

Sunday, September 26, 2010: Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15; Amos 6:1a, 4-7; Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16; 1 Timothy 6:6-19; Luke 16:19-31

by [Kristin M. Swenson](#) in the [September 21, 2010](#) issue

I'm at that age where I need to start rethinking my investments. Do I keep high-risk investments that have a slim chance of going through the roof but could also tank, or do I go with the tried and true, slow and steady gain of Treasury bonds or CDs?

Security and risk are nothing new. Today's biblical texts deal not with stocks and bonds exactly, but with living in the real circumstances of a difficult and uncertain world while also accepting the possibility of good, of help and support, comfort and security. Jeremiah, for example, is anchored in the real and mundane world. The prophet tells of nations at war and of his decision to engage in a personal real estate transaction. We read about a powerful enemy attacking the capital city—and about a specific plot of land, with money exchanged and a deed drawn up.

Then, with the same matter-of-fact inflection, Jeremiah says: "I knew that this was the word of the Lord." How did he know? Was it because the instruction to buy that land made so little sense? After all, it was clear that the Babylonians would soon have control of Jerusalem and probably all of Judah. They had already taken some Israelites away to Babylon and would surely do the same again. Talk about a bad investment! Yet Jeremiah explains the extraordinary symbolism of this ordinary act: against all expectation, God has determined hope for the future, when "houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land."

Call me a pessimist or chalk it up to my dark Swedish heritage (*Girl with a Dragon Tattoo*, anyone?), but I've found that it's easier to trust the bad than the good. It's easier to assume that things will be hard than to believe that peace will come. Yet not only Jeremiah but others too declare that God wants good for us. In Psalm 91 we read, "Under his wings you will find refuge . . . with long life I will satisfy them." In Hebrews, the words "the Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid" remind us that God promises to deliver.

Make no mistake: this is no high-on-the-hog prosperity gospel message. On the contrary, these texts accept and even invite the possibly austere conditions of a no-

frills life. Several texts are explicit about abandoning efforts to increase material wealth and sharing what one has with those who have not. Amos dresses down the rich Israelites and warns that they "will be the first to go into exile." Jesus tells of reward for poor Lazarus and punishment for the rich man, and instructs his audience to assist the downtrodden. The author of Hebrews says, "Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have."

Enough. It's a word that gets very little attention these days. Knowing that one has enough, however, is liberating. John C. Bogle tells how Joseph Heller responded when someone pointed out that his billionaire party host made more money in a single day of hedge fund trading than Heller had ever earned from his book *Catch-22*. Heller replied: "Yes, but I have something that he will never have: enough."

To know that one has enough allows others to have the same possibility. When one can say to oneself, "I have enough," the noisy, grinding gears of endless acquisition come to a halt, and we're drawn deeper into life with all its wonder and pain and beauty. Saying "enough" also has environmental and social effects that ripple out in ways that we can only imagine.

When we know that with faith and trust in God we have enough, we make room and provide relief for those who are lacking basic necessities. Psalm 146 suggests that we'll be moved to joy, moved to praise. "Happy are those whose hope is in the Lord . . . He upholds the orphan and widow . . . Praise the Lord!" Yes, God will give us things, but God holds out something more to the faithful: the peace of knowing that we have enough. That knowledge makes us partners in God's work in the world.

Without the quiet power of enough, the notion that God will provide is superficially optimistic and impractical, even dangerous and devastating, as environmental degradation and the financial debacles show. It's tempting to interpret these texts to mean that God wants endless gain for us, that we don't need to consider the destructive consequences of endless acquisition or take responsibility for our own financial circumstances or debts. We tell ourselves that "God will repair the earth and take care of us, so let's go ahead and buy the toys, the bigger house . . . God will look out for the people who make our cheap trinkets. God will clean the air, the water. God will (get the bank to) forgive our debts."

It's easy to interpret these biblical texts in these ways, but such interpretation requires suspending any sense of personal responsibility. It is also a perverse

distortion of "God's care," as it comes on the backs of people who are paid unfair wages and who absorb the costs of others' debts.

Knowing that we have enough makes it easy to practice restraint and to pay what's right for decent work and the true price for what one consumes. I'm still working on my faith, and decisions about getting and spending are frequently murky. But every now and then I can taste the glimmer of joy, clarity and contented generosity that is God's gift of enough.