

**Sermon preached at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Kingstowne, Virginia,
by Pastor David Fischler, on Sunday, June 1, 2008**

SIGNS

Jeremiah 32:1-15

Flag-burning. If you check your pulse, you may find that the very expression elicits some kind of response. It creates an immediate picture in your mind of treasonous radicals, denouncing the United States and all that it stands for as rotten to the core. The amazing thing about flag-burning is that there is no need for the one making the political statement to say a word. His actions speak louder than any speech.

Klansmen marching. Another picture comes to mind, one as repulsive as the first. Men and women walking down the streets of some small southern town, their faces covered by the traditional hoods, but you don't need to see their faces or hear their voices. You know, simply by watching them, what they are saying. "We are apostles of hatred," is the message. It comes through the mask loud and clear.

Candles held high. Yet another picture, this one far more pleasant. At a Christmas Eve worship service, individual candles are lit from the Advent wreath, the light being passed from person to person until the symbolic light of Christ fills the sanctuary. Inevitably, it seems, the preacher feels compelled to explain the meaning of the light, but no explanation is necessary. Every Christian knows instinctively that this is the Light of the world, born in the city of Bethlehem.

This morning, I'd like for us to think a bit about signs, about actions undertaken to spread a message, actions which speak louder than words, actions which are to characterize our lives as followers of Jesus Christ. To do that, I'd like for us to look at the story of a prophet's purchase, at the message which that act gave to his times, and at the implications of his act for our lives.

We begin with the prophet Jeremiah. The time is 587 BC, and the place is the courtyard of the palace of the king of Judah in Jerusalem. Jerusalem was a city under siege. Nebuchadnezzar, the king of the Babylonians, had come in force to Judah, without knowing it serving as a kind of avenging angel for God in the process. We come into the story at the point where Judean resistance to the world's mightiest empire had about four months to go before it collapsed. Jeremiah found himself imprisoned in the courtyard as a result of his prophecies against Judah and King Zedekiah, who considered Jeremiah's preaching defeatist, maybe even treasonous. That's because Jeremiah had told the king three things he couldn't bear to hear.

The first was that the Babylonians were going to overrun the city, and bring the kingdom of Judah to an end. The second was that Zedekiah was going to be taken prisoner and carried away in chains to Babylon. But it was the last thing Jeremiah said that made his message especially infuriating. He said that Judah's calamity was God's doing, that it was God's just punishment for Judah's sin, and that there was no way to stop it. The sum

total of Jeremiah's proclamation in those dark days was this: Give up. You can't fight God. He's going to have His way, He's going to punish the nation, and the only proper response for Judah was to take its medicine and say thank you for being punished and hopefully set on the right road. Think of it this way: when children misbehave, and their parents discipline them, they aren't expected to enjoy the punishment, but they are expected to appreciate the reason for it and to correct their behavior accordingly. That's what Jeremiah was counseling the king, and like most unpopular counsel addressed to rulers it got the bearer of bad news dropped in jail. The king then came to him, and in bewilderment asked why he should be causing so much trouble, spreading discontent and defeatism and fear through the city just when a unified and valiant effort was most needed, and bringing hardship upon himself in the process.

In answer to the king's complaint, Jeremiah told him the story of how he'd bought a field. The field was in the little village of Anathoth, his hometown, about three miles northeast of Jerusalem. His uncle Shallum's son Hanamel had come to Jeremiah and asked if he would exercise his ancestral option on the field. He was even going to give his cousin a good price, just seventeen shekels of silver, probably not expensive if the field was close to a standard size. This seems like a generous thing for Hanamel to do, until you realize, as Jeremiah well knew, that the field was in territory occupied by the Babylonians! But instead of brushing him off as a crank or a war profiteer, Jeremiah consented to the deal. He bought this land to which he would never be able to lay claim, paid the full price Hanamel asked for it, and then even went through the whole rigamarole of making it nice and legal – you know, two copies, notarized, sealed, and so on. And the really wonderful and bizarre thing about it is that Jeremiah didn't have any idea when he did this why God wanted him to do so.

Verses 17 through 25 record a prayer of Jeremiah's, in which he says, "The city will be handed over to the Babylonians who are attacking it. What you said has happened, as you now see. And though the city will be handed over to the Babylonians, you, O Sovereign Lord, say to me, 'Buy the field with silver and have the transaction witnessed.'"

He sounds a little like Job, don't you think? Why me, Lord? And, what's the matter with you, Lord? Have you lost your mind? What is going on here? What's the point of all this? Why are you messing up my finances to no good purpose?

God responds to Jeremiah this way. First He says in verse 27, "I am the Lord, the God of all mankind. Is anything too hard for Me?" He's letting Jeremiah know that something unexpected is coming. Then He says in verses 28 and 29, "I am about to hand this city over to the Babylonians...The Babylonians who are attacking this city will come in and set it on fire; they will burn it down, along with the houses where the people provoked me to anger by burning incense on the roofs to Baal and by pouring out drink offerings to other gods."

Now this first part is the bad part, but it's not the only thing Jeremiah hears. God still hasn't explained the field yet. This is the next thing He says to His prophet, in verses 36

through 41: “You are saying about this city...‘It will be handed over to the king of Babylon;’ but this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: I will surely gather them from all the lands where I banish them in my furious anger and great wrath; I will bring them back to this place and let them live in safety. They will be my people, and I will be their God. I will give them singleness of heart and action, so that they will always fear me for their own good and the good of their children after them. I will make an everlasting covenant with them: I will never stop doing good to them....I will rejoice in doing them good and will assuredly plant them in this land with all my heart and soul.”

