

“Going Bananas For God”
Jeremiah 32:1-15; 1 Timothy 6:6-9
Rev. David Hutchinson
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I once served a church - - as their pastor - - in which...

- - a church elder - - walked into a meeting - - and announced:

“I’ve gone bananas!”

It’s true.

Can you imagine this ever really happening at a church meeting?

It did.

And in this case - - no one seemed surprised - - except me.

I was new to the congregation, and apparently they knew this man better than I did. / It’s not the sort of announcement that many people - - just make.

But it was just the sort of thing they had come to expect from Max.

“I’ve gone bananas”, he said again - - and then pulled a bunch of bananas out of the bag he was carrying - - and handed them out to anyone who wanted one. /

“They were on SALE!”, he said, “So I got each of you one as a gift!”

How generous, I thought.

And so as the church meeting continued - - there we elders all sat - - around the table, discussing the business of the church, with banana peels hanging over our fists - - kind of like a bunch of monkeys.

What I ended up liking about the whole thing was - - there was no attempt by this man - - to cover up or minimize who he was. / By contrast - - lots of times I try to avoid looking silly. / But he was not only fine with it - - it was who he was.

And we were all invited to join him - - the bananas are a gift!

Go bananas!

How could you say no to that?

It's the sort of thing that Jeremiah did on the Old Testament reading for today.

He was in prison - - during an invasion by an enemy empire.

His people had been forced into exile.

And all the land around them was under siege.

And in the middle of all that his cousin suggests that he BUY land!

And even though he did have the right to buy land in an occupied country - - it made no real business sense. / It was completely - - bananas.

Good business sense would suggest - - waiting - - and seeing how things go - - and if Babylon is defeated eventually - - making it a much better investment for him - - as an enemy of Babylon - - to wait to buy under better circumstances.

But Jeremiah was completely hopeful.

Jeremiah TRUSTED his cousin.

And Jeremiah trusted that GOD had spoken to his cousin.

It's beautiful - - it's trusting - - it's senseless - - it's bananas - - it's the stuff legends are made of - - it is courageous and crazy at the same time. /

SO - - what are WE supposed to do - - in response?

It's a good question.

Are we supposed to admire Jeremiah's courage - - as legendary?

Or are we supposed to - - try to act - - in a similar way?

Well, let's take a minute to consider these questions...

When a person says to someone, “That doesn’t make sense” - -

Usually - - it’s an attempt to DISMISS - - whatever it is.

If the thing under consideration - - doesn’t make sense - - don’t do it.

That’s the common wisdom.

Right?

For example - - somebody at work comes up with an idea - - that you don’t want to try - - and one way to sidetrack the discussion is to say: “that doesn’t make sense”.

“Let’s go to the moon for vacation”

“That doesn’t make sense” - - that’s bananas!

It’s a way to dismiss something - - because - - to us - - “sense” - - is a value.

We value the sensible.

Sensible is safe.

Sense is based on logic.

Sense is rational.

We are in control of things that are sensible.

And to live lives that always make sense - - is not very risky.

And there is something - - good about all that.

We have minds - - and logic - - and sense - - for a reason.

But - - sometimes life - - is bigger than that.

When the statistics fail us - - then what?

When the odds - - are against us - - and we are in a corner - - then what?

Then - - sometimes - - it makes sense - - to go bananas.

Jeremiah - - makes a conscious choice - - to do this.

The people of Israel have been backed into a corner - by the invasion of Babylon.

The city of Jerusalem was surrounded by the armies of Babylon. / They were in the process of taking over the city. / They would eventually send Jeremiah's people into exile - - in internment camps.

Meanwhile Jeremiah was in prison.

He had attempted to warn the king about the coming invasion - - but the king of Israel didn't want to hear it. / He had told people to get right with God - - because challenging days were coming. / But no one wanted to worry about the future.

Things were fine - - for now - -

So the king of Israel threw Jeremiah into prison.

But pretty soon - - the king was in trouble - - from a more powerful king.

Babylon invaded Israel.

And in this situation - - a member of Jeremiah's family - - named Hanamel - - showed up at the prison - - and offered Jeremiah a chance to buy land - - land located just outside Jerusalem. / Land in the heart of the HOMELAND of his people - - BUT land that was currently occupied by a powerful enemy empire.

Sacred land - - his family has the right to buy.

But land that it would be dangerous to own - - and might be worthless.

And - - Jeremiah's OWN people - - from that town had threatened to kill him - - recently - - because they didn't want to listen to his warnings.

