

“A garden becomes a protest”
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Last month, Syria—you know, the country caught in the middle of a civil war, the base of operations for ISIS, potentially the most frightening terrorist organization ever—released (get this!) a travel ad. That’s right! Syria wants 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.

It is, like so many urban areas in America, 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 this church—memories of what once was and is no more. Or maybe it's the personal grief that you can't bear to name.

Maybe it's the news yet again of an unarmed black man, with arms up, gunned down and killed by police—this time, Terence Crutcher, a 40-year-old man and father of four children, driving home from a music class at a local college, whose car stalled in the middle of a Tulsa road. Maybe it's the news of protests turning violent in Charlotte. Maybe it's seeing the co-moderator of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Rev. Tawnya Denise Anderson, an African American woman, post to Facebook that she's afraid to send her husband out on errands, lest he be killed, writing, "This world doesn't love us. It doesn't."

All across this world are places like that park in Baltimore, that field in Anathoth, that hole in your heart, that bloody street in Tulsa—places besieged by the forces of death, places aching with loss, counted worthless in the eyes of the world.

Wouldn't it be easier just to walk away and leave these places to their fate?

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. The symbolic power of this action cannot be overstated.

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. In doing so, he gives new life to the weary.

It's like he flung a star into the pitch black of night.

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 bad 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.

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 an immigrant detention center, or a refugee shelter, or a movement to insist that black lives matter? What crazy, ridiculous 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.