

*This sermon is largely borrowed from Pastor Robin Fish of Shaped by the Cross Lutheran Church in Laurie, MO.*

Sixth Sunday of Easter; May 14, 2023

Jeremiah 29:11-14

“God Has Good Plans”

**For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans to give you peace, not disaster, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come to pray to me, and I will listen to you. When you seek me, you will find me, when will seek me with all your heart. I will let you find me, declares the LORD, and I will bring you back from exile. I will gather you from all the nations and from all the places where I have sent you as exiles, declares the LORD. I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.**

Graduations season is now upon us. If you are a Christian graduate, or buying a card for one, you are likely going to see the first verse of today’s First Lesson. In it God promises good plans for his people: **For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans to give you peace, not disaster, plans to give you hope and a future.** It is certainly a beautiful and divine promise to share with a young person heading into their next adventure. But we should also notice that the Holy Spirit directly connects those promises of good plans to prayer.

This morning is Rogate Sunday. That means it is prayer Sunday. In our Gospel today John tells us about the promises of Jesus that the Father will listen to our prayers, and that we have direct access to him because God the Father loves us Himself and wants to hear our prayers and answer them. Jesus tells his disciples this just before they head into a hard, seemingly desperate situation of having to see him arrested, tried, and crucified. His purpose: Don’t worry. The Father’s still got you. Because of what I do, you can always go to him in prayer.

The original audience for this message that the Spirit sends through the prophet Jeremiah were also living in desperate times. These were the last days of independence for the kingdom of Judah and its capital, Jerusalem. It was within months, probably, of the siege and destruction of Jerusalem. Things were economically hard. That meant, back then, not just that people were behind on their bills or had no vacation fund, but that there was a shortage of food. People were hungry. The political outlook was grim. Normal daily life was no longer normal. They had powerful enemies threatening them, and they were not merely looking at the loss of their jobs or a severe reduction in the value of their 401ks. They were facing the likely loss of life. In short, the people had every outward reason to ask where God had gone. Why had he abandoned his people, and what were they going to do?

Of course, most of the people of Jerusalem were probably not asking those questions. They had fallen into paganism and unbelief, and many of them were making their sacrifices and prayers to their idols. Others were hopeless and helpless. And to make matters worse, many of those living in Jerusalem could remember much better times: the so-called Silver Age when things were all-around good politically, economically, and militarily.

The normal situation for humankind appears to be something like that. We have brilliant but brief periods where everything is just wonderful, but they are stacked between periods in which we tend to feel troubled, challenged by circumstances, and frightened about what the future may hold. Like Israel at the time of Jeremiah, many people in our land have come sliding out of a time of economic prosperity and found ourselves in a time of frightening change: economic change, political change, social change, and personal change. Through Jeremiah, the Lord speaks the same message to us that He spoke to those who still trusted in God and would listen to His Word: God has plans - good plans - for us.

Listen: he says it plainly and directly, **For I know the plans that I have for you, declares the LORD, plans to give you peace, not disaster, plans to give you hope and a future.** Contained in those words is the implicit recognition that we might be doubting the goodness of the future. And God knows that we have sufficient causes for the temptation to believe that things are not going to go well for us. They had bigger reasons back then, but our reasons are our own; they are in our lives and coloring our world, and they are real - and real spooky. And God says, "I have plans for you. Not only do I have plans - clear and definite and I know precisely what they are, but they are plans for your welfare, and not for the calamity you may be expecting. These are plans to give you are hope and a future!"

From where we stand, we cannot always see how God could possibly have a good plan for our lives. "Of course," we may think, "he has plans for eternity, but what about right now?! What sort of plans does He have for this life and this moment?"

The answer is, I don't know. God in his wisdom has not chosen to share the details of his plans with me. But you'll notice, he didn't give specifics to Jeremiah either. Jeremiah knew that those plans led through the valley of earthly troubles and sorrows, and, for many, death. But the promise was not spoken to the unbelievers among Israel, and it is not aimed at the unbelievers today. Besides, the question we ask - What about now? - is the wrong question to start off with. It assumes that eternal life and blessedness is either illusory or insignificant compared to the urgency of the present!

That attitude is easy to arrive at, but it is dead wrong. It is backwards. How can the next moment be more important and more urgent than everything else that will follow it? It is like saying, as long as I feel okay right now, it will never matter how I feel in twenty minutes, or tomorrow. The plans God has include today and tomorrow, but the focus is on the plans for everlasting life. This life is now, it is real, and it can be very good, but it has a distinct end. What future can God have in mind for us if this life of seventy, or eighty, or maybe ninety years is all that there is?

