“Houses and Field and Vineyards”

Preached at the Wollaston Congregational Church

On September 25th 2016

Focus scripture: Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15

As you may be aware, our Bible readings for each week are generally taken from the Revised Common Lectionary. This is a three year cycle of scripture readings: from the Hebrew scriptures (or the Old Testament)

and Christian scriptures (or the New Testament) which are in line with the liturgical seasons of the year. This means that every three years, the same readings come up.

On the Sunday corresponding to this Sunday in the church year in 2013, I

preached my first sermon at the First Congregational Church, UCC, in Stoughton, where I had just begun my first field education year. And I preached on today’s scripture from the book of Jeremiah.

I hope you will forgive me for “recycling” parts of that sermon, because I think that it will speak for us today as it spoke for the people in Stoughton three years ago.

May we pray …

In the Old Testament story we heard today, the prophet Jeremiah demonstrates God’s hope for the people of Israel, by making an investment in their future.

This story prompted me to think about this church, Wollaston Congregational Church, and the investments that you are all making in the future. The first investment that came to mind was the one you are making in me!

I am so happy to be here as your settled pastor. As I look out into the congregation now, I recall my first visit here for an interview early this past summer. Before then I had heard about the Wollaston church, of course, through classmates at Andover Newton Theological School, some of whom served as your field education students in years past. And last year I worked with Mary Lou Gifford, your previous settled pastor, at the First Congregational Church in Randolph.

Over the past year, I was discerning what kind of ministry I might be called to, interviewing with a number of churches for a variety of positions.

One thing that was weighing on my mind was the question of my parents, now 81 years old and residing in England. For most of the 30 years my

family and I have lived in the US, they have been able to come and visit us for about 3 weeks in the fall. But how long would this go on? Was it wise for me to take a full time ministry position when I may need more time to travel to the UK? The possibility of a part-time position at Wollaston, with time off in the summer, seemed like a great solution.

During my time of discernment I also thought back on the experiences that formed my call to ministry. These included - my upbringing in a very small Methodist church, where my mom is still an active member; my home church in Sherborn, where I will be ordained later today; and also my time at UCC Stoughton as student pastor. In both Stoughton and Sherborn, I have been involved in ministry during difficult times of change and uncertainty.

My field education at UCC Stoughton almost didn’t happen, because shortly before I was due to start, the settled pastor, Jean Niven Lenk, received a devastating cancer diagnosis. She had to take an immediate leave of absence. However, I was able to work with my good friend, Mary Perry, who had been taken on as Acting Pastor, to minister to this congregation in a time of change.

At Stoughton, I was able to bring in experience I gained in my home church, when our Senior Pastor had to retire from ministry, due to terminal cancer. During that time I had created a weekly “Circle of Prayer” email letter to keep the congregation connected in prayer. It was concern for the future of the church that led me to serve on the search committee for our new Senior Pastor, and to serve as co-moderator and then moderator during the new pastor’s first years.

And so, you see, now I am here. The circumstances in Wollaston are not exactly the same as those in Stoughton or Sherborn, but these are certainly difficult times.

Taking me on as pastor is an investment of your precious resources. It is an investment in the future of the Wollaston Congregational Church. It is also an investment in my future as a pastor, for which I am very grateful. And it is an investment in the future of the wider church, in this place, even in difficult times. These are certainly difficult times, as we face the cost of maintaining this large historic building and sustaining a congregation in times of general decline.

Our Bible story this morning concerns an investment made during difficult times. As we enter the story, Jerusalem is still standing,

but the city is about to fall. The delusional king, Zedekiah,

tries to tell the people he’s got everything under control. But the Babylonian war machine cannot be pushed back. Jerusalem will soon be ransacked, and the people will be taken off into exile in Babylon.

The prophet Jeremiah calls on the King to surrender and trust in God. It is the only reasonable course of action and would save many lives. But the king locks up Jeremiah to shut him up. Zedekiah isn’t interested in hearing the truth.

Jeremiah may have been silenced from the public square, but he has one more card to play. God tells him to buy a field. Yes … buy a field. It is an action, allowed to him by the law. Jeremiah’s cousin, Hanamel, has become destitute and Jeremiah has the right to redeem Hanamel’s property. He may “bail out” a relative. The property is a field, for which Jeremiah will pay the original fair-market price of seventeen shekels.

