

**A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church**  
**By Chris Fillingham**  
**“Betting on the Future”**  
***“Echoes of the Generations” series.***  
**Jeremiah 32:1-2, 6-15**  
**October 18, 2015**

In college I had a close group of friends who were a lot like me. We were all headed into the ministry and we were all a little too proud of our biblical and theological prowess at the wise age of 18. Most guys at that age have a bit of machismo when it comes to playing sports. Things can get a little too intense on the basketball court or the Ultimate Frisbee field. But our egos rose and fell on the court of **“Holier than Thou.”**

I remember a time when we were flexing our spiritual pride in front of each other like a bunch of peacocks strutting around with its feathers up. Gambling was the topic on hand and I told them that, unlike the other vices we all “knew” were a ticket to hell (like drinking and cussing) gambling is never prohibited in the bible.

**“Of course it is,”** they both said.

**“No. It’s not.”**

**“Yes it is, Chris”**

**“Then prove it.”**

Next thing you know they are in what looks like a bible drill. They’re flipping the pages of scripture, combing through Paul’s lists in the New testament.

**“Not there?”** I ask.

But they keep going. With little beads of sweat on their foreheads, I could hear them mumbling, **“Surely it’s in Leviticus.”**

**“Nope,”** I say with a sinister smirk.

Next thing I know they’re picking up the phone to call their youth pastor back home. **“Joey, where does it say we’re not supposed to gamble?”**

After awhile on the phone, their hardened faces finally admit I was right. It was a glorious moment. A glow of heavenly light shown round about me. The angels were singing. And a voice from heaven said, **“Well done, my faithfully arrogant and overly prideful servant.”**

All I have to say is that it was a good thing I didn’t know the bible nearly as well as I thought. Because if I did, I would have pulled out this story from Jeremiah just to rub it in their face. **“See, God even condones gambling!”**

That is more or less what’s going on in the story here. God tells Jeremiah to go gamble on the future by making one heck of a risky investment.

\*\*\*\*\*

It's the year 588 BCE. For the second time in a few years, King Nebuchadnezzar and his Babylonian army is laying siege to Jerusalem. By this time, the writing is on the wall. Jerusalem is about to be destroyed, just as Jeremiah said it would be.

He's been warning the people and the leaders for a long time now. But they wouldn't listen. Oh no. After all, raising the surrender flag to the enemy is never popular. That's why the king of Jerusalem has Jeremiah put under house arrest. His message wasn't helping the cause, and they needed to shut him up.

But now there's no more avoiding it. In just a few short months, Jerusalem will be completely wiped out... and just about everyone that survives will be carried off into permanent exile.

Jeremiah knows this is going to happen. It's obvious by now. It's what he's been warning them about. And yet, God tells him to go out and invest in some land. It would be like deciding to invest in real estate in Syria right now. There's a good chance any contract you sign is going to end up worthless.

But Jeremiah does it anyway. And he goes through all the legal steps to make sure it's fully legitimate. That's what all those details we heard were about.

He gets it notarized.

He registers the title with the county clerk.

He has the deed put away in his safety deposit box.

Jeremiah is serious here. And he tells us that he does this, because God has told him to bet on the future. **"Houses and fields and vineyards will again be bought in this land."** Of course that's not-at-all what it looks like in the present. *But Jeremiah has a sacred imagination*... and he's able to see what will one day be.

In the midst of war-drums beating outside the walls, he is picturing a warm spring day with dew on the grass and a beautiful vineyards covering the hillside. At the top of the hill is a vibrant village, with people busy about their work. Shops are opening up. Merchants are pushing their carts to the town square. Children are running in the streets, laughing, chasing chickens. Life is full and spilling out. At the base of the vineyard is the farmland, with shoots of barley and wheat coming up out of the rich soil.

Jeremiah has this sacred imagination that transcends the scorched blackened countryside he can see from his window. It doesn't make any sense. But God tells him, **"Buy the field. Place your bets on that future. This will happen.**

**Buy this field, so that those around you....**

**will learn to place their bets on the future too."**

And so he does. He counts out his money. He signs the deed. He casts his bet on a future he will never see.

\*\*\*\*\*

*Sometimes... I wonder... if it was that same kind of sacred imagination that led someone to cast their bet on me.*

Since the time I was born, I've always been involved in some church or another. I can remember a church from my pre-school years. It was a charismatic church. I remember this one specific day. I was probably about 4 years old and I was standing on front row with my eyes closed during worship and I was dancing and happy and loving every moment of it.

Only what I didn't realize (because my eyes were closed) was that I had danced all the way up to the front where I bumped into my pastor... who looked down at me and smiled in the middle of the music... and pointed back to my seat. I almost felt embarrassed, but somehow I didn't. Somehow his gracious smile was enough for me to know... it was OK... There was something beautiful happening.