But Jeremiah - - buys the swamp land - - as it were.

And THAT - - non-sense act - - inspires others - - to have HOPE!

Jeremiah had HOPE in the future - - and trust in God.

Jeremiah's wisdom - - for US - - and our lives - - might go something like this:

First - - ask yourself a few questions:

What are YOUR problems?

What are you afraid of?

Where do you feel backed into a corner?

And Jeremiah's response might be:

Look for an answer - - where you haven't thought to look yet.

Consider something that doesn't make complete sense.

Imagine that there is hope in the future.

In the New Testament reading from 1 Timothy - - the letter sets us up with a choice - - between - - sense AND non-sense.

This is similar territory - - to the reading from Jeremiah:

A choice between immediate safety - - and future possibility.

For Paul - - who is said to have written this - - the choice specifically is:

Between - - being RICH now - - and being faithfully content with nothing.

The letter says, "We brought nothing into this world - - and we cannot take anything OUT of this world - - so DON'T choose to be wrapped in the things of THIS world - - for the short time we are here! / Instead - - choose to be content".

Walter Bruggemann has written about this choice. / He wrote:

"We take the choice too seriously! / We are so PIOUS about the choice, and we think that ONE choice PLUNGES us into the eternity of living with a ruined soul where all there is - - is the love of money. / And the OTHER choice involves SUCH a sacrifice of ourselves - - that we feel the anxiety of poverty and need."

Instead, he suggests, it is different for those who have actually MADE the choice.

He says, quote, “For those who have REALLY made the IRRATIONAL choice - - to side with God - - it is an act of - - sheer - - lyrical - - unembarrassed PRAISE - - and JOY!”

“Whenever the church has had - - MISSIONAL VITALITY” he says, “It has chosen the IRRATIONALITY of PRAISE - - over the RATIONALITY of COMMODITY - - and money”.

Which is another way to say - - when the church is really faithful - -

It seems like its gone BANANAS!

Or as 1 Timothy says, “There is great GAIN - - in being content - - with the life God has GIVEN us”.

To illustrate this, here’s a true story from Kathleen Norris:

Two women each diagnosed with terminal cancer.

One said this: “If I ever get out of this hospital I’m going to look out for number one”. / And she did - - against overwhelming odds - - get out. / And she became a mean angry person.

The other woman said: “The only thing about this illness that scares me is the pain - - I hope I die before I turn into an old grouch”. / She did - - she was loving and hopeful to the end of her life - - and they told this story at her funeral.

We take nothing into this world - - and we take nothing out - - except...

Except - - how we lived - - and who we loved.

I’ll end with a story of a Caribbean banana farmer.

There was a tough guy - - who lived in town - - and as feared by everyone.

No one challenged him.

He was the banana farmer.

He had a very fine banana tree in his yard.

But one day - - another tough guy comes to town.

They meet and size one another up...

The banana farmer brags about his fabulous banana tree.

And the newcomer gets JEALOUS.

So finally he says, "I'm going the STEAL your bananas."

I'll do it TONIGHT - - between 6pm and 2am!

Well the farmer gets his gun - - and a thermos of coffee - - and waits.

He never takes his eyes off the tree...

His wife calls out the time from inside the house: 7pm, 8pm, 9pm...

And midnight his wife suggests he just take the bananas down.

But it's a matter of pride, so he just sits there, waiting.

His wife calls out - - 1:30am - - 1:45 - - 1:50...

And with just minutes to go the frustrated farmer looks down at his watch.

He turns around to his wife in the window and says,

"Well, I wasted the whole night on nothing!"

And as the clock strikes two - - he turns back around toward the tree - -

to see - - NO bananas!

Nothing but a bare tree and a few leaves.

The story is called - - the HONEST thief.

We usually think of thieves as DIS-honest.

But this story turns things around.

Would you rather have all your bananas - - or give a few away?

Would you rather have your property - - or your integrity?

Or your honesty?

Or be an old grouch?

Imagine a world in which - - instead of everyone and everything - - seeming to go bananas - - and every day a new thing that seems to defy common sense - - instead...

...instead we lived in a world where people went bananas for God.

Sometimes the things - - faith leads us to do - - are a little strange.

Like offering the new guy in town a few bananas.

Or taking a risk - - to hope for the future - - instead of fear it.

Or giving your money to help others - - instead of hoarding it for yourself.

Maybe faith is not about competition and power.

Maybe faith is the opposite of invading land and making money.

That's what these two texts from the Bible say.

Faith - - and hope - - are about seeing things differently.

Amen