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Jeremiah 32:6-15
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A FIELD FOR THE FUTURE

I

In 1931, Karen Blixen lost her farm.

She had come to East Africa from her home in Sweden in 1914, just as the Great War was breaking out in Europe. She had come to meet her husband and her future, far away from Europe's decay, up in the continental highlands. Together, the Baron and Baroness von Blixen purchased some land in the mountains of Kenya where they proposed to build a coffee plantation.

Their European friends told them it was a mistake; that the land was too high to grow coffee, that the market was too unstable, and that the enterprise would consume them. They were right. Coffee trees and marriages make for hard work, and offer few rewards, and the Baron grew impatient with his investment in both. In the end, he left both farm and wife and lived the life of the idle rich until his money ran out and he died penniless, of syphilis.

But Karen Blixen stayed behind on the plantation in the Kenyan hills, struggling to grow coffee and survive. Neither task was easy, but she managed them for awhile, mostly because she had the help of the Kikuyu people, a clan of the great Masai tribe that once ruled all of central Africa. Karen Blixen labored hard and long, and with few rewards, and many among the Kikuyu wondered why the Memsahib from the far north did not return to her home. But the reason Karen Blixen stayed in Africa was simple: she *was* at home. She was at home among the Kikuyu who struggled beside her everyday to scratch out a meager living from the hard mountain soil. She was at home in the arms of a British adventurer named Denys Finch-Hatton who swooped her into the sky in his biplane and taught her to fly and showed her the vast, unspeakable beauty of an Africa that no longer exists. Most of all, though, she was at home in the land itself, with its limitless horizons, its harsh beauty, its endless diversity.

But even into Eden there come hard times, and this African Eden was not immune. Global depression reached Africa by 1930, and the Kikuyu were forced into the cities of Nairobi and Mombasa to find work. Denys Finch-Hatton was killed in an airplane crash, leaving Karen Blixen bewildered with grief. And then the coffee crop failed and the processing plant burned, and in the end there was nothing to do but sell the plantation and go back to Sweden. And so, in 1931, Karen Blixen lost her farm and with it the land she had come to call home.

But in 1937, she came back home to Africa. Not in an airplane or aboard a ship. In 1937 Karen Blixen came back to Africa in her mind and with her words, and she brought hundreds of thousands of us with her. Writing under the penname Isak Dinesen, Karen Blixen published a memoir entitled *Out of Africa*. Her opening words have invited untold thousands of us to see the glory and the heartache of her Africa from the front porch of her plantation house in the Kenyan highlands:

I had a farm in Africa, at the foot of the Ngong hills. The Equator runs across these highlands a hundred miles to the north, and the farm lay at an altitude of over six thousand feet. In the daytime, you felt that you had got up high, near to the sun, but the mornings and evenings were limpid and restful and the nights were cold.... In the middle of the day the air was alive all over the land, like a flame burning; it scintillated, waved, and shone like running water, mirrored and doubled all objects... Up in this high air you breathed easily, drawing in a vital assurance and

lightness of heart. In the highlands, you woke up in the morning and thought: here I am, where I ought to be.¹

II

About two thousand five hundred years before Karen Blixen bought her farm in Africa, the scripture tells us, God commanded the prophet Jeremiah to buy a field in Anathoth. Like Karen Blixen's farm, Jeremiah's field was the place where he ought to be. Anathoth, a little village west of Jerusalem, was Jeremiah's familial home, and the field belonged to his relatives. It would be fair to say that the field God told Jeremiah to buy was his own home, the place where he belonged.

It was hardly a good time for buying land. Even as the prophet closed the deal in Jerusalem, outside the city gates the Babylonian army was massing for an assault, bent on conquering and destroying Jerusalem and exiling its people. In a matter of weeks, the walls of the city would be breached, the king's palace burned, the temple would lie in ruins, and everything that had held meaning and value for Jeremiah and his people would be taken from them. The economy was already in collapse; Jeremiah's own family couldn't afford to keep the field, and it needed the cash to buy food. And Jeremiah himself was imprisoned, accused of treason against king and country. Hardly the time to buy a field.

