

Most people who heard shook their heads and thought that Walter had finally gone over the edge. "You did WHAT?" they asked.

Walter had never seemed the gullible sort. In fact, he was known for his good business sense, but now...

You know the phrase people say when someone is trying to sell them a bill of goods.... "...and if you believe that, I've got some prime real estate in Florida to sell you," referring to the crocodile-infested swamplands that are virtually undevelopable.

Well Walter--he had actually bought some of those swamplands from a shady land developer. And not just a couple of acres but—27,000! Everyone thought he had lost it!

However, Walter saw something that no one else could see. He had a vision for the future. When he looked at that expanse of God-forsaken real estate, he saw a place that would one day bring smiles to faces and joy to hearts. In fact, he could see the happiest place on earth—a place they would someday name after him--Walt Disney's World. (from the Disneydreamer.com site)

>I always think of Walt Disney when I read this morning's text because it's about another man who bought land at a time when people thought he was crazy, too.

The truth is, we probably would have thought that he was nuts if we had been around in 588 BCE.

At the time he bought the land, the prophet Jeremiah was in prison, put there because of his "treasonous" oracles. He had been telling the nation of Judah for quite some time that God was going to punish them for their sins. The leaders of the nation got tired of hearing his negativity, so they had him arrested.

About the same time, Babylon had invaded and surrounded Jerusalem. The destruction that Jeremiah had predicted was taking place right before their eyes. It was a situation of deepest gloom and doom. The people were rightly terrified, and everyone was wondering what the future would hold for them. They knew that the Babylonian army was not known for its kindness and mercy. They didn't know if anyone would be alive when these events played themselves out.

We can well imagine that with a mighty army outside the city gates, there probably weren't too many people investing in real estate. It's a bad time to buy land when you're not sure who is going to be in control of things next week. In the ancient world, conquering armies tended to ignore deeds of sale. If they conquered your country, they figured they owned the land. ("Buying Swamp Land for God," Robert P Hines on [esermons.com](http://esermons.com).)

>Though we don't have enemy armies immediately surrounding us, we can relate somewhat to the psychological state of the people of Israel. Our enemy of late has been more abstract—less tangible--greedy corporations which made bad decisions that had global implications.

Psychologically, we feared the worse—a virtual collapse of our economy that would lead to

soup lines,

homelessness,

an end to the lifestyle with which we've become accustomed.

This past year was not the time to buy land, or a new car, or anything new, for that matter. **This was the time to retreat into our psychological panic rooms.**

>You know what a panic room is, don't you? Jodie Foster starred in a movie about one a couple of years ago. They are usually interior, hidden rooms in a home that can be locked from the inside—a place to hide when danger is threatening.

I remember a friend of a friend of mine had one up in the mountains of Arizona at the end of the last century. He was just so sure that the world would come to a complete standstill when all the computers would shut down on January 1<sup>st</sup>,

2000. He was certain that all of our infrastructure (national and global) would go on the fritz when the computers that ran electricity, water supplies, air traffic control, virtually all of our life-sustaining systems—would shut down because they didn't know what to do with a year that didn't start with 19. So he had built a cabin in the woods and installed a panic room complete with enough food and water to last a year, bought shot guns to use to hunt and protect himself from the lawlessness he knew was coming, and prepared to say goodbye to the world as he had always known it.

I spoke with him for the last time the fall of 1999 at a retirement party for a mutual friend. He shared with me his plan for panic, for the devastation of the world that he was certain was going to happen. He spoke calmly, rationally, and after the party took off. I never saw him again after that. Perhaps he just liked being retired in the mountains. Perhaps he was embarrassed because he had over-reacted to the unknown.

There's a fine line between being prepared,  
and pushing the panic button too soon.

There's a fine line between using fear as a way to protect,  
and allowing fear to use and abuse us.

When we allow fear to control our lives, we leave ourselves vulnerable to succumb to evil's power. Fear seduces us to evil's darkness.

It was the fear of scarcity that led to a woman into betraying her trusting employers, friends of mine in Tucson, by stealing from them when her boss was debilitated by the onset of Alzheimer's. She succumbed to evil, and was caught. She is now facing a prison sentence—and the looks of confusion and betrayal from her husband and children and friends—much less her now former employers—are heartbreaking.

