

“The Elephant in the Room” a sermon by the Rev. Keenan Colton Kelsey  
Noe Valley Ministry Presbyterian Church July 20, 2008

OUR TEXT IS JEREMIAH 32:5-15. Following directions that he had received from God, Jeremiah prophesied for 12 years that Jerusalem would be destroyed. Finally, having angered the king by saying such things, Jeremiah was sitting in prison watching his prediction of doom come true. The Southern Kingdom of Judah (ruled by David’s heirs and possessing the great capital of Jerusalem and its Temple) had been in decline for some time. Now they were on the brink of destruction, under attack by The Babylonian Empire. The Judeans who had already been killed lay unburied and those who were still alive suffered from famine and pestilence. The end was very near. In the midst of this hopeless and despairing situation, God led Jeremiah to do an incredibly hopeful thing, an act of audacity.

Jeremiah said, The word of the Lord came to me: 7Hanamel 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.’ 8Then 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. 10I signed the deed, sealed it, got witnesses, and weighed the money on scales. 11Then I took the sealed deed of purchase, containing the terms and conditions, and the open copy; 12and I gave the deed of purchase to Baruch son of Neriah son of Mahseiah, in the presence of my cousin Hanamel, in the presence of the witnesses who signed the deed of purchase, and in the presence of all the Judeans who were sitting in the court of the guard. 13In their presence I charged Baruch, saying, 14Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Take these deeds, both this sealed deed of purchase and this open deed, and put them in an earthenware jar, in order that they may last for a long time. 15For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.

Next Sunday, we will meet and greet our Architect John Goldman, and the following week we will begin calling each of you about your Capital Campaign Pledge. It is all very exciting! This is a goal of many years! But behind my own closed door, I have been wrestling with the fact that we are beginning our church “ask” in the middle of the largest financial downturn and most uncertain economic future in recent history. It seems to be the elephant in the room – How can we possibly do this? How can we possibly NOT do this?

Not all of you here today are members of this congregation, so not all of you are grappling with this precise decision. But, still, I am certain, each of you can identify a financial decision that requires an inordinate amount of faith, a decision that you want to be able to risk, but you are not quite sure how or if you should take such a leap. The current economy is edgy -- for all of us. Rising prices pose a serious threat to the standard of living: this week, the Consumer Price Index (CPI) for June recorded a 1.1 percent increase, which is the largest one-month increase in this key measure of inflation since 1982. Unemployment is up, especially in California, the banking and housing crises are real.

After years of an energy policy written by and for the oil companies, and a war draining human and financial resources, Americans are earning less yet paying more for everything from groceries and gas, to college tuition and health care. I am sure I am not the only one whose doctor, gym trainer and housekeeper have all raised their rates in the past month. And I couldn't be the only one whose total value of investments has dropped almost 60 percent.

Oh yes, government is searching for solutions, and the private sector is looking for stability. But the outlook is uncertain. Our economy is on the brink of something – and from my humble little perch, it feels like it could tip either way, positively or negatively, just as precipitously.

My particular juggernaut is that I have already made a major pledge to our Campaign. It is part of the monies we have already raised. I've pledged it, but I haven't paid it. Where will it come from? How far can I stretch myself, how much can I risk?. A similar process occurs when any of you ask "Do I keep my kids in private school?" "Do I take that expensive vacation?" "Should I buy a new car?" "Can I keep a pledge to a charity?" "Should I plan to work another 10 years instead of 5?" "Should I use the credit card again?" What do we do with our fear and uncertainty, particularly around money?

Throughout the Gospel, Jesus is pretty clear on such issues. "Do not worry." "Give up your fear." "Trust God to provide." Over and over, Jesus asks people to surrender, trust, and follow. Somehow the disciples were actually able to do that: Give up their livelihood, and follow. Except for Judas. In the end, he could not let go of the imagined promise of money and power. The rich young man couldn't do it either. He knew all the right answers but could not give up his wealth. The servant who had been forgiven a debt, he was asked to be generous and gracious in return but he just could not forgive another's debt to him. The Pharisee Nicodemus believed, but he just couldn't come into the open and risk his reputation and power by engaging Jesus.

Jesus seems to acknowledge that risk, especially around money and possessions, goes against a deeply-ingrained human need for control. Trusting in an unknown future challenges the human ego that wants to maintain power. Yet still Jesus tells us, again and again, that ambition sets our sails in the wrong direction, that material things will rust and rot, but that trust and surrender, gifts of the spirit and the joys of serving, will yield a more authentic and lasting happiness and freedom.

The prophet Jeremiah speaks directly to this dilemma: How do you give up logical, rational prudence and place faith in an unknown future, God's future? At the moment when things looked the worst in a city under siege, God asks Jeremiah to purchase a field. We can imagine that there probably weren't too many people investing in real estate just then -- conquering armies tend to ignore deeds of sale! And folks were probably stashing their gold to buy better treatment by the invading Babylonians. Yet Jeremiah honored his cousin's request. He spent his gold on a piece of land in a country that was about to be taken over by the enemy.

There is definite tension in this story. The hopeful vision of a return to the land does turn out to be true. The exiles do eventually get to go home. But Jeremiah is dead by that time, And since the Lord had told him, "You shall not take a wife, nor shall you have sons or daughters" (16:1-2), his piece of land passed on to others. The prophet invests in the future, but he does not personally reap any dividend.

