

# Buying Low

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell



*Jeremiah 32:6-15; Matthew 15:21-28*

How hopeful are you?

Between the years 1950-1953 the Hayden Planetarium in New York ran a marketing campaign to entice people to visit the planetarium and it revolved around helping people imagine the day when common ordinary folks like us would be able to travel in space and in particular, visit the moon. This was, of course, some ten years before anyone traveled into space ... and almost twenty years before Neil Armstrong step foot on the moon. And what the Planetarium did back in the early 50's was send out coupons for people to use to make their reservations for the day when commercial interplanetary tour services would be offered. People were given the chance to be first in line for the chance to travel to the moon. The response was overwhelming. People from all over the world wanted their chance to fly to the moon. Along with sending in their coupons to make their reservation, some wrote with particular questions: Will it be a round-trip ticket? Do I need to bring my own oxygen? Does the Planetarium (remember this is 1950) have a specific schedule of flight departures? And this one comment – “Since the way I’ve lived my life guarantees I’m not going to heaven – I’d sure like a crack at the moon.”

Now as I said the response was overwhelming to this little marketing effort – but what the Planetarium did not expect was that over 75 years later people would be calling the Planetarium to see what the flight status was and where were they in line. Ten year olds, now 65 years old – have been calling to see how things are looking for their reservations to go to the moon. They took the offer seriously. Fortunately, the Planetarium had kept the coupons in a file somewhere in some storage room and it has become a source of some good humor to think about the great expectation of those over a half-century ago and even those today.

There is something quite compelling, I must admit, to these hopeful travelers. Not only to have sent their coupons in long before they had any proof that any man could make it through the atmosphere and into space, not to mention the moon, -- but then sixty years later to follow it up – to see how things were going with their reservations! Now that, my friends, is hope.

Now I suspect things might have changed for many of these coupon holders if a significant deposit had been required of them to hold their reservation. What would be an appropriate deposit for a multi-million dollar ride into space? \$10,000, \$100,000??? I suspect that the line would get a wee bit smaller. How hopeful are you?

But it is in our story this morning from Jeremiah – that we find one very hopeful prophet. Many of you may know the background here. It is the sixth century B.C. and Judah is surrounded by some of the great empires of the known middle-eastern world. And not only are they surrounded by these empires but they are becoming increasingly threatened by them. And their independence is being maintained only by some precarious treaties. But all of a sudden the whole thing collapses and the armies of Babylon make their way into Judah and lay siege on Jerusalem. And what begins is what is called the great Babylonian captivity wherein nearly all the residents of Judah and Jerusalem are killed, violated, and/or dragged off into captivity in Babylon. An entire nation is taken away from their land – and forced to live in a foreign land. Not much worse can happen to a nation.

Jeremiah has been warning about this for quite a time. He believes that Judah is going to somehow pay the price for their disobedience. But Jeremiah also believes that God doesn't give up. God's provisional grace will not ultimately abandon the people of Judah. He knows that someday Jerusalem will be filled again with God's people. His hope is in the God of grace and purposes. Now Jeremiah believes all this and envisions all this in the very moment while Babylonian soldiers are dragging off his countrymen. Now that is hope. In the spirit of Abraham and Moses who had a vision for God's promised land – Jeremiah

believes that God will not forsake his people or his land ... and so he sees the day when the people will return.

But not only does he see it – not only does he have this hope that Jerusalem will be filled again – he hears the voice of God tell him to buy a field. To buy a field. To buy a plot of land that today is absolutely worthless – but Jeremiah is told to buy this land because someday God's people will return.

And that's exactly what Jeremiah does. He buys a field. He invests in a piece of property. Talk about buying low. Talk about a dip in the market. Jeremiah gets out his checkbook and he buys a piece of land. This is putting your money where your mouth is ... this is standing behind what you believe ... this is investing in your hope. This is no prophet of word only ... this is a prophet of deed. So much so that he acquires a deed. He buys a field. He is connecting his hope to his actions. “I purchase this land – not as a smart real estate investment – no, I purchase this land because I have hope in the purposes of God.” Jeremiah did not live to see the day of God's people returning – but they did. He connected his hope to his deed.

Think with me for a moment about connecting your hope to your deed. Think with me about buying a ticket to the moon. About putting a down payment on what would be equivalent to some swampland in Florida. Think with me about connecting your hope to your deed.

My grandfather loved to tell the story about the Iowa town that had been through months of drought and the fields were dying and the crops were parched. And finally one day the local preacher called for a prayer meeting – a meeting to pray for rain. It would be at 6:00 there in the little church in the middle of town. And so when 6:00 came around and the church bell rang throughout the town ... not a cloud was in the sky. But the people came and they crowded into the little church to pray for rain. And the pastor got up and looked around ... and finally said, “This meeting is dismissed. This meeting is over.” The people looked around in consternation. The Rev. continued, “How can we dare to have a prayer meeting for rain ... if not one of us thought to bring an umbrella?”

What does it mean to connect your hope to your deed? It's one thing to book a flight to the moon ... it's another thing to pay for it in advance. It's one thing to wonder if this land will be any good someday, it's another thing to put down a down payment.

What does it mean to connect your hope to your deed? Because we church folk are people of hope, right?

Between just about every line of the Gospels – there is this message – and the message is that God loves the world. This is the hope of Jesus' ministry. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son. What are the two great commandments – Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength, and love your neighbor as much as you love yourself. Love

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you enemy. Ove and over again, there is this hope imbedded in the ministry of Jesus that God does in fact love the world. It's why we flock to Bethlehem in December – to wonder again at the good news that God loved the world enough to come as a little baby. And we say it a thousand different ways – that God loves every single person – as if that person was the only person in the world.

