

“Filthy Rich”

Sermon – September 28, 2025 Stone Presbyterian Church

“Hope springs eternal in the human breast” wrote Alexander Pope nearly three centuries ago. There are times, though, when hope is hard to find.

Where is the hope when the dread of war is reality?

Where is the hope when the lone voice of the one God commissioned to bring hope is locked away in prison?

Where is the hope when leaders mistake painful words for words of hopelessness?

This is the situation in today’s Old Testament passage from Jeremiah 32.

Babylon has overtaken Jerusalem leaving a trail of death and destruction in its path. Jeremiah, the prophet whose job it is “to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant” is imprisoned by the king, silenced within the walls of the king’s palace.

The king, King Zedekiah, is too shortsighted to understand that Jeremiah’s word of warning prophesying the fall is a blessing in and of itself.

And in the midst of all of this, “the word of the LORD” comes to Jeremiah saying Jeremiah’s cousin Hanamel is going to come and ask him to buy his field in Anathoth, Jeremiah’s hometown a few miles northeast of Jerusalem.

And indeed, that is what happened. Now way back in Jeremiah 11 because of Jeremiah’s unpopular message and challenge to religious complacency, the people of Anathoth rejected him harshly and even plotted to kill him, saying in verse 21: “Do not prophesy in the name of the Lord, or you will die by our hands.”

Now Jeremiah is expected to buy property there? In the midst of the area being conquered by the Babylonians? Is his cousin just trying to make some quick cash and get out town?

“Filthy Rich”

Sermon – September 28, 2025 Stone Presbyterian Church

It seems pointless, and certainly not practical, to buy property when the entire population is about to be killed or deported. But because “the word of the LORD” came to him first, Jeremiah understood his cousin’s offer to be a sign of hope and expectation for future blessing.

Since God had told him to expect his cousin to make the offer, Jeremiah saw it as a sign that God would reverse Israel’s fortunes. He saw it as a sign that God had neither forgotten Israel nor left it to its own devices. Jeremiah goes through the whole legal process, including having witnesses and having two copies of the deed made: one, to have at hand and the second to be put in clay pots to assure that the deed of purchase would outlast war and destruction.

For Jeremiah, that act of faith meant buying a plot of land. It was a symbolic act of hope. Jeremiah’s purchase was a prophetic sign, despite the coming exile. As verse 15 says, “houses, fields, and vineyards will again be bought in this land”. The deed being placed in a clay jar to preserve it for the future, symbolized that God’s covenant with Israel would endure and that restoration would come.

The act did not prevent the destruction of Judah and Jerusalem but did signal it would not be the end. And indeed some 70 years later when Persia conquers Babylon, under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah, the exiles would return to reclaim and rebuild the nation and its temple, though never to its full former glory.

Jeremiah, though, remained in the Jerusalem area. Because he was not a threat to and was a man of integrity, the Babylonians let him stay rather than being taken into exile.

“Filthy Rich”

Sermon – September 28, 2025 Stone Presbyterian Church

But after rogue Jewish leader kills the Babylonian-appointed governor of Judah, the people panic out of fear of retaliation. Jeremiah tells them that God says, “Stay in Judah and I will protect you.”

But they accuse Jeremiah of lying, they flee to Egypt—dragging Jeremiah with them unwillingly, where it is presumed that he died there.

Scripture doesn’t record whether Jeremiah or his descendants ever reclaimed the land he bought. It seems unlikely. Even Jeremiah must have suspected that could happen. So was the purchase foolish? Well, from a worldly view, yes. But for Jeremiah, the emphasis is theological, not transactional. The field became a sacrament of hope—a tangible promise that God’s justice would not cancel His mercy.

Despite all that happened to him, Jeremiah remained faithful to God and speaking God’s word—prophesying. Doing so the king eventually gets so frustrated with him that he imprisons Jeremiah.

Thus, Jeremiah demonstrates how religious people must be careful not to be co-opted by political leadership.

He manifests the true virtue of hope, which allows us to take actions in the bleak present in order to ensure the future of others.

Jeremiah bought a bunch of dirt that he never used and in fact was taken away from it. And yet he was rich in faith and willing to do a symbolic effort that cost him real money for sake of others to give them hope.

Yesterday we did a baptism—on a Saturday. Very unusual. As our Reformed ancestors asserted, for us Presbyterians baptism is not a private matter—it is our incorporation into Christ and his body, the church. As such, baptism is a public event, ordinarily celebrated in the context of Sunday worship and witnessed by the community of faith.

“Filthy Rich”

Sermon – September 28, 2025 Stone Presbyterian Church

In fact, in my life I don't think I ever attended or conducted a baptism in a Protestant church that was not done at a regular Sunday worship.

In our Reformed tradition we have only two sacraments: baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Baptism is done only once; the Lord's Supper is celebrated repeatedly, and in a sense represents the renewal of the baptism covenant—that is, the obligations and privileges of the relationship between God and God's people. As a sacrament then, baptism should be part of, not separate from, the communal worship of God.

The parents, who are presbyterian, asked if we could do it on a Saturday because the father's brother and wife were in town and would be leaving on Sunday—today—and the brother, along with their sister, would be sponsors—godparents, if you will. After a special session meeting last Sunday, I told the parents I could do the baptism but only as part of a public worship service, which they agreed.

So, amidst Hamilton College homecoming, the Fair Trade Shop, and our pie sale out front, I conducted a slightly abbreviated worship service. Don't worry—they still got a sermon with the title of “Death and Life” using the gospel lesson of the rich man and Lazarus. And there was no music, no singing, no breaks for announcements. Just me talking the whole time.

As my wife Helen told me, “It was such a joy to finally get to the baptism.” Donna Goodfriend and Pat Joseph, who also attended on behalf of Stone Church, could probably attest to as well.

“Filthy Rich”

Sermon – September 28, 2025 Stone Presbyterian Church

But baptism is not just a celebration—it’s a crossing. A crossing from death to life, from isolation to belonging, from the world’s values to God’s kingdom.

So, while Jeremiah’s act was symbolic to provide hope for the people, the baptism we had was an act of faith to provide us hope for the future.

There are no guarantees as to how the child or the family will grow in their faith or live it out in word and deed, but by their desiring to be part of the church universal, we have hope.

Being formed in godliness and contentment, as today’s epistle lesson from 1 Timothy discusses, is a lifelong journey that can only be traveled one step at a time.

We may get filthy on the journey as we get down and dirty on living out our faith, standing up to oppressors while helping the marginalized, but we do so rich with the blessings we have received from God.

As Paul exhorts us in verses 11 and 12, “pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.”

In the name of God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer.
Amen.