The future God has planned for us is spelled out for us in the gospel. This life is to be lived and enjoyed as far as we are able, that is for sure, but it is not the future that Jeremiah spoke about. The future God has planned for those who listen and believe is a future beyond death, where there is no pain, no sickness, no suffering, no sorrow, and no more dying. It is that life to which Jesus invites us, and for which he died that we might live. The plans of God that Jeremiah spoke about came to fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

The people of Israel were afraid that not only might they die (because they knew that everyone dies) but they were afraid for the future of their families and for their nation. A mark of the degeneracy of our age is that so few people today think beyond themselves. Back then, the future of their families and of their nation was an overriding concern. The plan of God for them included that earthly future too. They were the people who would carry forward the Word of God and the promises. They would be the nation that produced the Messiah in the flesh.

God had a plan for them, and for their lives. His plan was for a prosperity of their posterity, a reason for their lives in the here and now, and a plan for their salvation as well. He has that same plan of salvation for us. Jesus has already died for our sins, and been raised to new and eternal life. So we can see the outlines of this plan with greater detail than they could, but it is the same plan. His plan is to bring all that believe to eternal life and glory.

He also has a plan for your life here and now. I cannot preach about it in any detail because each of us may have entirely different plans, as far as this world is concerned. But the plan is for us to live our lives as his believing children. We are to show the world what true faith is, and who God is, and what he has done for us and what it means to us. When people see the reflection of God in us and in our lives, they will come seeking the difference, and then we can also share with them the meaning of Christ for their lives in eternity. But they need to see and hear Christ in you, here and now. This is the biggest reason that the here and now is so impressive to us who know about the gift of eternal life: here and now there are people who don't have a share in God's eternal plan, because they don't trust his promise in Christ.

They need to see Christ in you. They need to see the faith, the hope, the confidence in God for this life and for everlasting life. Sometimes we show that by how we set our priorities. Sometimes it can be seen

in how we face adversities. Occasionally, people see our Lord reflected in how we handle the good times of life, too. It shows in humility and good cheer and the forgiveness of sins and the knowledge of the love of God. The words we use and the way we judge or do not judge others tells a lot about our faith and hope.

Jesus told the disciples that God's plans included their prayers. Jeremiah tells the Lord's people the same: **Then you will call on me and come to pray to me, and I will listen to you. When you seek me, you will find me, when you will seek me with all your heart.** His plans include you talking to him, seeking him in times of trouble and need, pouring out your heart to him, and finding that he is there, listening, answering. The best part of his plan is that you find him, you know him, and you talk with him.

A curious Catechism student once asked me: If God has his plans, what difference can prayer make? Because it seemed the question was coming from innocent curiosity and not skepticism, I tamped down my anger and tried to respond kindly: It can make a difference because God says it does. It makes a difference because God's plans include the prayers of his people.

Of course, this "seeking the Lord with all your heart" can only be done by believers, so your faith and salvation are central to his good plans for you to pray. On this Prayer Sunday, you can see how this fits the theme of the day. God promises us that we will call and he will listen. That doesn't sound like much until you consider that the meaning of "listen" means to listen with a sympathetic ear and to answer in a helpful way! In the Gospel today Jesus tells the disciples they will be able to go straight to the Father in prayer. The Old Testament people did not know that right. They could do it, and God would listen and answer, but it was all connected to the sacrifices and prayers of the priests.

I used to wonder about that. How was it that it worked so differently back then? Prayer was connected to the sacrifices so that the people could connect their prayers and the answers to the promises, which were visible in the sacrifices made by priests at the temple.

Today, we don't have to go to the temple to pray because we are the temple. The Holy Spirit dwells in us. And our prayers don't depend on priests' sacrifices of animals, because our Passover Lamb, Jesus, has been sacrificed once for all. So when we pray, our prayers are connected to Jesus. We know that God loves us and will answer our prayers because of what Jesus did - and because of what Jesus says, in our Gospel today. We have those promises. And so God wants us to take for granted that his answer will be for our best. He told those in Judah, who were facing generations of exile: **...and I will bring you back from your exile. I will gather you from all the nations and from all the places where I have sent you as exiles, declares the LORD. I will bring you back from the places from which I sent you into exile.**

For Jeremiah and the people of his day, this was probably understood as pointing to a future day when God would gather his chosen ones back together to live in the peace and prosperity of which they could only dream. It sounds like Jeremiah was talking about the Babylonian Captivity, spoken before anyone went into exile.

But we can also understand Jeremiah's words more broadly as being directed at all of God's people who live as exiles in this world, whose true home is heaven's Promised Land, won and opened for them by Jesus' perfect life and his death on the cross. Jeremiah is also talking about that great rescue to come. The Lord exiled Adam and Eve from the glory and perfection of the Garden, as well the glory and perfection of God's presence. We were exiled in sin, and the world was corrupted. The good plans of God are to end that exile and bring us home to glory. It won't seem like a return for us, because we have never personally known the perfection or the full glory of God. But it will be a return to what God originally intended, to a life of full communion with him. It will be glorious. **I know the plans that I have for you, declares the LORD, plans to give you peace, not disaster, plans to give you hope and future.** And on that day, we will fully and perfectly recognize that the plans of God for us are good plans. Amen.