What a message! What a thing for the people to hear! Things look bleak now – and you have no one to blame but yourselves. You, by your thoughts, your words, and your deeds, have brought the inevitable reaction of a just and righteous God upon yourselves. But look to the future! Know that God still loves you and strives with you despite your sin, and is determined to do all that is in His power, which is plenty, to restore the damaged relationships between Himself and His people. That’s a proclamation of the gospel when the people most needed to hear it.

But what about the field, you say? Well, the punch line comes in verses 42 through 44: “As I have brought all this great calamity on this people, so I will give them all the prosperity I have promised them. Once more fields will be bought in this land of which you say, ‘It is a desolate waste...for it has been handed over to the Babylonians.’ Fields will be bought for silver, and deeds will be signed, sealed and witnessed in the territory of Benjamin, in the villages around Jerusalem, in the towns of Judah and in the towns of the hill country, of the western foothills and of the Negev, because I will restore their fortunes, declares the Lord.” You see, what Jeremiah did was a sign, a living, acted out testimony, to the promise of God to His people.

Why did Jeremiah buy a field occupied by the enemy? Because it would one day belong again to the people of God. Why did he put the deed in a safe place, from which it could be retrieved years later? Because though the people would be punished with exile for as long as it took to bring them back to their God, an end to their plight was already in sight, even before they had felt the full weight of it. By the power of God, symbolized in the purchase of that field by His prophet, there might still be hope in Israel.

Jeremiah is sometimes called “the weeping prophet,” because all we hear out of him is gloom and doom, death and destruction, sin and suffering. But that’s not really fair. Sure, Jeremiah painted a bleak picture of his times, just as we can paint a bleak picture of ours. He was dealing with a nation of sinners and idolators. So are we. Jeremiah was confronting this reality in the people of God, and if we’re honest with ourselves we’ll admit that the Church of God, and not just the larger, secular society, has many if not all of the same problems. Yet all is not dark, nor can it ever be. Why? Because we have this word from above: “I am the Lord, the God of all mankind. Is anything too hard for Me?”

God still rules, which means that there is light at the end of the tunnel, and a reason to buy occupied fields. Does it mean that all is right with the world, that God approves of

all that happens? No, of course not. Does it not leave us with some questions about why some things are, why certain kinds of evil seem to flourish, why certain kinds of good seem so difficult to achieve? Certainly. I know I struggle with those kinds of questions, about the world and about my own life, on a daily basis. But God doesn't promise us a struggle-free, sin-free, evil-free, question-free world or life. He does, however, promise that in the end it will be His ways and His righteousness, and, thank God, His mercies, that will prevail.

Now, where does all this leave us? If God rules the nations, if He has made His plans to one day put all that is evil in the world to an end, what part do we have to play? At least part of the answer is found in the way that He used Jeremiah. When God wanted to give Judah a message, He didn't write the words we read in Jeremiah's prophecy across the sky over Jerusalem. He sent it via a man and his actions, along with the written record of those actions – a man, incidentally, who was not at all popular simply because he spoke God's word, and who was not by worldly standards "successful" in his mission.

For whatever reason, God has chosen to work in the power of His Spirit through men and women just like you and me in getting His plans accomplished. That means that when we say that God rules the world, that He is the God of all humanity, we are called upon to respond as His people, and particularly to take up the mantle of speaking to the world through our actions. We, like Jeremiah, are called to be signs for our times, signs of the ways in which God is involved in the life of the world and of all creation.

I remember vividly one such moment as it happened several years ago. It took place in Rome, at one of Pope John Paul's regular public audiences. He had spoken to the crowd, and apparently knew about the presence there of a special person. With the style and feel for ordinary people that has made him so beloved, John Paul left his platform, went down in the crowd, and found a small boy. He embraced and kissed the child as cameras recorded his actions. What's so special about that, you say? Well, the boy was afflicted with AIDS, which he probably got from his mother *in utero*. For some, that would make him a pariah to be avoided at all costs. For John Paul, that made him a person of exceptional importance to God. The child was a sufferer, and God has a special place in the kingdom for those who suffer and are made outcasts in the world. John Paul wanted to communicate that to the world, but words either would not suffice or were not necessary. What was necessary was action, a graphic picture of the love of Christ which would be burned into the heart and mind of every person who saw it.

There was no lengthy news story the next day in the world's newspapers headlined, "Pope kisses boy with AIDS." There was just a picture of a man demonstrating this truth: The love of Christ does not end at the edge of our fear. If a picture is indeed worth a thousand words, then that act on the part of the Pope said more about how Christians respond even to a scourge as fearsome as AIDS than all the sermons that have ever addressed it.

Sisters and brothers, our lives are signs for all who see us, hear us, touch us, and are touched by us. We have a message to proclaim, a message of the love and mercy of an

Almighty God, offered to the world in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. When people look at you, do they see the sacrificial love of Christ exemplified in the way that you live, in the things that you do, in all of the small, seemingly trivial events that have a way of sending messages to those who take part? If so, rejoice and praise God for the insight to know how to act as a sign of His gospel. If not, the invitation this morning is for you: to come before God and His Word, seeking His guidance and power to live before the world as a transparent sign of His love.