

St. Paul's Ev. Lutheran Church—Muskego, WI
Sermon for July 8-10, 2006—Treasured Portions of Scripture
Text: Jeremiah 29:11

Theme: God's Plans Are Always Best

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future” (Jeremiah 29:11).

You're happily married with three children. You love them, but they're about all you can handle. You have no intentions on having any more. One day, you come home from work and your wife says “Guess what? I just got back from the doctor. I'm pregnant...with twins! Isn't this a blessing?” Your response? “Honey, I think I need to sit down.” God's plans are not always easy to accept. But God's plans are always BEST.

Or maybe you have a job that you really enjoy. A job that you're good at. But one day, the boss says, “John, we need to make some changes. We're going to have to let you go.” And you go home saying, “Lord, what is happening? I thought I was where you wanted me to be! I thought I was doing what you wanted me to do!” God's plans are not always easy to understand. But God's plans are always BEST.

Or perhaps someone you love is fighting cancer. You were counting on God to come through for your family just like he always has. You were counting on a miracle! But this morning, the doctor called back with the test results you didn't want to hear. God's plans are sometimes painful. But God's plans are always BEST.

“I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD. In theory it sounds great, right? God's plans are always best. And it is great ***UNTIL*** God's plans turns out to be different than our plans.

That was definitely the case for God's people in Jeremiah 29. It's around 600 BC. God is judging the nation of Judah because of their persistent unfaithfulness to him. The Babylonians have attacked Jerusalem. They've taken 3000 prisoners back to Babylon. Including the king, the court officials, and the craftsmen. And the Jews are saying “This isn't supposed to happen to us! We're the chosen people! We're the apple of God's eye! What is going on?”

The Jewish people have a beautiful history of God coming through for them in times of crisis. In Exodus chapter 3:7, the Lord told Moses: ***“I have seen the misery of my people. I am concerned about their suffering at the hands of the Egyptians. So I'm going to bring them out of the land of Egypt.”***

And that's exactly what God did. Think of all the powerful plagues God brought on Egypt, how he brought them through the Red Sea. Forty years later, under Joshua, the Lord brought the Israelites into the Promised Land. God's plan was accomplished in the lives of his people and they loved it!

Later in their history, when the Assyrian army invaded the land of Judah, the people were frightened. The commander of the Assyrian army said, ***“No one can deliver you out of the hand of the King of Assyria. Surrender to us now, and we will let you live!”***

But Hezekiah prayed to the Lord. And that very night, an angel of the Lord went out and put to death 185,000 soldiers in the Assyrian camp. The almighty God had come through once again and God's people loved it!

And so as the captives from Judah and Jerusalem arrive in Babylon in 597 BC, they're thinking, ***“This isn't going to last long. God is going to come through for us like he always does!”*** The false prophet, feel-good preacher, Hananiah prophesied in Jeremiah 28: ***“In two years God will break the yoke of the king of Babylon and we'll be free! We'll be home soon. Praise God!”***

But God directed Jeremiah to write a letter to the captives in Babylon which said, *“You’re not coming home—not for quite a while. Build houses and settle down. Plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters. Be fruitful and multiply. It’s going to be seventy years before I bring you home.”*

Seventy years? God, you’ve got to be crazy! In seventy years most of us will be dead! Many of us will never see our homes again!

It’s tough, isn’t it—that moment we come to the realization that God’s plans are not at all what we planned for. There’s a part of us that wants to get really angry. What do you think you’re doing God? You’re turning my plans for my life upside down! I thought you wanted me to be happy. “Ask and you shall receive,” you say. Well, I’m asking you to abandon these crazy plans of yours and let me have my life my way!

Thank God that he is gracious and doesn’t give us everything we ask for.

When God had his people hauled off to Babylon, they were a people in trouble. They had had it so good for so long they had forgotten just how much they needed God. They had begun to make all sorts of compromises in their lives. Little Benjamin’s fallen in love with an idol worshipper. Oh well, as long as their happy. Little Rachel doesn’t want to go up to the temple anymore. Well, I guess it’s her life. We want to build that new summer home on the Sea of Galilee. We’ll have to cut back our financial support of the temple.

God looked down from heaven and he was terrified. You heard right. God was terrified. His people were on the verge of turning away from him completely. He was about to loose them. He just couldn’t let that happen. He loved them too much. So he set out to get their attention. He shook up their plans—just like at time of the Flood and the Tower of Babel.

