

# Down Market

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Somewhere along the way most of us have crossed paths with Cervantes' classic tale, *Don Quixote* – the story of the delusional man, Alonso Quijano, who had read far too many tales of chivalry that he becomes convinced that this is the life to which he has been called himself. He turns himself into a knight, Don Quixote, dons a battered suit of armor, and recruits a local farmer, Sancho Panza, to be his squire. The two gallop the Spanish countryside in Don Quixote's chivalric pursuits. In windmills he sees giants – in holy men he sees captors – in taverns he sees castles and in peasant girls he sees queens. More often than not he views benign moments as crisis – and steps in where he is, in fact, not needed. He makes matters often worse with his hope of bringing justice to a cruel world. Published 400 years ago and considered perhaps the first great modern novel, *Don Quixote*, raises the age old existential question about how to view our mission in the world. How do we face the realities that surround us? What are we to do with the events that unfold before us? Must we courageously engage with fantasies of making some kind of difference? Sticking our nose into places where we may not be needed or welcomed? Or should we cynically stand back and pessimistically watch as the world seemingly goes to hell in a hand basket? Is it crazier to think that you can change the world for the better, or to think that if the world is going to change it will undoubtedly change for the worse?

In the Broadway version of the story, *Man of LaMancha*, it's Don Quixote who addresses the question this way - "Too much sanity may be madness. And maddest of all, to see life as it is and not as it should be."

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If you are wondering where in scripture you might look to find the maddest of all the Biblical characters – you don't need to look much further than the section in the Hebrew Scriptures called The Prophets. It's the prophets of the Old Testament that are continually seeing the world very different than most around them. It is the prophets who are always raising the contrary view. When Israel thinks it is making itself more secure, it is the prophets who warn them of their insecurity. When Israel gets obsessed over its religious duties and piety, it is the prophets who shake a stick and say, Remember the orphans and widows. And when Israel and Jerusalem despair over their sacking and captivity, it is the prophets who say, "Comfort, comfort my people ... make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up and every mountain and hill be made low ... for the glory of the Lord will be revealed."

The prophets, in other words, see things that most people cannot see. And what they see is that the God of Israel is somehow working his purposes out. What they see is that the God of Israel is a God of covenant, a God who makes and keeps his promises, a God who loves his people and will never let them go, a God who is not above or below the attempt to make his people into a holy and righteous people. They see a God who holds in one hand the scales of justice and in the other hand the mantle of grace. And the prophets don their armor and walk upon the plains of Palestine and give witness to the promises and purposes of God. In other words, they hold onto the view that as bad as the world might seem to be, somehow God will redeem all this. Somehow God will not renege on his promise. And in the face of certain scorn, ridicule and derision, in the face of the great cynicism and skepticism of the day, the prophets see it as their mission to do something about it. To take on the side of the redemptive God who is working his purposes out.

Nowhere perhaps is this courageous calling more exemplified than in our text this morning as Jeremiah is witnessing the destruction of Jerusalem, the walls tumbled, the city sacked, the people of God being carried off into captivity in Babylon and the pundits all around saying that this is the end. So in the face of the world going to hell it is the prophet who decides that now is the time to buy some land. Now is the time to stake a claim. Now is the time to put his money where his mouth is and say, Someday we will return. Someday we will come back home. Someday the glory of the Lord will be revealed and all flesh will see it together and there will be a real estate boom right here in Jerusalem. While caravans of people and possessions are leaving town, Jeremiah says don't forget the promises of God. Don't forget the purposes of God. Don't forget the faithfulness of God. Don't forget that God will not let his people go. Someday they are going to build on this land. Jeremiah held onto his hope. And he didn't just hold onto his hope ... he acted on it. Down payment on a field that wouldn't see a house for a hundred years. Crazy old Jeremiah waving a deed to a property that would lie empty for four generations. Getting laughed at, reviled, scorned, abused -- all because he saw something that nobody else could see -- the promises and purposes of a God who would stay true to the covenant.

Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

It is so easy, isn't it, for you and me to give in to the cynicism of the day. To look outside the walls of our houses and see the amassing armies of a changing world where things aren't the way they used to be. To read the headlines and worry that things are just getting worse and worse. Washington's a mess. The economy is uncertain. The ranks of the poor are growing larger. Our sense of morality is being questioned. Terrorism advances. You can look at any of it or all of it and say to yourself -- the world is going to pot. And you can chat at coffee with your friends and say what a shame. You can pass on emails that claim that the world is going to be taken over by something or by someone. You can blame every problem in American on one politician or another. And if you

did any or all of that – people would consider you somewhat normal. Just joining the ranks in the army of cynicism and pessimism.

But to claim the contrary opinion? To interject into the conversation that maybe God has something up his sleeve? To stop shaking your head and instead lay claim to the promises of God and to say, “Yeah, things aren’t so hot, but God’s not giving up and I think he wants me to do something about it.” Everybody these days seems to have a handle on the problem, or at least a loud opinion about it. But so few want to offer a solution. So few want to buy some land. So few want to lay claim to a redemptive deed. Lots of talk, little action.

Isn’t that what Jeremiah has waving in his hand – a redemptive deed? It looks like just a deed to property – but it is a redemptive deed. A claim on the future. A parcel of hope.

I was in St. Louis this past week attending a certain baseball game of a certain baseball team that ended in a certain unfortunate score. But a few blocks from the stadium was the Jefferson County Court House where the fate of Dred Scott was handed down. You remember Dred Scott – the African-American slave who in the 1840’s, some 20 years before the end of the Civil War – got up the gumption to sue for his freedom. Knowing that a good part of the white world at that time didn’t see him nor his race as even being fully human, knowing that a good part of his own people would see his suit for freedom not worth the trouble, in fact making trouble – it was Dred Scott who looked into the future and saw hope. He looked into the future and wondered if the purposes of God might be true. He looked into the future and saw a God who promised never to let him or his people go. So in the face of scorn and ridicule and derision – the prophet sued for his freedom. And though the “halls of justice” denied Mr. and Mrs. Scott their claim to freedom and returned them to their owner – God’s purposes would still come true. Scott and his wife were soon freed by their owners. Waving the redemptive deed not just to their own lives, but to the lives of every fellow slave. God’s promises would not be forgotten. And three years later Abraham Lincoln was elected President.

And so Jesus gathers his disciples at table in the face of an impending gloom. With the shadow of the cross lying heavy upon the assembled, Jesus lays claim to the future. Jesus offers a down payment. Jesus says that the world is not going to hell. He is putting his money where his mouth is. He is executing the redemptive deed. And he knows that from the foot of the cross they'll laugh and ridicule and deride and scorn – but such they did to the prophets who went before. But he, like they, know something that no one else knows. They see something that no one else can see. The Father, who will not forget his promises. Who will not let his children go.

So where, for God's sake, is the deed – the redemptive deed – of your life? Where, for God's sake, have you laid claim to the promised land? Where have you put yourself at risk – to say and to show that the promises of God are true and his purposes will not be denied? Where is the deed to the land that will someday be your children's? Your children's children? Your children's children's children?

Blessed are you, you who didn't give up. Blessed are you who laid claim to the future. Blessed are you who didn't give in to the cynicism. Blessed are you who bought a piece of property while everyone was leaving town. Blessed are you who endured the ridicule. Blessed are you who did battle with windmills. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

For too much sanity may be madness. And maddest of all, to see life as it is and not as it should be.