It was the fear of feeling different because he was partly Jewish that led partially to the paranoid obsession of Adolf Hitler to rid the world of Jews—who jumped whole body and soul into evil's dark ways. It is the perpetuation of those fears

that continues to disturb the minds of others like the man who attacked the Holocaust museum in D.C. last week.

It is the fear of isolation and rejection that led a pack of girls to attack another girl—no one wanting to say no because then the other might turn on her.

Think for a moment--what are the fears that try to seduce you in doing hurtful, evil things to yourself or others? That keep you hiding away from others. Let's spend a moment naming them to ourselves and to God.

What I have observed over the years is that fear seems to be contagious; that people can transmit fear just like we can share the swine flu with each other, and that fear can reach a pandemic level.

A whole community that lives in fear is a very dangerous thing. They tend to be reactive rather than proactive. They tend to nervously jump at anything out of the ordinary—including people.

That's why Jeremiah's act of buying land was such an important gesture for his community. It was a time when there was no hope in the city of Jerusalem. People weren't planning for their retirement. They weren't even planning for next week. No one knew if anyone would be alive then. To buy land, when you could not be sure if you would be alive next week, was the height of folly. They were hunkering down in the fear of their own self-induced panic room.

In spite of his people's contagion of fear, Jeremiah bought land. He saw a vision of the future when he bought that land—a future that promised home and their own rendition of the "happiest place on earth."

Though the immediate future was dark, it still belonged to God. Buying that land was Jeremiah's way of telling and showing the people to put their trust in God.

Jeremiah knew that the future of God's people does not depend on national security, or social security, or financial security.

Our future depends on God. And because the future belongs to God, there is always reason to hope.

The great Methodist missionary, Dr. E. Stanley Jones, once wrote:

“I am inwardly fashioned for faith, not for fear. Fear is not my native land; faith is. I am so made that worry and anxiety are sand in the machinery of life; faith is the oil. I live better by faith and confidence than by fear, doubt and anxiety. In anxiety and worry, my being is gasping for breath--this are not my native air. But in faith and confidence, I breathe freely--these are my native air. A John Hopkins University doctor says, ‘We do not know why it is that worriers die sooner than the non-worriers, but that is a fact.’ But I, who am simple of mind, think I know; We are inwardly constructed in nerve and tissue, brain cell and soul, for faith and not for fear. God made us that way. To live by worry is to live against reality.” [www.sermonillustrations.com/f/fear](http://www.sermonillustrations.com/f/fear).

Friends, it is faithful to fight fear. It is a part of following Christ that we must confront our fears—just as he confronted the cross--and to move into and beyond it. I know that none of us is Jesus—that many of us really struggle with our fears that sometimes debilitate and paralyze us.

But just as fear is contagious to communities—so is hope.

As disciples of Christ, we are called to fight fear with hope. We are called to step out in hope, to make decisions that are symbolic of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

We are called to greet the stranger when others run from them;

we are called to speak peace in a time of war

we are called to plant a tree after devastating fire;

we are called to hold the hand of a person whose body is riddled with disease.

It’s the little things that transmit hope—little things that shift the perception of an individual or change the course of the world.

One of my favorite stories is told of a woman whose job was to be a visiting teacher, assigned to tutor hospitalized children until they were well enough to go back to class.

On one particular occasion she was given a boy's name and room number and was told by his regular teacher "We're studying nouns and adverbs in his class now. I'd be grateful if you could help him with his homework so he doesn't fall behind the others."

It wasn't until the visiting teaching got outside the boys room that she realized it was located in the hospital's burn unit. No one had prepared her to find a young boy horribly burned and in great pain. She felt that she couldn't just turn and walk out, so she awkwardly stammered, "I'm the hospital teacher, and your teacher sent me to help you with nouns and adverbs."

The next morning a nurse on the burn unit asked her, "What did you do to that boy?"

Before she could finish a profusion of apologies, the nurse interrupted her. "You don't understand. We've been very worried about him, but ever since you were here yesterday, his whole attitude has changed. He's fighting back, responding to treatment.... It's as though he's decided to live."

The boy later explained that he had completely given up hope until he saw that teacher. It all changed when he came to a simple realization. With joyful tears he expressed it this way. "They wouldn't send a teacher to work on nouns and adverbs with a dying boy, would they?" (James L. Hewett. Illustrations Unlimited. Tyndale. 1988. pp. 292-293)

Little symbols of hope—from buying a field to teaching nouns and adverbs. That's what we are called to bring in the name of the one who gives us all hope—Jesus Christ.