Now it's one thing to hope it, it's another thing to practice what you hope. Even so for Jesus. Matthew tells us the story of Jesus making his way up outside the heart of Israel to a Gentile region called Tyre and Sidon up along the northern Mediterranean coast. Jesus is away from his people and face to face with foreigners. And the rules were pretty simple back then – Jews didn't fraternize with Gentiles. You stayed away. They weren't clean, they weren't pure, they were not of our race. So it is a stunning development when Jesus makes his way into the heart of the Gentiles. But there he is. And sure enough – almost as if he's asked for it -- Jesus is confronted with one of these different people. A desperate mother whose little girl is ill. And Jesus' reputation has likely preceded him such that this Canaanite woman accosts the foreign holy man and begs him to heal her daughter. Now if I had been a Gospel writer – I'm not sure I would have included this story, because it doesn't make Jesus look too good. Because in the story Jesus hesitates. A foreign woman in need and Jesus hesitates. He keeps his distance. He even casts somewhat of an aspersion upon the woman. It was the easy thing to do. The disciples would have understood Jesus keeping his distance. The Pharisees would have understood Jesus keeping his distance. So for a moment Jesus keeps his distance. The writer to the Hebrews said of Jesus that he was tempted as often and as deeply as we are, but without sin. Well, this is where Jesus is tempted. This is where Jesus is tempted to hope in God's love, but not do anything about it. To hope in God's love, but walk away from the Gentile woman in need. Hope in God's love but leave this young family to fend for themselves. It's one thing to hope for the moon, it's another thing to buy a ticket.

But Jesus buys a ticket. This courageous woman

won't let Jesus go until he puts some money down. And Jesus puts some money down. If God so loves the world, well that means that God so loves you. Whoa, whoa, the disciples say, you can't do that. Whoa, whoa, the Pharisees say, you can't do that. But Jesus does it. Buys a ticket to the moon. Puts a down payment upon someone's soul. Because it's one thing to hope in God's love, it's another thing to do it.

If there is any story where I think Jesus can most relate to me – I think it's this one. Jesus knows my hesitation. I certainly understand Jesus' hesitation. Woven deeply into my soul – and I suspect all of our souls – is this genetic hesitation, this genetic fear, this genetic flight from the different, from the stranger. And if we let it hesitation grows into suspicion and suspicion grows into fear and fear grows into hate and hate grows into violence. And violence is what we saw this week. In Charlottesville and in Spain. And it's horrifying and it must be condemned of course without any hesitation. And at the same time confessing to the hesitancies in our own lives. Right? To the times when we held back, when we pulled ourselves a part, when we failed to condemn. When we were worried more about our own purity or our own color or our own race or our own orientation, and far less about our hope that God so loves the world. Gazing at the moon, but not purchasing a ticket.

I think it's time to buy some tickets to the moon. I think it's time to put some down payment on the souls of people different than us. It's the only thing the counteracts the genetic hesitation.

When I was sixteen my church youth group hosted a youth group from our sister church in Detroit. We invited them to our all-white suburb for a Sunday afternoon of fellowship that included a softball game at the local school playground. This is 1974. Now we white kids knew that there was a reason why our town was all-white but none of us took it very seriously. Until that afternoon on the softball diamond when the local neighbors showed up with baseball bats – swinging at any kid that they could get close to. It turned serious then. And we walked away in shame. We walked away in disbelief.

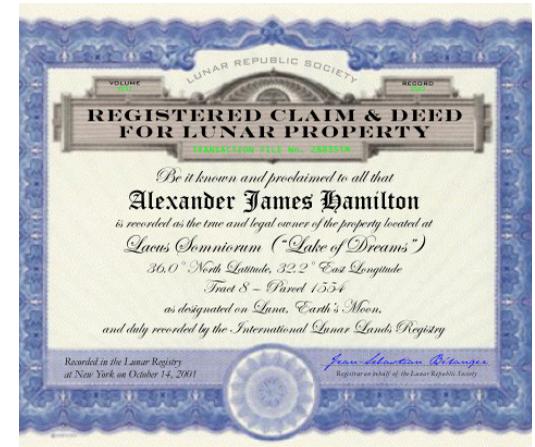
Friday night at the Temple Sinai synagogue I was

invited to share a few words with our Jewish friends in the wake of the Charlottesville incident and the President's equivocal response. And I began with John Donne's great meditation:

*No man is an island,  
Entire of itself,  
Every man is a piece of the continent,  
A part of the main.  
If a clod be washed away by the sea,  
Europe is the less.  
As well as if a promontory were.  
As well as if a manor of thy friend's  
Or of thine own were:  
Any man's death diminishes me,  
Because I am involved in mankind,  
And therefore never send to know for whom the bell  
tolls;  
It tolls for thee.*

Of all the feelings I had about watching my white neighbors swinging baseball bats at my black neighbors – I suppose what I felt most distinctly was diminishment. Any person's diminishment diminishes me. A threat against them was to some degree a threat against me. A threat against humanity. A threat against the hope of God's love.

There isn't a person in this world that couldn't give you a reason not to love them. There isn't a cable news report that couldn't possibly incite in you some form of prejudice. But the Church of Jesus Christ exists to counteract our instinct to take the bait. There can be no justification for our hesitation. No color. No race. Nor sexual orientation. No economic class. No moral failure. There can be no justification for our hesitation. Now more than ever is the time to connect our hope to our deed. To buy some tickets to the moon. Put a down payment on some souls. For we are, whether we like it or not, involved in mankind. And the bell is tolling.



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Church of the Palms

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