My friends, when God suddenly shakes up your plans, it might be good to ask yourself: Is God shaking up my life because it needs a little shake-up? And if he is, are you going to heed God’s call to turn back to him or are you going to just get mad and push the Lord further away?

“For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” There’s certainly another reason why God may choose to shake up our plans. It may be that his incredible love for us wants what’s best for us and he knows better than us what that is.

Think about it. When you tune in the radio on the way home from work and the people in the traffic helicopter tell you to avoid the 894 bypass because there’s been a huge accident, do you think to yourself, *“Those guys don’t know what they’re talking about! My plan is the take the bypass and I’m sticking to it.”* That’s what we’re doing when we balk at God’s plans.

God has got the ultimate bird’s eye view of our lives. He can see the whole thing from beginning to end. So, why wouldn’t we trust him to know the best way to direct us through life?

Let me share a story to help illustrate. There once was an old man who was very poor. In an attempt to take care of his family, he pooled all his money and bought a horse. The people in town thought that this was a foolish thing to do because “things happen to horses.”

Sure enough, a few days later, the horse was missing. The town’s people came to the poor old man and said: “Oh what a tragedy!” But the old man was very wise and replied, “We don’t know yet if this is going to be a tragedy or a blessing.”

A few days later, the horse returned, and trailing behind him was a herd of 15 wild mustangs. Again, the town’s people came back to the old man and said, “You were right! This was a blessing and not a tragedy.”

But, again, the old man answered, “Well, we really don’t know yet if this is a blessing or a tragedy.”

A few days later, his only son was breaking in one of the wild mustangs when he was thrown. While lying on the ground, the horse trampled him and shattered his leg. The town’s people returned, saying: “It’s true, what a tragedy! Your only son is now crippled for life!”

But this happened right before the war started. All the other young men from the town were called away...and none returned.

We don't know what tomorrow holds. But God does. He sees the beginning of your life. He sees the end of your life. And he sees everything in between. Psalm 139:16 says ***"All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be."*** God knows what is best for you.

Jeremiah says that ***"God has plans to prosper you and not to harm you."*** Some might think that means everyone in church ought to win the Powerball jackpot. But I think Jeremiah is simply talking about enjoying the everyday blessings of God—the one's we in an affluent country take for granted—a place to live, food to eat, families to love, and communities to pray for. All of these things are a sign that we are experiencing God's plans to prosper us and not to harm us.

But God's plans to prosper us go far beyond his world. God has ***"plans to give us a hope and a future."*** For the Jewish people, that meant going BACK to the Promised Land. For us, it means going UP to the Promised Land.

As believers in Jesus Christ, we have a hope and a future that goes far beyond the parameters of this life. We look forward to an eternity with God himself. We have the hope that he who began a good work in us will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. We have the hope when God is finished with the work he's doing in our lives, we will reign with Christ forever!

In fact, the whole book of Jeremiah, the whole Bible, all of history is HIS story, the story of God's plans to give us hope and a future in heaven. In the first 25 chapters of Jeremiah, God says over and over again, ***"I am going to judge the nation of Judah because they have forsaken the Lord, the spring of living water."*** Judah was the nation through which the promised Savior would come. Where would we be if the Lord hadn't stepped in and preserved the faith our Savior's great-great grandparents?

In Jeremiah chapter 30:3, God says ***"The days are coming, when I will bring my people Israel and Judah back from captivity and restore them to the land I gave their forefathers to possess," says the LORD.*** Fifty years later, the Medes and the Persians conquered the kingdom of Babylon. And the Jews were allowed to go back home. God was setting the stage for Jesus' birth in Bethlehem.

In Jeremiah 31:31, the Lord says ***"I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah...For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."***

630 years after the exile, God ratified this new covenant when he sent Jesus Christ to die on the cross for our sins. And because of what Jesus Christ did for us on that cross, we all have an opportunity to know the Lord for ourselves. We have forgiveness and peace with God! Finally, all of God's plans ultimately seek to bring everyone in this world to heaven. God's plans are always BEST!

And now, because we, by God's grace, know and believe God's plans are always best, instead of fighting God's will and God's plan for our lives, we as God's children pray that God will give us the strength of faith to follow our Savior's lead, and, wherever God's plans may lead us, joyfully say, "Lord, not my will, but yours be done."

With that in mind our morning prayers might sound something like this: "Lord, you've already seen the day that lies ahead of me. You know every interruption I'm going to face, every cranky person in the office, every flat tire, every traffic jam, and every moment of frustration. You've already worked out how you're going to work good through them. Please give me the strength of faith to see and believe that. Lord, help me trust you!" Amen.

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