

“Long Term Investments” - Stephanie Sorge, 9/29/19

Most of you know I grew up in North Carolina. I can still feel the texture of the salt dough we made into maps of the state, complete with that thin line of barrier islands known as the Outer Banks. I’ve got fond memories of vacations there. I know many who make an annual pilgrimage to those beautiful places. My boys have now enjoyed trips out there, discovering new places and revisiting familiar sites.

One of those familiar sites is the Cape Hatteras Lighthouse. It is probably the most easily recognizable lighthouse, as the tallest brick structure with its signature black and white spiraling stripes. For many years it guided ships through one of the most hazardous sections of the Atlantic Coast. Twenty years ago, in June of 1999, it began a 23-day journey that moved the entire lighthouse nearly 3000 feet in an effort to protect it from the effects of climate change, erosion, and destructive storms. It was moved just before Hurricanes Dennis, Floyd, and Irene pummeled the coast later that year. It likely would not have survived.

I love those beaches. Sometimes I dream about having a house on those shores. But my next immediate thought is this: I wouldn’t want to put down any long term investment in an area that could be under water by the end of this century! The N.C. Coastal Resources Commission has suggested that sea level rise

could hit 39 inches by 2100, enough to submerge nearly all of the Outer Banks.¹

That is likely within the lifetime of my two boys. Their children, should they have any, may never see those shores.

When I think about this passage in Jeremiah, that's my modern day equivalent. Jeremiah was a lone prophetic voice for so long, speaking the uncomfortable truth to a people who chose instead to listen to the voices of the false prophets, the ones who soothed the people with easy answers. "We know it looks bad, but don't worry! It's all going to be ok!" It's like that cartoon dog, sitting calmly at a table drinking coffee, while everything around him goes up in flames. "It's fine," says the caption.

Jeremiah has been alone in shouting, "EVERYTHING IS NOT OK!" That makes this passage stand out even more. Jeremiah has not been sugar coating what's coming - destruction, siege, and exile. In fact, it's no longer a threat - it's here, now. Babylon's army is literally outside of the city, besieging Jerusalem. What's more is that Jeremiah himself is basically imprisoned. He's not going anywhere soon, and it's not like there's a likely safe escape, anyway.

It's in those dire circumstances that God speaks to Jeremiah, and tells him to buy land. Who on earth would buy real estate in Judah at this time? There's no way

¹ <https://www.governing.com/topics/transportation-infrastructure/sl-dare-county-climate-change.html>

that Jeremiah will ever get to enjoy or use that land. But the word comes a second time, and so Jeremiah acts.

It's as if the Big One is coming. The superstorm that will surely wipe out all of the structures on the Outer Banks. And while residents are evacuating, a voice says, "Have I got a real estate investment for you!" Who on earth would take that deal?

A few weeks ago a friend shared an article from *The New Yorker*, by Jonathan Franzen. The title: "What If We Stopped Pretending? The climate apocalypse is coming. To prepare for it, we need to admit that we can't prevent it."² My friend shared it with this preface: "Do what you have to do to force yourself to read this. Then cry. Then distract yourself. Then do something. Then repeat." I saved the article to read at a later time, and finally opened it recently.

We aren't talking about any meaningful scientific disagreement about what's happening. We haven't been there for decades, at least. We're not talking about theoretical models or even the writing on the wall. Climate change is already wreaking havoc. It's here. The incremental changes we have been trying to make aren't anywhere near enough to stop this swinging wrecking ball.

Over twenty years ago, Ross Gelbspan, a former journalist, wrote *The Heat is On*. I read it just before I started working for the nonprofit organizations with

² <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/what-if-we-stopped-pretending?fbclid=IwAR2S4SBsSu4xeWyYwjPLiAUJYzDUNEaQeTzGx7okVcuHRiY5YqtYmUgGaRk>

whom I worked after college, and it terrified me then. It painted a dire picture of what could be, and each chapter began with a clear example of the devastating effects of global warming. More than 20 years later, the situation is far worse. Frankly, it's hard to look at what is happening now and what is coming without devolving into total depression or panic. And yet, in this country especially, it's pretty easy to live in ignorance of the severity of what we are facing.