And yet, that was exactly what God called Jeremiah to do: buy a field in Anathoth. For in so doing, God said, Jeremiah would be making a downpayment on the future, on a time when invading armies would be vanquished and destruction mended, a day when exiles would return and life would resume, when even the storied greatness of yesterday would be surpassed by the promise of tomorrow. Buy a field in Anathoth, commanded the LORD, because "houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land."

God's call to Jeremiah is a call to an eschatological act, a commitment of radical faith in the promise of God. It is an investment in hope. Jeremiah would not even live to see that investment pay off; he would die in exile in Egypt. But even the uncertainty of his own life did not prevent him from entrusting himself to God. Despite the gathering gloom of Babylonian power, Jeremiah believed that God was not yet through with the people whom God had called and the land on which they lived. Jeremiah invested in the hope that God's promise outlasts all threats, even so great a threat as the Babylonian army. Jeremiah weighed out his cash and plunked it down squarely on the barrelhead, put his money where his prophetic mouth was, in an eschatological act that staked a claim on the promises of God. He bought a field for the future.

III

And that, my friends, if you will permit me the metaphor, is what I think God is calling us to do. I think God is calling us to put down some earnest money on an ecclesiological grubstake, to put our faith in a church that isn't here yet, but is nonetheless the church where we ought to be. I think God is calling us to believe that God isn't through with the PC(USA) just yet, regardless of appearances to the contrary. God is calling us to buy a field for the future.

God knows, it is hardly the time for buying land, ecclesiastically speaking. The Babylonians are, after all, at the gates: crises and controversy, and PUP reports and property clauses, about budget shortfalls and staff reductions and legal strategy. Our conversations about

¹ Isak Dinesen, *Out of Africa* and *Shadows on the Grass*, New York: Vintage International, 1987. pp 3-4.

the church are riddled with worry. We are entrapped in our fears, enmeshed in our frustrations. We practice the ecclesiology of anxiety.

But there is another ecclesiology available to us, if we have the courage and faith to see it. It is an ecclesiology that looks not only at the failures of our present but also at the possibilities of the future God is creating. It is an ecclesiology founded upon hope and invested in the confidence that God is creating a new reality. It is an ecclesiology that calls us to live out in the here-and-now the there-and-then of that new reality. It is an *eschatological ecclesiology*, and it's written into the heart of our polity.

You've read it; you can probably recite it. It's right there in the third chapter of the *Book of Order*, the "Church and Its Mission," amidst some of the most poetic language in all of Reformed polity. Listen to what we Presbyterians say about the church:

The Church of Jesus Christ is the provisional demonstration of what God intends for all humanity...a sign in and for the world of the new reality God has made available to people in Jesus Christ. The new reality revealed in Jesus Christ is the new humanity, a new creation, a new beginning for human life in the world (G-3.0200)

There is such power in that language! It says that God has chosen the church – the likes of us – to show the world what human life can be, ought to be, and – most important – *will be*. And it says that when the world is looking for what it means to live as God wants life lived, *the world comes looking to us*. It says that, in the church, God has begun the new creation, begun building a different sort of reality than the one we see when we turn on Fox News or CNN. And it calls us to build a church that demonstrates that new reality to the world.

What does a church built to reflect God's reality look like? Does it ordain gay and lesbian members to church office? I don't know. Is it evangelical or traditional, conservative or liberal? I haven't got a clue. Does it have a strong central structure, or is it a loosely-organized confederation of congregations and communities? Though I have an opinion or two, in the end, I can't say, and I don't know that anything I say would finally matter. What I know is that the future of this church belongs to God, and that more than anywhere else, it is the place where we belong.

And, I know this: that whatever else it means to be the "provisional demonstration" of God's new reality, it will mean that what we are and what we do will be measured by the virtues of that new reality, virtues that cut against the grain of the way of the world. We could and probably should spend a day exploring those virtues, but for now let me name just three:

The new reality God calls us to demonstrate is characterized by *humility*. Theologian Gordon Lathrop tells of a native people in northern Canada,

... commonly called the "Yellowknife," who have named themselves the *Tetsot'ine*, "those who know something a little." Their name reflects the respectful and careful common life of a people surrounded by a vast and mysterious land marked by powerful natural forces: no one knows everything about such a land. But borrowed here, ... such a name might be used to invite Christians to enter into reflection... to know the things we do really know, especially those things without which we cannot survive as Christians, and to be silent before the great mysteries that

remain; to know together the things that truly unite us and to listen respectfully to our genuine differences.²

Humility is “knowing something a little.” It is the antidote to arrogance that assumes we know the all the answers to all the questions that count and that we have the truth captured in a bottle or a book. Humility recognizes that that we are not God’s kingdom, but only the sign to the world that God’s kingdom is coming. Humility recognizes the truth of Oliver Cromwell’s plea to the Scottish General Assembly in 1650: “I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible you may be mistaken. Humility makes room for respect and wonder and awe... and for the possibility that we may be mistaken.

