

Sermon for November 15, 2020
“God’s Economy, Part Four: Future Returns”
Thirty-third Sunday in OT, Year A—Text: Jeremiah 29:4-14

Three boys were talking about their dads and what they did for a living. The first boy says, “My dad writes a few things on a piece of paper, calls it a poem and they give him 50 bucks.” The second boy says, “My Dad writes a few things on a piece of paper, calls it a song and they give him a 100 bucks.” The third boy says, “My Dad writes a few things on a piece of paper, calls it a sermon and it takes eight people to collect all the money.”

Over the course of the last month or so we’ve been talking about Stewardship, with a particular emphasis on the future. Our “theme” for this year’s stewardship program, God’s Plan, Our Future, Our Hope, comes from this morning’s reading from Jeremiah—a portion of which we read five weeks ago when we opened Stewardship season.

We continued the following week with a reading from a few chapters later, where the prophet buys a field from his cousin while the country was under siege. The context of these readings from Jeremiah provides for us an interesting setting, in which to speak about giving and stewardship.

Israel is in exile. It’s been conquered by the Babylonians. Jerusalem—including the temple—is utterly destroyed and the people are deported into Babylon. It’s a fearful, uncertain time for the people of Israel, with a clear sense that their future as a nation is over. But God tells them, through the prophet Jeremiah, when they arrive in Babylon, to build houses, plant gardens and raise families because they’re going to be there for a while—seventy years, to be exact.

And then God tells these people—the chosen people—in a strange land, far from home and uncertain about the future not to worry because He is in control. “‘For surely I know the plans I have for you,’ says the Lord. “‘Plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.’”

“I know the plans I have for you,” He says. How about that? God has plans for us! But we’ve heard this before—haven’t we? I wonder then—what would happen to us if we who worry so much about the future allowed that promise to saturate into every part of our lives—including our finances? How might happen if we approached decisions about stewardship and giving with that promise at the heart and center of those decisions?

In the midst of our fear, over whether we’ll have enough...

In the midst of our fear of letting go...

In the midst of our fear of whether or not we should get involved...

In the midst of the uncertainty in all our lives and that of the church...

Into all that—God speaks a word to us.

“I know the plans I have for you.”

God has a plan for you, me—and for Westwood First. God knows what that plan is or our welfare and not for harm, to give us a future with hope. I like the sound of that. Granted, it may sound a bit vague, but remember this is God we're talking about. And when God says, "I have a plan for you..." that's a promise. You can take that to the bank. And if God says it's for our welfare and not our harm, you can bet that it'll be better than we can imagine.

Question is—do we believe this?

Do we truly believe that God has a plan for us, plans for our welfare and not for harm, to give us a future with hope? Do you believe that God has a plan for Westwood First? I—for one—do. I believe it. I do and what's more, I can do so without knowing the details of what lies ahead.

What about the rest of us? Do we really need to know what the future holds to begin to live into that future? I hope not. I'd like to think that we trust God to have our best interest at heart. Hasn't God done so in the past? If your answer is no—I'd say look again. I say that because faith—in many respects—is a matter of perspective. It's also—most of the time—a matter of choice and not just because physical proof is hard to find.

So what will we choose with respect to our faith?

Will we choose to step out in faith? Will we listen for God as we go about the task of discerning God's plan for our lives? Will we do so as we consider how we will give of ourselves—our time, talents and treasure—in the coming year?

For the better part of the last month I've been talking about the future. God's future. God's future specifically as it relates to **our** future. I'm not asking you to necessarily trust me or church leadership—at least not entirely. I'm asking you to trust in God. God—and God alone—is our hope. Trusting in God is what we are called to do.

Now—if I stopped here—that'd be a pretty good stewardship sermon. And I'd be willing to bet that many of you would agree that it was straight and to the point—though probably not original. It'd certainly be a short stewardship sermon, exactly 761 words, not counting the 95 in the joke at the beginning—which is probably why people would say it was good. The only problem is—as I understand the text and what I believe I'm called to preach on it—there's so much more to it.

Part of the problem with the reading is that it's largely misinterpreted and not entirely what God wants us to learn from it. Nevertheless the lesson it teaches IS about stewardship as a comprehensive way of living.

Another part of the problem is that we often approach our reading as a security blanket—words of comfort. God has a plan for me that's good, so clearly this suffering I'm going through will end soon so that we can pop the champagne and get the party started! But that's not at all what God was promising the Israelites and it's not what he's promising us either. One scholar addresses this. As she explains—the heart of the verse is not that "we would escape our lot, but that we would learn to thrive in the **midst** of it."

I've already talked about the context. The Exile had begun, things were pretty bad. The future of the Israelites was very much in doubt. False prophets preached false hope. Jeremiah preached real hope, but also much more, and here's where we begin to delve a little deeper. He (Jeremiah) told the people that their only true hope was to repent—to return wholeheartedly to God.

