

“What Is the Plan?”

Valley Presbyterian Church – July 30, 2023

9th Sunday after Pentecost Rev. Dr. John Wahl Jeremiah 29:1, 4-14

We have come, finally, to the end of our Bumper Sticker Faith series: today's message is “All Part of God's Plan.” Throughout this series, we have been exploring the wisdom and folly expressed in these messages about what we (or others) say we believe. All the while, we have been asking whether the messages – when applied – are true (faithful to the message of scripture) and useful (rather than insensitive or even harmful).

To date, we have encountered several scripture passages that seem to suggest that all things are, indeed, part of God's plan. Ecclesiastes 3:1 says, “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.” Romans 8:28 reads, “We know all that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose,” Today, we come to Jeremiah 29:11, which says, “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.”

In the midst of chaos, uncertainty, or loss, it can be reassuring to know that God has a plan for us; a plan for welfare and not harm. In trying seasons, we long to believe that God can work all things together for good, that we will be given a future with hope.

Still, as last Sunday's tale about Job and Dusty's personal story this morning illustrate, the questions of how and how long remain. Yes, God might ultimately have plans for each of us, but when will they be revealed; and what about all we might have to endure in the meantime?

The setting of Jeremiah 29 is the capture and destruction of the city of Jerusalem by the Babylonian army and a series of deportations in the 6th century BCE. The exile of Judeans into Babylon did not happen all at once, but in waves and phases, which is why the king and queen – along with various court officials, merchants, and artisans – were forcibly migrated to Babylon while Jeremiah and others remained, for the time being, in Jerusalem.

This letter reflects a traumatized community who has lost everything: their homes and loved ones, their beloved city of Jerusalem, their culture, language, and traditions. The underlying question addressed by Jeremiah is one that may also live in many other uprooted individuals and communities: how does one go on after such devastation?

The prophetic word in the letter encourages the community in exile not to linger waiting for deliverance back to Jerusalem in the near future or abandon themselves to despair. Instead, they are called to build, plant, marry, have children, and make contributions to the city in which they currently live, rather than pining for their now-distant homeland.

The fact that there is reference to children and children's weddings suggests that the people of Judah will be in Babylon for the long haul. The exiles are encouraged by Jeremiah to make the best of their current situation; to build a life. They are advised to actively work for the peace and well-being of their newly adopted city – even praying to God for their enemies to prosper. For, if the city prospers, it might just go well with them, too.

Uprooted from the familiarity of home, in a place 900 miles away, in a land whose food, language, and customs they neither knew nor desired to learn, these exiles would likely have been appalled to learn from Jeremiah that blessing would come in the form of adjusting to, rather than escaping from, their present situation. Perplexed, they may have wondered, *Aren't we God's chosen people? This is not supposed to happen to us!*¹

Jeremiah brought an important message – both for the people of Judah and for people living today. He taught the spiritual disciplines of patience, endurance, and acceptance. He warned against those who deceptively promised a quick end to the exile. He told the people that they would remain in this place of defeat and humiliation, but to pray for the welfare of their captors, and to maintain their identity and connection to the Lord by persevering through a painful situation. In the midst of difficult circumstances, sometimes the call of God is to dig in and find ways to thrive rather than waiting idly for the situation to change.

That was then, we might think, but what about now? What are we to do in this season of pandemics, climate devastation, and global migration? How should

¹ Alphonetta Wines from *WorkingPreacher.com*

we react when faced with the obstacles of personal illness, uncertainty, or loss? Many of us encounter situations that cannot be changed, no matter how much we might want things to be different. The question, then, is how one – amidst such difficult situations – can live the best possible life; what daily practices will make life meaningful; how can one manage to find peace and joy in less-than-perfect circumstances?

As Christians, we are called to seek and follow the will of God. Yet, knowing the will of God is not always easy. Sometimes, choices are simple because the options are clear-cut. At other times, there are baffling perplexities and paralyzing ambiguities. A part of God's will is that we are given free will; the ability to each choose our own paths in alignment with God's purposes for our lives.

Our Presbyterian tradition teaches us to seek God's guidance for our decisions through the two primary means by which God communicates with us: prayer and scripture. Relatedly, we share our struggles about the will of God with the community of faith. God's Spirit is active in the Body of Christ and the insights of other Christians (past and present) are helpful in leading us to understand what God might be telling us to be or do in our circumstances. One blessing of being part of the fellowship of faith is to gain from the experiences and perspectives shared by other church members.

More specifically, we should recognize that God's will is focused most clearly for us in the person and message of Jesus Christ. Many of us grew up learning to ask, "What would Jesus do?" But our questions and struggles should lead us instead to ask, "What would Jesus have me do?" *Does what I want to do align with what Jesus taught? Is this action consistent with the values that Jesus embodied in his life?*²

We pose these questions and make our decisions in faith. We trust God to guide us, even if an individual decision does not turn out to be the best choice it could have been. We trust in God's continuing love, believing that God's plans for us ultimately are for good, pointing to our welfare and not to harm.

And yet, a word of caution. For, as much as we may or may not believe that our personal circumstances are aligned with God's will, we also believe that others possess the same right. What might be comforting to us could be disturbing to someone else. Advocating the spiritual disciplines of patience, endurance, and

² Donald McKim, *Presbyterian Questions, Presbyterian Answers: Exploring Christian Faith*

acceptance can be appropriate and useful for some, but insensitive or even harmful for others.

For, as was said, sometimes understanding God's will – what Jesus would have us do – is straightforward; but at other times, it can be a struggle. When we tell someone, even with the best intentions, that their personal circumstances are “All Part of God's Plan,” we discount their right to discern – through prayer, scripture, and the community of faith – their own decisions.

Bumper Sticker Faith messages – like the placards we adhere to the backs of our cars – are often one-size-fits-all. What may be true and helpful for us might not resonate with or help someone else. It is important for Christians to remember that faith for Jesus, and in Jesus, is not meant to be uniform: what it is for us may not be what it is or should be for anyone else.

We are each uniquely created in God's image, meaning that our life journeys will all be different. Thanks be that, as our final hymn affirms, God will “meet us on the road” with plans that – though they may, today, be mysterious – are for good. Amen.