this Ukrainian woman planting flowers in bombed out soil. When Russia invaded Ukraine, her town was one of the first to fall. Everywhere she looks there are ruins, houses leveled, grocery stores empty, railroad tracks twisted from explosions, windows blown out, bullet holes in the walls of her home, no electricity, no gas, no heat for the coming winter, her own son being taken by Russian soldiers for interrogation. Everywhere, death and destruction, and she plants flowers. Beautiful flowers. Splashes of yellow and violet and pink.

Ostensibly, it is an irrational act—as irrational as what Jeremiah does in our story today. He buys a plot of land. But this isn't a real estate investment. He's not expanding his portfolio. Because this land he's just bought, it's currently occupied by an invading army that Jeremiah knows very well is going to destroy his nation, exile his people. Why buy this land? Why plant those flowers?

We could ask the same thing about what we're doing today. Why baptize? The world is full of trouble. We know the hardships life brings. What good is one little act of baptism going to do against all that?

That Ukrainian woman planted those flowers, I think, for the same reason Jeremiah bought that land, and for the same reason we baptize and reaffirm baptism today. It may not make sense to outsiders. It may not make sense to those who have given in to cynicism and despair, to the cold calculations of expediency. But that Ukrainian woman planted those flowers, and Jeremiah bought that land, and we baptize, because we have something that the world has forgotten. We have hope. It may be small and fragile as seeds planted in the earth, but it has life. Wonderful life that stands defiant in the face of everything bad in this world. A choice to build, to grow, when others tear down.

“We will live with candles, if need be,” the Ukrainian woman says. “But we will live on our land. We will rebuild.”

That old woman planted those flowers because that is her home. And no matter what destruction happens, she believes it will remain her home, that life will come back, that flowers will grow once again, that children will laugh in those streets again. Jeremiah bought that land because that was his home. And no matter who invaded it, there would be a return of joy to his land. His people would come home. Maybe not him. Maybe not his children. But his grandchildren and their children. He believed that. He believed in the promise of God. So he bought that land. And she planted those flowers. And we baptize.

Baptism is a seed of home and hope. God is our home, and baptism, a little piece of home, a fragment of God, placed within us. When we baptize, we are saying, “I see God in you and in myself—grace, life—even when it’s not apparent now.” Beneath the surface of daily life, God is already here, working for our future. We believe. We may be buried but we will rise. We believe in a God who makes a way out of no way, who makes life out of death.

I imagine that whenever Jeremiah was tempted to despair, held captive in a foreign land, he could think on that deed, that plot of land, and it would give him a jolt, a little more strength to go on, a hope.

Touch your forehead. Somewhere, beneath the skin and bone, the wrinkles and passage of time, the scars and hurts, the sweat and grime, somewhere there is a cross marked in water, a disciple of God saying, “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” You can touch it. It pulses beneath your skin. It is a little piece of home. A shock of hope. A reminder of who you are: a child of God, beloved.

Oh, and just so you know: about two weeks ago, long after she planted those flowers, the Ukrainian army liberated her village. Her neighbors have begun to come home. They will find ruins. But they will also find flowers. And maybe that’ll be enough for life to begin again.

Amen.