As hope in the future of Jerusalem hits rock bottom, so do real estate prices. The Babylonians have destroyed all the crops, and occupy the farmland surrounding the city. Jeremiah’s investment seems like the height of craziness. The land is worthless. Yet, the prophet understands, this is the message of hope he must deliver from God.

What may seem foolish on a human level, makes sense to God. God has a greater vision for the people of Israel than their present troubles. Jeremiah is to demonstrate that vision, by investing in the future. Jeremiah isn’t just to TELL a message of hope, he is to SHOW that message by “putting his money where his mouth is.”

God is clear on this one: houses, fields and vineyards will be bought again in Judah. Houses, fields and vineyards: the things of the community and the people. God doesn’t promise to rebuild Zedekiah’s palace or Solomon’s temple. God promises houses, fields and vineyards.

Now, you may well be thinking: what does God’s promise to the people of Israel, so long ago, mean to me? A story about a siege in ancient times, and God’s solution to the falling of Jerusalem – buying a field!

What does that have to do with my daily life and my struggles, in this 21st century culture? Perhaps, it is the case that *you* are feeling besieged.

Are you besieged by the demands of your boss, or your workplace, your teachers or coaches?

Are you besieged by the pressures of your social group, or the need to provide for your family?

Are you besieged by ill health, and batteries of treatments and tests,

or perhaps are you besieged by loneliness?

In this over-busy competitive culture, that threatens to break down the things of community, do you feel besieged?

Even, as a church, we might well feel besieged. After years of fundraising and grant-writing you did all you could to restore this church. You began new, exciting ministries, such as hosting youth groups who worked with

City Missions to make a difference among the poor of Boston. You were struggling, but were doing well with the hosting of youth groups in the building. Then the fire department came and closed the operation down due to building code requirements.

More investment was needed to bring things up to code. And so, the church is dealing with the loss of income from the absence of the groups and also the necessary expenditure in order to host groups again.

I think that the church ---- *this ---* church could be excused for feeling besieged.

You may well say, “I feel tapped out and this church is tapped out. We’ve done all the investing we can do … what is all this talk about buying a field?”

Well, a wise friend once advised me, in difficult times, to ask the question “Where is God in all this?”

And so, we might well ask that question today.

Where is God in all this?

What is God’s investment in us?

What is God putting on the line in all this?

Our answer, I think, can be found in Jesus. Because, in Jesus God invested in the world in the most fundamental way. God put more than God’s money on the line. God made the greatest investment in the world and in humanity, that God could possibly make. God gave God’s own self, in the person of Jesus Christ, who lived among us full of grace and truth.

The prophet Jeremiah spoke truth to power. Jeremiah delivered God’s message of hope by means of an investment made in a field. Jesus, as God’s incarnation, lived God’s truth, lived God’s investment in this broken, fallen, besieged world. Jesus’ lived his life on the side of the besieged, the broken down and the fallen. His truth telling and truth living, led to the greatest investment of all: God’s pouring out of God-self on the cross.

The Christian hope is in God, who does not forsake us when we are besieged, but walks with us and invests in us, in the person of Jesus Christ.

So, friends, what will our part of that investment be?

Here at Wollaston Congregational Church you have a huge building, and a small dedicated congregation. Through the space here, you have provided the people of this community with opportunities to engage in the arts, a place to find healing from alcohol and other addictions, and educational growth and development for children.

That is quite a ministry in itself. Beyond that, you have hosted -- and I hope and pray we will continue to host -- youth groups from far and wide coming to make a difference in the city of Boston. Here, we have prime real estate, all commutable to the city of Boston.

The way forward is not yet clear. We hope that the youth groups will return and that we will build up ministries with other community groups who are doing important work. We cannot work alone, we need to build relationships and partnerships. We may well need to look to organizations who have the funds to complete the necessary renovations of the property.

God calls us to invest in houses, fields and vineyards – the things of community, nurture and growth. Things like:

Ministries of wellness and health

Connecting with the elderly and the lonely

Feeding the hungry and housing the homeless

Nurturing children and families

Planting gardens and creating safe space for children to play.

So, if we’re all tapped out with the things that break down community and pull us apart: may we come together in this investment.

Houses and fields and vineyards will again be bought in this land, my friends, and you have taken the first steps.

We live, as Jesus did, in a fallen besieged world. With our prayerful and wise investment, this church will re-emerge as the saving, truth-telling, love-spreading body God intends it to be.

May it be so,

Amen