I won't go into details, which you can learn elsewhere, but Franzen sums it up pretty well. He writes: "If you're younger than sixty, you have a good chance of witnessing the radical destabilization of life on earth—massive crop failures, apocalyptic fires, imploding economies, epic flooding, hundreds of millions of refugees fleeing regions made uninhabitable by extreme heat or permanent drought. If you're under thirty, you're all but guaranteed to witness it."³

Franzen continues: "If you care about the planet, and about the people and animals who live on it, there are two ways to think about this. You can keep on hoping that catastrophe is preventable, and feel ever more frustrated or enraged by the world's inaction. Or you can accept that disaster is coming, and begin to rethink what it means to have hope."

Maybe Jeremiah gives us a blueprint for this kind of hope. Babylon is at the gates. Food and other necessities are running out. Hoping for the best is pure foolishness at this point. And yet, Jeremiah purchases a piece of land.

³ *ibid*

Friends, we are far beyond the point of hoping for the best while we continue to live the same as we always have. The words from 1 Timothy couldn't be more pertinent: "Those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction." It doesn't make sense, because as the letter points out, "God...richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment." Even so, humanity has plundered that bounty. Insatiable consumption and greed have brought us where we are today. The path into the future must stem that rising tide. Contentment is not just a godly virtue, it is a necessary condition for survival. But to make any dent in the damage that has been done, a radical wholesale change must happen.

So what can we learn from Jeremiah? Perhaps that God is not done with us yet. And despite grim realities that we'd rather not face, we have some investments to make. A few years ago I remember the Earth Care House Church calculating the average age of their members. If I remember correctly, at that time it was 84. Since then, a few of the members have passed on, including two of the youngest, and the rest are a couple of years older. The Earth Care House Church has been living out the faithfulness of Jeremiah, making long term investments whose returns they will never see.

It's so easy to go about our daily lives without the sense of urgency shown recently in the global climate strikes. Greta Thunberg, the Swedish youth who catalyzed this movement, says this: "Yes, we do need hope. Of course we do. But

the one thing we need more than hope is action. Once we start to act, hope is everywhere. So instead of looking for hope, look for action. Then, and only then, hope will come.”⁴

When God called Jeremiah to be a prophet, Jeremiah protested. He said, “I don’t know how to speak; I’m only a child!” God responded: “Don’t say, ‘I’m only a child.’ Where I send you, you must go; what I tell you, you must say.” Then God’s outstretched hand touched Jeremiah’s mouth and said to him: “I’m putting my words in your mouth. This very day I appoint you over nations and empires, to dig up and pull down, to destroy and demolish, to build and plant.”

Radical action is needed. Our children are calling us to it. They are leading the way in digging up and pulling down the systems that destroy the earth and humanity. They are pointing to the places that need to be destroyed and demolished, but that destruction is not the final word. The final part of that call to Jeremiah, and to us today, is to build and plant. To make long term investments that make no sense at all. To proclaim with our faithfulness that God is not done with us, and that we are not done in our tasks, either.

This is the hope. Hope born out of faithful response and action to God’s call to us today. God spoke through Jeremiah’s youthful voice, and I think God is speaking to us today through youth around the globe, including Autumn Peltier, age 14; Isra Hirsi and Greta Thunberg, both age 16; and Xiuhtezcatl Martinez, age

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EAmUJIEsN9A>

18. The call is not to blind hope, nor is it a promise of the kind of return on investments that we desperately hope to see. It's a call to faithfulness. And that is a call we can choose to answer each and every day. May we be strengthened by the Holy Spirit to choose the faithful path together, as one body of Christ here on earth. Amen.