The new reality is also characterized by *reconciliation*. Reconciliation believes that our divisions are not permanent but temporary, because they are the product not of God’s will but of our fear. Reconciliation believes that our connections to one another are more important than the triumph of our point of view. Let’s not kid ourselves here; this is hard work. It’s a lot easier to find the group we most agree with and stick with them, rehearsing the truths of our own arguments and critiquing the weaknesses of others’. It’s a lot easier to be a member of the Presbyterian Coalition or the Covenant Network of Presbyterians, of New Wineskins or the Witherspoon Society, than it is to be a member of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A). It’s easier... but in the end, I believe, it fails God’s vision for the church. Our common life as Presbyterians is based on the notion that we are a covenanted people, bound to each other in relationships of mutual accountability. The great strength of this identity is that it forces us to be reconciled to each other in matters of sharp disagreement and to deal constructively and creatively with each other. When we base our life as a church on associations of like-minded individuals, we miss the fundamental eschatological vision of the reconciled community of God’s people, where people “will come from east and west and eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 8:11).

And the new reality is characterized by *trust*. Trust is what happens when you practice humility and reconciliation. Trust involves being vulnerable to each other. Just as Christ, trusting in the will of God, was vulnerable to pain and death at the hands of the world, so the church of Christ is called to be vulnerable to pain and loss as it trusts in God. What is it our polity says?

The Church is called to undertake [its] mission even at the risk of losing its life, trusting in God alone as the author and giver of life... (*Book of Order*, G-3.0400)

As we live together in the reconciled community, we are called to model that vulnerability in trusting one another. We must be more committed to the mission of Christ than to the preservation of our own perspectives. We must learn the practice of “mutual forbearance toward each other” (*Book of Order* G-1.0305). Without such trust, the covenantal polity that holds us together will hold no longer, and we will fail our eschatological calling to be the provisional demonstration of God’s intent.

These are tough times for the church; there’s no denying that. All the more reason, I think, to dream a new dream for the church. I think it’s high time we envision a church built not so much on the disappointments of the past as on the promise of the future, a church that draws its strength not from what we have been but from what God is creating us to be. I think it’s time

² Gordon Lathrop, *Holy People: A Liturgical Ecclesiology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999, p.101.

to envision a church that is not a memorial to a bygone reality, but a sign in and for the world of God's new reality. I think it's time invest in the church we have not yet become. I think it's time for an eschatological ecclesiology. Time to buy a field for the future.

IV

Let me tell you one last story. It is said that in 211 BC, in the midst of the Second Punic War, the armies of Hannibal, the great general of Carthage, having picked their way across the Italian Alps on the backs of elephants, descended on Rome, bent on destroying the city and its people. Romans panicked when they heard the news that Hannibal had overwhelmed the city's defenses and was encamped on the plains just outside the walls. With battle looming, the Roman Senate met to consider whether to surrender the city to avoid bloodbath and death. As the story goes, in the midst of the discussion, one senator – a man named Cincinnatus – arose to express his desire to buy a plot of land. It was not just any plot, however, but a particular piece of land he wanted: Cincinnatus wanted to buy, at full market value, the very spot on which Hannibal had that night encamped his army.³ My friends, that's the spirit of eschatological ecclesiology. That's what it means to buy a field for the future.

...

Oh, by the way, I understand that, today, on the very slopes where Karen Blixen invested her life in that failed plantation, they now grow those rich, black coffee beans you can buy at Starbuck's or Barnie's; we call them Kenyan Dark Roast.

Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land. So says the prophet; so says the prophet's God. What say you, my friends? What say you?

³ Source: Edward Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vol II, ch. Xxxi. New York: Random House, p. 134.