

A Single Plot of Land

Jeremiah 32; 1 Tim 6:6-19

A sermon preached by Zac Koons at St. Mark's, Austin on Sept 25 2022

From what I can tell there has been, in recent years, a dramatic uptick in people super-glueing themselves to things. This activity that used to exist solely in the realms of domestic-handcraft projects gone wrong or frat house hazing rituals has now become an in vogue form of environmental protest. In the last week I have read stories about folks glueing themselves to everything from famous statues, to prime ministers, to museum paintings by the likes of Van Gogh, da Vinci, Botticelli and many others.

I must say, I appreciate the creativity at work here. It's a way of saying "Hey! Don't look at that. Look at this! In fact, how can you look at that when this is going on? Stop distracting yourself from terrifying truth right before your eyes; stop luxuriating and act!" The form of protest must be absurd because, in their view, the reality we are living in is absurd. A doomsday comet is inbound and everybody is sleepwalking through life. Only something drastic, such as a young man pretending to be an old woman in a wheel chair smashing a cake into the face of the Mona Lisa—something else that has happened in the last year—has the potential to jolt us awake to the point that we might actually think about doing something about it, or so the protester thinks.

If you're at all like me, when you read stories like these, you think to yourself something along the lines of, "*Well that person seems a little intense. . . . They're probably not all wrong though . . . You know, I would love to do more to combat climate change in my own life. . . . Oh, I've got to pack the kids' lunch or were'e going to be late.*" And on we go.

We live in this tension between this looming, gradually encroaching apocalypse and the reality and demands of every day life. And it's not like we don't care about the environment or don't try to do our part. We recycle. We shop organic. We compost. We vote for the right candidates. We even drive a Prius. But there is a lingering despair underneath even these acts. We can determinedly keep our thermostats at "green-leaf" levels through never-ending entirety of a Texas summer only to then realize that the energy you and I can save in a year takes all of 3 seconds for an Amazon factory to churn through. Investigate journalists long ago discovered that many of the plastic to-go containers we diligently wash before putting into the recycling container are going to end up in the ocean anyway; only 9% of plastic actually ends up getting truly recycled in the end. What effect can you and I really have in combatting deforestation, deep sea fishing, or the rapidly increasing rate of extinction across the globe. We feel like ants trying take on the problem the size of an elephant. It's overwhelming.

What are we supposed to do differently? What is the point of these things we already do? And what are we to think about what we do? I give you Jeremiah. In the tenth year of King Zedekiah of Jerusalem, which was the eighteenth year of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. This was a year when a long-encroaching doomsday appeared to be immediately on the horizon. At this time God's people had been divided into two kingdoms, ten of the twelve tribes in the northern kingdom of Israel and the remaining two in the southern kingdom of Judah. And already, by the time of Jeremiah, the northern kingdom of Israel was a distant memory. They had been surrounded, attacked, and killed or banished into exile, and scattered across the ancient world by the Assyrian

Empire. And now, a few generations later, the same fate is at the doorstep for Judah at the hands of the Babylonians. At the time of this chapter, the Babylonians have Jerusalem surrounded with troops and they are simply biding their time. The conclusion to the stand-off is inevitable. King Zedekiah and the kingdom of Judah stand no chance against the might empire of Babylon. They're ants facing off against elephants. Their defeat was just a matter of when. Babylon was starving them out.

And it's at this moment that Jeremiah's cousin comes to him with a strange request. Please buy this piece of family property, near Anathoth (which is near Jerusalem), the place of your birth. It's hard to overstate what an insane and nonsensical request this is from Jeremiah's cousin, Hanamel. You know those situations where there is a piece of property that has so many problems, which folks have had such a hard time selling that eventually they decide to put it on the market for one dollar? Someone gets a good deal, but someone inherits a property that needs a lot of work and investment to be made useful or habitable again. What Hanamel is asking of Jeremiah is way worse than that. For not only does his cousin's property have no financial value. It has no potential practical value either. Babylon is about run them over and run them out. At this point it's been nearly 150 years since those in the northern kingdom were sent into exile. Who were they to think they would be able to return sooner than that.

Babylon isn't going to care about the deed records of the Kingdom of Judah. It reminds me of a scene from one of my favorite television shows, *30 Rock*. One character, newly promoted, and braving the Manhattan real estate market for the first time finally finds the perfect apartment after a long and arduous search, and just as she's about to sign on the dotted line, a Saudi prince peeks his head in with his own realtor, takes a quick look around, and announces, "Yes, I'll take this one too. I will use it to store my motorcycles." Babylon is going to use Jeremiah's family plot in Anathoth to store their motorcycles.

Jeremiah's choice to go through with the purchase only makes sense, then, as a symbolic act. An act of protest, if you will. An absurd choice to match the absurdity of their circumstance. They're about to lose their home that was promised to them by God. It's Jeremiah's way of saying, *The rest of the world might be packing their bags. But I'm just settling in. I'm going to enjoy this piece of land, I'm going to invest it today as if I'm going to live here forever. Even if I am thrown out, I am confident it will only be temporary, for "houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land."* Jeremiah milks the symbolism for all its worth. He makes a show of it. He calls neighbors together. He weighs the money on scales. He clicks "agree" on all the terms and conditions. He signs on the dotted line "in the presence of all the Judeans who were sitting in the court of the guard." He calls for it to be sealed in an earthenware jar, an ancient time capsule that will bear witness to this radical act of protest, this defiant statement of hope and faith for centuries to come.

