

“A garden becomes a protest”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
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*Jeremiah 32:1-3, 6-15*

By Rev. Patrick D. Heery

Four years ago, in the midst of civil war, ISIS, terrorism, and refugees, Syria (get this!) released a travel ad. That’s right! Syria wanted you to come there for vacation. Never mind the 400,000 people dead and many more millions displaced. Never mind the bombed out buildings, humanitarian crisis, or beheadings. Come, and spend a day on the beach! The video consists of shots of the same beach over and over again; no words (what would they say?); and glamorous images of swimmers and speedboats, all set to very bad dance music.

Seriously? Who’s going to go to Syria for vacation? Go to assist the refugees, by all means! But vacation? As one video commenter wrote, “You guys have lost your minds; are there even flights to Syria?” Of course, the moment the video was released, governments around the world issued statements saying, “Do not go to Syria. That is a bad idea.”

It’s about as bad as Jeremiah’s decision to buy this field in Anathoth. No financial advisor would ever tell Jeremiah to do this. Jerusalem is surrounded by the Babylonian army. And guess where they’re camped? Yep, that’s right, they’re smack dab in the middle of that field Jeremiah just bought. They’re starving out the city. And Jeremiah knows what’s going to happen after Jerusalem surrenders. Many of its people will be killed, the rest will be deported into exile. In fact, Jeremiah knows this so well that the king of Judah has imprisoned him for saying all this negative stuff about the future. That’s right, Jeremiah not only has bought a piece of land that is currently occupied by the very army trying to kill his people, but he has done so from prison.

It is the worst land deal ever made. Some people just don’t know when to give up.

For instance, I have a friend who every week takes a group of high school students to an urban park in Baltimore that has fallen into disarray. They pick up trash, weed, hack down bushes, pull up dead trees, clean up graffiti, doing anything they can to make this park a safe, livable space for the neighborhood. And every week, they have to do it over again.

My friend’s a pastor and a community organizer in a city that, much like Auburn, has been gutted of its manufacturing jobs, leaving so much poverty that 84 percent of Baltimore’s public school students are poor enough to qualify for a free or reduced-price lunch. As depicted in the popular HBO series *The Wire*, Baltimore stands at the intersection between drugs, gang violence, the militarization of police, racism, broken school systems, political corruption, and poverty. It’s a city that has paid more than \$5.7 million in police brutality lawsuits to mostly victims of color, including a pregnant woman, a 65-year-old church deacon, and an 87-year-old grandmother.

Like Jeremiah's Jerusalem, it is a city besieged.

And it’s to one of this city’s parks that my friend and these teenagers go every week. They leave it as clean as they can, and each time, the following Monday, they’re back picking up trash again,

fixing the fence someone pulled down, redoing all their hard work. It's enough to make anyone lose hope.

The truth is that there's a place in each of our lives that feels hopeless. Maybe it's Auburn. Maybe it's that pile of bills you can't pay, or the relationship that is falling apart, or the health challenges that just won't go away. Or maybe it's the personal grief that you can't bear to name.

A lot of us are feeling overwhelmed right now. Our lives have been turned upside down, thanks to COVID. Parents are trying to make decisions about school, and they feel like they've been given an impossible choice. We feel isolated and economically and emotionally depleted by this pandemic.

But it's not just COVID. Over the years, I've talked with so many people who are trying to help and love and be faithful disciples. They're trying to feed the hungry, and house the homeless, and protect the environment, and grow the church, and advocate justice, and all of them at one time or another feel hopeless—like it's not getting better, like they're too small to make a difference.

I hear this exhaustion in the voices of my Black and Brown siblings. It's been 400 years, and still the deadly sin of racism persists. Still, mothers and fathers grieve their children targeted, hurt, and sometimes killed by the very people sworn to protect them. Still, Breonna Taylor has no justice. New police body-cam footage shows that paramedics waited a full three minutes before providing medical care to George Floyd.

All across this world are places like that park in Baltimore, that field in Anathoth, that hole in your heart—places aching with loss.

What can we do?

It is in the face of such despair, however, that Jeremiah does something completely unexpected. He buys a plot of land, and he makes sure that people see him do it. Elaborate steps are taken to render this exchange of money public and visible. Jeremiah is making a statement.

For a couple chapters now, Jeremiah has been speaking about hope: “In that day, declares the Lord Almighty, I will break the yoke off their necks and will tear off their bonds... You will be my people, and I will be your God... You say about this place, ‘It is a desolate waste....’ Yet in the towns of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem that are deserted... there will be heard once more the sounds of joy and gladness, the voices of bride and bridegroom” (30:8, 22; 33:10).

But Jeremiah, at God's direction, realizes that it's not enough to speak of hope. He's going to have to put his money where his mouth is—literally. He binds his fate with his people's. He takes a bold and public action, spending money that might have helped save him, to show just how confident he is that God has not abandoned this place.

It's like he flung a star into the night sky.

Now, my friend in Baltimore didn't buy the park. But he did do something unexpected. On a particularly bad day, when the park was a mess, he bent down and began to plant flowers. Big red and pink flowers. Pretty things. Derrick says, “I needed a break from the ugly.”

The teenagers were skeptical of course. “Mr. Derrick, you know dem kids jus’ gonna pull these up, right?” “Maybe,” he responded. “We’ll see.” A week later, those flowers were still there. “Planting those flowers felt like an act of insurgency,” Derrick says.

I know. I know. We don’t typically think of gardening or of real estate as subversive. But the truth is that a flower can create a revolution. They are protests, signs that neither God nor we are going anywhere.

Here’s Derrick again: “At the end of the day, I want to be the kind of person who would rather make a small, temporary gesture of goodness and beauty rather than add to the ugliness or do nothing at all.”

I guess that’s what it all comes down to: the kind of person we want to be.

Jeremiah looked out at a sea of soldiers bent on his people’s destruction and bought a field. Because God showed him that one day the smoke would clear and children would play and laugh in those streets, unafraid. Derrick looked at a suffering city and planted flowers. Because he saw another side to Baltimore, a whole bunch of people working to better their community, to cry out against injustice—artists and teachers and doctors and ministers and grandmothers and the unemployed and the formerly incarcerated all striving, all dancing in the face of evil.

Truth is: I still don’t want to go to Syria for vacation. But I do want to be the kind of person who builds amid bombs, the kind of person who looks at the places and the people the world has thrown away and sees, not hopelessness, but a garden waiting to emerge.

Because that is God’s word to us today through Jeremiah: when life seems hopeless, do something. Do something reckless and beautiful. Do it just because it’s the right thing to do, because it helps somebody, because it loves somebody. Even if they tear it down tomorrow, do it. And you are: when they destroyed our church’s Black Lives Matter sign, we built a new one, and now hundreds of yard signs are appearing all over Auburn. Others of you have been volunteering with the Permaculture Park to build a Living Willow structure, part art, part sacred space, part community, part revolution in ecology and food. The other day, I visited a family that lives in Melone Village, operated by the Auburn Housing Authority, and the mother had planted buckets of flowers all around her home; she had a vegetable garden growing nearby; it was stunningly beautiful, a veritable botanical garden; when I saw it, I felt like this mother was saying: there is more than struggle here, there is hope, there is life, there is joy, there is family and home and God.

What will your protest be? In what unlikely place will you invest? Will it be this church, this city? Will it be the prison down the street, or low-income housing, or a movement to insist that Black lives matter? What crazy, ridiculous, beautiful things will you do to give people hope and prove that God is here?

I hope you plant some flowers. Because, my friends, that’s how a garden becomes a protest. **Amen.**