“Real Estate” - Stephanie Sorge, 7.13.25

 Exile to Babylon didn’t happen overnight. For many years, Judah was the one nation that hadn’t been conquered by Babylon. All around them, other nations had fallen to the powerful Empire. They weren’t spared because they were more powerful or special. They bought time through exorbitantly high tributes to the Babylonian King. So first, they were economically choked by the Empire. Then, when that wasn’t enough, Babylon began to launch a series of attacks, each one delivering worse blows than the last. This went on for years. They were stripped of their wealth and precious resources. Sacred items were pillaged from the Temple. But that’s only stuff, right? The next resources taken were human resources - the best and brightest leaders of the city. The first few verses of chapter 29 tell us that the letter was sent after King Jeconiah, the queen mother, the court officials, the government leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, and the craftsmen and smiths had left Jerusalem. They hadn’t just left Jerusalem. They had been forcibly removed and brought to Babylon.

 Everything of value had been forcibly removed. What hope did anyone have for a future after that? Jeremiah was still in Judah, and this is when he wrote the letter to the exiles in Babylon. Those who had been disappeared, stripped of their rights and dignity. Those who faced an unknown future in a foreign land. To that group, Jeremiah delivered God’s instruction: settle down. Buy some land. Plant crops, build houses, marry, and have children. Get comfortable in this place you don’t want to be. Really?

 After everything and anyone of value had been extracted from Judah, the Babylonian army came in for the kill. Like the extended pillaging violence, the next levels of attack weren’t done quickly, either. Instead of going for the quick kill of a predator, the army surrounded bloodied and wounded Judah like vultures. That’s where things stand at the beginning of chapter 32. Jeremiah was still there, confined to the prison quarters within the palace - even though the King was long gone. Once again, God’s instruction is to buy land. There aren’t many passages in the Bible that deal so specifically with property acquisition, but here we get two nearly back-to-back. Unlike the exiles, who had some hope for building a better future, Jeremiah was told to invest in a future that he had no hope of ever inhabiting. Maybe it would be like buying some property on the coast of the Outer Banks, where houses are already falling into the ocean, to leave your great-grandkids. Who knows what will be there in 70 years? Or who will be around to care for it? It is not a good real estate investment.

 In these two passages, God speaks words of hope into situations that seem very hopeless, different as they may be. Those living in Babylon are promised a future with hope. They’re promised a return to the land from which they have been taken. But they aren’t supposed to just twiddle their thumbs for the next seven decades. God tells them to make a home, not only for their own comfort. Their peace, wholeness, welfare - shalom - is inextricably bound to the peace, wholeness, welfare - shalom - of their new, unfamiliar, and unknown place. They will thrive by investing in the hostile land, by investing in the thriving of the very people they most despise.

 Jeremiah’s land purchase is symbolic. His cousin asks him to buy the family land, to take care of it. Jeremiah’s wasn’t going anywhere, and the Babylonians were going to take it all over, anyway. But the hope in this story isn’t in the acquisition, it’s in the promise. It’s a stake in God’s faithfulness.

 The land is in Judah, but not in Jerusalem. It’s in Anathoth. The land where the priest Adonijah had been banished 400 years earlier. The land of the prophets who saw the writing on the wall, who spoke against injustice and greed even when the injustice and greed seemed to be serving Judah just fine, depending on who you asked.

 Jeremiah’s purchase wasn’t a yard sign to make Jerusalem great again. It was a statement that the future redemption of Judah, of God’s people, would be focused on a radically different way of life. The future hope wasn’t to rebuild, better, stronger, richer than before. The future hope would be built on justice, righteousness, and faithfulness to God.

 What do these two real estate investment strategies have to say to us today?

Maybe we’re like the exiles. We find ourselves living in a reality that is so far from what we want, surrounded by people we struggle to understand. Maybe we’re having a hard time finding hope, or knowing how to engage within this hostile territory. We’re grieving what we’ve lost, or grieving the future for which we had hoped. If that’s where we are, I don’t want to settle in and invest! I want to get out!

 Hope isn’t in the promised return to a familiar land, it’s in living into the reality that our welfare, flourishing, and peace can’t be separated from the welfare, flourishing, and peace of those around us. This is Ubuntu - I am because we are. It’s Fannie Lou Hamer - no one is free until we are all free. This work is not aimed at victory or escape. It’s work that is committed, first and foremost, to creating a community together where all can flourish and live in dignity.

 The second investment strategy is a little different. We’re not investing in repairing broken structures and restoring to what once was. We’re invited to embrace the vision of a completely transformed creation, built in alignment with God’s priorities and desires. It’s not fixing our broken safety nets, it’s investing in actual safety for all people. It’s not repairing our systems of social support. It’s re-creating a world where there is no need for social services because everyone has what they need for life and abundant flourishing, just as God intends. As long as we’re living in our Jerusalem, our current reality, we respond to the needs of our reality. We can support each other in the brokenness of the systems without supporting the systems. We can meet real and present needs while also working for a vision far greater than what we’ve known.

 A few weeks ago Brother Christian gave us a pretty good lay of the land of Judah during the time of Jeremiah. It wasn’t pretty, and it hits close to home. Reading Jeremiah’s words today may cause our anxiety to spike. The book ends with the final, crushing defeat of Judah, and the finality of exile. There’s no happy ending, and yet there is hope.

 I don’t know how our story unfolds. I don’t know what will happen this year, or over the next few years, here in the US, or anywhere else. I don’t know what’s next. You may find yourself hopeful or full of despair, courageous or fearful, optimistic or pessimistic or annihilistic, or cycling or ping-ponging between all of those and more. That’s where we are. But God is with us, and God doesn’t leave us there. Even in the uncertainty, the doubt, and the great unknown, God speaks:

“I know the plans I have in mind for you, declares the Lord; they are plans for peace, not disaster, to give you a future filled with hope. When you call me and come and pray to me, I will listen to you. When you search for me, yes, search for me with all your heart, you will find me. I will be present for you, declares the Lord.” It is so. It will be so. Amen.