

“A Future with Hope”

Jeremiah 29:10-14

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These words from the prophet Jeremiah have been of particular comfort to many people during uncertain times. I return to them today because I sense within my own spiritual life and perhaps within some of yours as well the need to hear them once again.

And I know they are favorite words of Melissa. They were given as a blessing to the Fletchers when they left Raleigh a few years ago, and we bless your family with them today as we send you off to your new home in Illinois.

These ancient words in Jeremiah were very likely written down while the Jewish people lived in exile in Babylon between 586 and 539 BCE. It was an exile lasting about 48 years. They were taken into exile because in ancient times human beings were too valuable to kill off in warfare; instead of killing the enemy, they overpowered them and took them home with them to become a captive work force and to help build up their economy.

People in exile are brokenhearted people. For the Jews they were forced to leave behind their temple and their promised land, things most important to them. It was as though they were yanked up by their roots and placed down in a place without the very things that made them who they were.

And yet in Babylon, in exile, the Jews get in touch with the essence of their faith, and their religious life is transformed and focused around synagogues (not the temple) and around the written word of scripture (not their oral traditions). It was in exile that their family history of faith and their scripture, the Torah, are compiled, organized, and recorded--lest they forget where they came from and the God who had journeyed with them through the centuries.

And ever since this exile the Jewish people have had their scriptures to take with them no matter where they were dispersed throughout the world.

Though I have loved this verse, I've had some trouble with the word “plans”, as in “I know the *plans* I have for you.” Does this imply that God pulls our strings as though we are puppets? Does God plan specific events to take place and then sit back and watch? If so, I have a few things to say to God about that. I asked Tom to look up the Hebrew.

The Hebrew word translated “plans” when used as a noun means: **plan and also idea, thought, intention, design, invention**. When it's used as a verb, it comes from the root of the word “to think” and can't be easily translated but **plan, consider, intend, think out, and reckon** are as close as we can get. So *plans* is definitely a viable translation, but these other words, equally viable, seem to give a depth to the word's meaning that goes beyond simply God dictating a specific thing to happen be it good or bad -- **consider, intend, think out, reckon, design, and idea**. You see, my understanding of God is that divine presence in the world in which all possibilities for the best possible good are held. Situations sometimes limit the best possible good so that they are not what we would like them to be. Yet, **design, intention, consider** are broad enough to include possibilities offered and participation on our part to create something beautiful.

A week ago Melissa shared with me some words of reflection on her family's time in California. And I have her permission to share some of her words with you this morning. She begins by quoting our text today and then, she writes:

These are comforting words and they were to some extent when our family was being moved from our beloved Raleigh community. Twenty years of history is a lot to say goodbye to.

The satisfaction of a job in your field waiting for you weeks after the sweet harvest of College graduation, the purchase of a first car, a house; meeting the love of your life and marrying him; receiving the blessing

of two children and all the memories of college friends, neighborhood friends and, best of all, church family is a lot to say goodbye too. Knowing that old adage “you can never go back” bumping around in the corner of your mind.

Then the job offer came, an internal promotion. Yes there was some more money and a new job description, but that wasn't the half of it. It required a move all the way across the country to a place called Los Angeles. And when you are living in the South East, you do not think of San Dimas / La Verne / Claremont when you think of Los Angeles. We did research as best we could on line. Real estate was out of sight as was the cost of living. We ran the numbers to see what our budget would look like and it wasn't pretty.

No matter how we looked at it, it appeared that our standard of living would go down by taking this promotion, but who passes up a promotion? To further the pressure, sensing we might not accept this offer, Stewart was told by an owner of the company “you need to take this position.” What does this mean? Where was God's voice? Was this “God's Plan” to move? Or were the tears, angst and panic attacks God's way of God telling us this was not his plan?

Quite obviously we came. We went from being connected to an area to feeling like an outsider in a community. We went from a home owner to renter. We went from being a long time member of a church community to church visitor. We went from putting money in savings every month to making ends meet every month.

Now we are being moved again, to a position and place of more stability ~ meaning we are to stay for a much long period of time. This offers a place to pause and reflect on the time our family has coined as our “California Adventure”. Was this move in God's plan or was God telling us through the tears, not to go?

I can say with absolute certainty... I don't know. But what I can say is that God has used this “California Adventure” to grow Melissa.

He has used this adventure to take a strong marriage and make it stronger. He has taken a heart who has been thankful of what I have and has deepened that understanding by showing me families of 4 who live in one bedroom apartments, and a parent who left an abusive marriage now living with her mother and who takes a bus at 5 am from the depths of Pomona to get her child to a La Verne school by 8 am every day.

God has shown his face to me through people at my children's school, through Pastor Joyce, who came to visit our home and recognized our white rocking chairs on the front porch as a uniquely Southern thing, and the people of this church who welcomed us without reservation. I found comfort in Hal Jackson's voice who reminded me of a North Carolina coworker and in Susan Jones, whose looks and mannerism are forever like a long-time church friend. I could go on and on.

Maybe, just maybe there is not just one path through this maze of life where God's plan for our lives unfolds only if you take option 1 and not option 2. Maybe, just maybe God is big enough for his ultimate goal to be fulfilled regardless if we stayed in Raleigh or moved to California.

For those of you who have seen or heard about the Musical called Wicked, the one about the Witches of the Oz, there was a song at the end called Changed for Good. The lyrics say “I don't know if I have been changed for the better, but because I knew you, I have been changed for good....San Dimas Community Church, because I knew you. I have been changed for good, and I pray that is some small way we have given more than we have taken.

Yes, Melissa, your family has indeed given much more to us; we are forever changed for good. And we pray that God's “design, intentions, creativity, and plans” for you will follow you all the days of your lives.

*I want to end with some words Agnes Jackson gave me last Thursday when I visited her. She said that they have become very important to her recovery, and those words are: **It is what it is, God knows, and we don't have to.***

To that I say, Amen!