Years later, I can remember being in a different church. It was a huge church we went to when I was in elementary school. And I remember this specific day in worship, sitting there trying to figure out what was so important going on that all these adults were so attentive to. And I remember very specifically, one Sunday, praying to myself, **"God help me to get it when I'm grown up too."**

I can remember being in a small Baptist church in high school. We didn't have a youth minister, but we had adults that loved us and taught us Sunday School, and took us on retreats... and helped us understand our faith. And challenged us to think deeper... and to live it out... and loved us, loved me. It was the safe place I really needed in the midst of all the pressures of the teenage years.

All those churches were given to me by somebody I probably never met... and yet... I know that someone... or a whole lot of someone's had enough sacred imagination to place their bets on a future they might never see. They were willing to bet that one day there will be little kids and teenagers there like me... and they were betting, that by creating those churches... it would change my life.

And you know what? ***They were right.***

\*\*\*\*\*

I know for sure that's why we're here today. Dayspring has a long history of people betting on hope, and dreaming about the impossible.

In 1884, our church moved **to the corner of Delmar and Spring Ave**, and changed our name from Garrison Ave to Delmar Baptist Church. We built a simple stone chapel with straight small iron chairs and an unheated baptistery. It's pictured on our *Generations* brochure.

At the time we thought we'd landed in a new home that would serve us for a long time. But a year or so later... a larger like-minded Baptist church moved into the neighborhood just around the corner... and to most Baptist in town, it didn't make sense to have two competing churches serving the same neighborhood. After all, that was the time when all churches were neighborhood churches... because everyone walked to church.

So, one winter evening, just a few years into our new building, several Baptist from around the city were gathered in the Women's Parlor at Delmar to decide what we should do... because we all know that's where the real decisions are made, right?

Well, it was obvious. There was a clear consensus. The other church could better serve that community. Delmar is just going to dwindle. And so, the decision was made. Delmar should disband.

Just then, another member of the church arrived. James McClellan walked into the room, heard what had been decided and asked to speak. **"A patient has to be dead before an inquest is held!"** he said. **"If anyone supposes Delmar is dead, they are very much mistaken and will soon find she is a very lively corpse!"**

He was risking his reputation, betting on the future, so that those around him... would learn to place their bets on the future too.

And they did. The congregation recognized his voice as God's voice to them, and decided to bet on the future.

Our church would move and build two more times to land at the corner of Sinker and Washington where we worshiped for over 70 years, for multiple generations.

Thanks to their willingness to cast their best on the future, decades of ministry, across the globe and into the homes of St. Louis continued.

Most of the people of Delmar from that time are long gone, but their legacy still lives with us,

a legacy of forward thinking and social justice,

a legacy of warmth and hospitality,

a legacy of deep generosity.

A legacy of betting on the future... betting on us... that our lives would be changed because of them.

\*\*\*\*\*

But even that wasn't meant to last. Nothing is. Some of you know the story better than I do. Eventually the facilities that once served us so well became more than we could manage. And we had to let them go. So we sold them to another congregation... unsure of what the future would hold.

We started meeting in another church's extra room for a few years... until it came time to decide what we should do. It was the 1990's. We were small. We didn't have a building. And it was clear to our pastor at the time, what needed to happen.

It was time to let go.

We should allow ourselves to gradually merge with our host church... until the unique ministry of Delmar was no more.

It wasn't a bad recommendation. In fact, it made a lot of sense. Some really good things could have come out of it. But there was a meeting, and in that meeting Bob Harmon stood up and said, **"That's not what we're going to do. Not on my watch."** It didn't make since, but Bob invited us to cast our bets on a future that seemed almost impossible.

You know, I don't know what he imagined in that moment. I doubt he imagined a vineyard like Jeremiah, but I wonder if he saw an orchard.

Maybe he never imagined farmland, but could he have pictured a community garden?

I don't know... but he saw something and decided to cast his bet on the future so that the rest of us would learn to live by that same kind of hope, ...so that the rest of us would **learn, to bet on the future too.**

And so the church at the time took the resources entrusted to them by the generations past... generations of people that most of us have never met. And they bought this old field with their money.

The people who actually paid for our church? Most of them have never stepped foot in this building... Most of them have never met you or me... and yet we are the embodiment of their hopes and dreams. Here we are because, even generations ago, they decided to bet on the future... just like Jeremiah did.

\*\*\*\*\*

Ernest Campbell, when he was pastor of Riverside Church in NYC, once said **"When we are young, we climb trees we did not plant, go to class in schools we did not pay for, and worship in churches we did not build. But if, by God's mercy, we become mature one day, we just might have the chance to plant a tree we will not climb, and pay for a school in which we will never take a class, and build a church in which we will never worship "**

By God's mercy, the generations before us, did just that. We are the embodiment of their hopes and dreams... And now it is our turn to dream for the sake of future generations.

That's what makes this moment so incredibly beautiful in the life of our church. It's our turn to go and buy the field,

...so that others will have the courage to hope in a future they cannot yet see,

...so that others will learn, ***to live the risky and beautiful and wondrous life of faith.***

To do that, I want to invite you to join me outside. We're going to gather around the outline of this hoped for addition because we're going to take some time to dream about what might be if we will cast our bets on the next generation.

Go ahead and get up where you are... and join me outside.