Still, the very act of purchase changes Jeremiah. By nature he was a denouncer, and a dramatic one at that. He denounced the king. He denounced the clergy. He denounced recreational sex and extramarital affairs. He denounced the rich for exploiting the poor. Then he denounced the poor for submitting like victims and taking it. He denounced the fickleness of the faithful for sniffing, like dogs in heat, after every new god or goddess that came rambling down the road. And while standing at the gates of the Temple ... the great, magnificent, to-die-for Temple ... he told them that if they thought God was impressed by all the mumbo-jumbo that went on inside there, they ought to have their heads examined. Jeremiah even denounced God for saddling him with the job of trying to reform such a group of degenerate ninnies.

But after the single act of trust in God's future, Jeremiah became more hopeful. After that act of investment in a future he could not imagine, he was able to say, deep in exile, "God has plans for you, plans for the good... God has written God's law on your hearts."

There was no future in Jerusalem. But Jeremiah invested in it anyway. He was boldly proclaiming that the future of God's people does not depend on national security, or social security, or financial security. It depends on God. Our hope is not based on the performance of the stock market and our own portfolio. Our hope is not based on the survival of some industry that provides us with employment. Our hope is not even based on the survival of the mainline churches. Our hope is not based on our good health, or the success of our children. Our hope is based on Jesus Christ. So if you believe any financial choice has to do with a response to God's call and an acknowledgement of God's care, then there is always room to hope, always reason to risk.

Jeremiah's story reminds me that whatever life may throw at me, I will be okay. In fact I will change the pronoun to the plural: Whatever we feel called to do, we can do it, because God is at work in our lives now, and will be with us. God will do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Absolutely and always. If I can remember and believe and truly claim this, it gives me both confidence and willingness to face each new day without knowing all the outcomes, and to follow the call of God into unknown and scary places.

Do you remember a man named A. J. Muste, a tireless anti-Vietnam activist who once sat across from the White house every evening for months, holding a candle? A security guard once asked him, "Why do you do this AJ? Do you really think you are going to change the policies of this country by standing out here alone at night with a candle?" Muste replied, "Oh, I don't do it to change the country, I do it so the country won't change me."

It is beginning to occur to me that I will fulfill my pledge so that fear doesn't change me. After all, one of my favorite truisms is, "The chief cause of failure and unhappiness is trading what matters most for what matters in the moment." Another way of saying it is, the chief cause of failure and unhappiness is the result of holding on to things that do not ultimately matter; of putting our faith in idols of bank accounts and securities and status quo.

I've learned this from many of you. I've listened to Phoebe McAfee talk about her friend Bess. Ask her for the story of her friend who was diagnosed with terminal cancer, given months to live. Bess put her affairs in order, but instead of lying down to await death, she began running and travelling and living in a way that brings joy. She still

lives, years after the diagnosis, and Phoebe says Bess is funnier, brighter, more charming and open than she ever was when she was clinging to the trappings of her life. And I've learned this from Elizabeth, who just this week told me, "Keenan I have had so much relief now that I have stopped worrying about money. I was so much happier when I didn't have any money of my own. These last months I have been so tied up worrying about my house and my will and my savings and how I will salvage the money I have. I've given it over to God. I have stopped worrying. I have decided to start trusting. I feel so much better! Somehow my life will be taken care of, it will all unfold and I will be okay." I know this kind of faith from Sue Agee as well, as she courageously trusts that money will come, to continue to allow her to live fully and faithfully within this city, and it has.

If we can stop holding so tightly to controlling our future, we can make room for something new. Just Friday I heard an NPR story of one Dr. Snow who quit her thriving medical practice to pursue her passion of kayaking. Following her passion around the world, running through her savings, she ended up in Uganda. She became involved with the Africans and began work in prevention and treatment of malaria. Today she still kayaks, but she also is a leading proponent and practitioner of malaria control in Africa.

A pledge is, by definition, a sign of trust. I am realizing that I have to give up my perceived security, let go of the financial safety net to which I have become accustomed, and believe that without the trappings to prop me up, without the things that fill the gaps of my life, perhaps God will be able to move into that space and do a new thing. If I am true to my understanding of our God and to the promises and promptings of my Jesus, then I will step out and claim my dependency on God, especially God through Jesus, rather than on a stock portfolio or dividend income or prestige or a solid house. If I am true to my understanding of our God and to the promises and promptings of my Jesus, then I will embrace service, gladly rendered; obligations squarely met; troubles well accepted or solved with God's help; knowledge that I am not alone, not a square peg in a round hole, but a partner in a common effort. What Jesus and Jeremiah and all you faithful people remind me is that in God's sight all humans are important, that love freely given surely brings a full return, that we are no longer isolated and alone in self-constructed prisons, that we can belong and contribute to God's scheme of things. I want to be a part of something bigger than myself.

Ultimately, I come around to telling that elephant in the room that he (or she) can stomp or poop all he (or she) wants, but he (or she) cannot, will not scare me. There are other permanent and legitimate satisfactions of right living and right trusting for which no pomp and circumstance, no hope of material possession, no prudent savings account, no grasping to material things, could possibly be substitutes. I am beginning to think that true ambition is the deep desire to live usefully, offer myself daily to God to build with me and do with me as God will, and to walk forward humbly, under the enormous and engulfing grace of God. If I trust, really trust, in God's promises, especially God's promises through Jesus, then I don't need all the stuff and security and safety net that I have depended on, all I need is my faith in my God and yes, you all, my church. We are not alone.

May it be so. Amen