If you feel overwhelmed in the face of the crisis of climate change, I commend to you Jeremiah's radical and beautiful act of protest: Choose a single plot of land. Choose a single plot of land and settle in. Enjoy it as if it's going to be yours always. Invest in it as if you're going to live there forever. Even if the signs around you hint towards an inevitably opposite conclusion. I don't mean anything crazy. I just mean, plant something to start. Garden and grow. Tend. Walk. Be a companion to whatever creation immediately surrounds you. Listen to the words of St. Paul: *As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.*

St. Augustine made a famous distinction between what we use vs what we enjoy. What we use, for Augustine, is of limited value and quickly runs out. What we use is mostly to be considered a means to an end. Those things that we enjoy, on the other hand, never run out. They are of value in and of themselves, and therefore can be enjoyed as ends in themselves. For Augustine, what we use exists primarily to enable us to reach what we enjoy. Humanity's role in causing our current climate crisis can be summarized neatly inside this vocabulary. We have used what was meant for us to enjoy. The invitation from Jeremiah is to stop making ourselves crazy by looking at the ecological crisis from the top down. From the head-dizzying numbers of carbon emissions and extinction rates etc. And to look at it instead from the ground up. From the *ground* up. And to enjoy it.

We might not all have plots of land whose deeds are under our name, like Jeremiah's plot in Anathoth. But who among us doesn't have access to land they can enjoy and invest in? This is why parks and community gardens exist. If you're in this room today, I offer you our own church property. How fortunate are we amongst all the churches in this city to have been trusted with this crown jewel of the Barton Creek greenbelt to help facilitate our relationships to God and creation? Some of you already do this. How do you think there are plants and flowers blossoming all year around in the little island in the parking lot? His name is Al McKinney.

Let me give you two more examples of how to enjoy creation through a single plot of land. The first is this, a more concrete suggestion than I usually make in sermons because it comes very much from my own life: Buy a bike and ride it as often as you can. You have to interpret "single plot of land" a little more metaphorically in this case, but nothing in my life has made me fall more in love with creation than being on a bike. And it's more than that, nothing has helped me get to know the city I live in as a place, not only the personalities of its people but the ways its streets and neighborhoods connect, to see parts of the city beyond just the parts meant to connect you to other parts, to know even its geological character. Nothing has made helped me enjoy God's creation as an end in itself than riding a bike.

Here's another example: Juliet Whistett's *Threatened Texas* art show that is currently featured on our meditation trail. If you haven't had a chance to see it yet, Juliet's plot of land is the state of Texas as a whole. She has created graphic prints and color palettes for species of flora and fauna that are threatened or endangered in the state. We have 15 of them for a few more months. The genius of this work—besides the sheer ingenuity and quality of its images—is that it's seeking to raise awareness not through doomsday shouting, but by appealing to creation's diverse beauty. The tragedy of a world without the Barton Springs Salamander, the Golden Cheeked Warbler or the Louisiana Black Bear is not that we won't be able to use those creatures anymore, it's that they won't be able to be enjoyed.

I know the objection you're harboring in your heart: One plot of land feels tiny and insignificant in the face of such a big problem. How is this going to make a difference? It may feel of no more practical help than super glueing yourself to a famous painting. And I'm not saying engaging the ecological crisis at other levels isn't a good idea. Of course it is. But if you don't know where to start, if you feel like an ant trying to solve problem the size of an elephant, here's a good place to start. Something small. And it's worth remembering, this is kind of the only way God has ever solved anything. God has always preferred to work through tiny, humble, insignificant things for the sake of the whole surrounding world. Of all the peoples in the world, God chose tiny and not-particularly-impressive-Israel to covenant with through whom the world would be blessed. Of all the ways God could have redeemed the world, he chose to become a Palestinian peasant, born to an unmarried

teenager. Of all the impressive, accomplished, intelligent people in the world, Jesus chose poor, working-class fishermen to be his disciples. And of all the communities of the world God might choose to be the guarantor of his presence through continued history, the Spirit most reliably present through the Church. It's more than an absurd act of protest.

Consider the inspiration of Jeremiah's decision to those in his community, terrified and hopeless as they were. Imagine how that act of financial foolishness planted hope in the hearts of a community convinced that they were doomed. This episode is actually quite rare in Jeremiah's life. He made an entire career out of the opposite—of being a doomsday prophet. Guess what? Nobody listened to his doomsday gloom either. Jeremiah would be the first to admit that doomsday prophesying is usually not an effective strategy for getting people to change their minds or behavior. What's much more effective, what's much more likely to convert the hearts and hands of the world, is joy. And one plot of land can bring plenty of that into this world.

Amen.