In the previous chapter—chapter 28—Jeremiah confronts the false prophet Hananiah, who'd boldly proclaimed that God was going to free Israel in two years. Which—of course—doesn't happen. So, Jeremiah calls out Hananiah's lie and then states the promise we know so well. Sounds good, right? Sure—but before Jeremiah shares this promise, he gives them this directive from God: “Seek the peace and the prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.” Wait—what?!?!

This is not at all what the Israelites wanted to hear! Oh no—they wanted to be told that they were going home. They wanted to be told that their suffering was coming to an end. Instead, God's “plan” was for them to stay right where they were and to help prosper the nation that enslaved them! And then came the biggest blow of all. In verse ten, there God says that he would fulfill this, “...after seventy years are completed in Babylon.” Seventy years!!! This meant that the current generation of Israelites would never return to their home—the Promised Land. What a crushing thing to be told!

So what are we to make of this? Yes, of course we know that God has plans for us—for a glorious future. Most of us have read the Bible and we have it on good authority—sometimes taking it for granted—that things will turn out okay. Our readings from Revelation a few weeks ago made that point eloquently! The problem is that we want it **now**! However—as I've said a few times before—God is more concerned with our character than our comfort. I've also said that things like pain and adversity have the potential to teach us, often by offering perspective—something I mentioned earlier.

I'm wondering how many of you remember the sermon that I gave on March 22, the Sunday we first began worshipping virtually, back in the earlier days of COVID. We talked about life having both a foreground and a background. The foreground are the things that we can see. The background are the invisible spiritual reality. They're distinct—but not separate.

Problems occur when all we focus on is the foreground—like the pandemic; like the recent election results; like dwindling attendance and giving; like potential budget shortfalls; like the possibility of a school renting space in our largely underused building—and lose sight of the divine eternal background that's meant to put everything into proper perspective. I get it—it's easy enough to do. But I said back then and I say it again now: God is breaking quarantine. Wherever God is needed—God is there. God is in control—our ever-present help in time of need. Now—as always. This is the background. This is what Jesus calls us to remember.

These are anxious times—I get that. It’s easy to write the future off and say that we’ve had a pretty good run, if only because it allows us to feel better—now. It’s easy to say that we’d prefer to wait and see how things play out in the coming year. And so I’ll also say again that our anxieties reveal our priorities. We get anxious about the things in which we should put our hope. That’s why Jesus says, “...where your treasure is your heart will be also.” In other words, what you’re hoping in—what you’re investing in—that’s what’s going to have a vise grip on your heart.

But Jesus was—and still is—about breaking the grip of anxiety and fear. Jesus offers a new perspective—a better way to live. It was—at least in part—why he was born. He was the ultimate fulfillment of the promise that God made with those in Exile. But God never deserted the Israelites and gave them a way to live through the mess in which they found themselves—which was largely their own fault.

Our hope in the future is meant to free us in the here and now. You cannot separate the two. You cannot separate the hope of eternal life in God’s kingdom from living hopeful lives now, in anticipation of that future. You just can’t! If hope in the future doesn’t change the way you live in the here and now—how hopeful are you? And in what are you placing your hope? The earliest Christians understood this and they took these words to heart. Do we? In all honesty—there are times when I wonder.

I say that because in many ways—we’re like the ancient Israelites. One way is the way we’re complicit in bringing about the situation in which we find ourselves. How often have we resisted change, for the sake of doing things the way we’ve always done them, thereby missing out on what God might’ve had planned? How often have we insisted on trying to figure things out for ourselves believing that taking the time to discern God’s will was a waste of time? How many times have we taken certain things—like having enough money, enough volunteers, enough members—for granted?

I don’t mean for this to sound like a guilt trip—I really don’t. But I been at this long enough to know and I’ve said more than a few times, that things in churches don’t just happen and they don’t just happen overnight. It takes years—decades even. Then one day we look around and wonder what the heck happened? Where’d everybody go? Where’d all our—I’ll let you fill in the blank—go?

Maybe we weren’t paying attention. Maybe it’s time we started. Will things look different? Will they BE different? Folks—they already are! But I don’t think that’s a bad thing. I don’t think change is necessarily a bad thing. And hey, I like a nice comfortable routine as much as anyone. But I really don’t think that we can ignore what’s happening around us and live with our heads in the sand anymore.

If I’ve learned anything—it’s this: The will of God will never take you beyond where the grace of God will sustain you.

And here—brothers and sisters—is the thing. We have lots of reasons to trust God and more than enough reasons to be hopeful about the future of the church. But we have to realize that a good bit of this is squarely on us—and what we do now! I keep saying that things don't just happen, so it's going to take our combined time, talents and treasure—all given to us by God—working together towards the future: Our future—God's future—to help make God's plans for us a reality.

Right now it may feel like we're in exile. That's understandable. But we have God on our side. And God's promise is as much to us as it has been with God's people throughout history. But just as the Israelites and the Church through the years had things they needed to do—things they needed to come to grips with, things they needed to change—so do we.

Thanks be to God. Amen and amen.