

God Has Plans for You

Jeremiah 29:1,4-14; Luke 17:11-19

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*Hope lives in the means, not the ends, then hope does not depend on having figured out what the future will be.*

-Wendell Berry

Some years ago, the satire magazine, *The Onion*, did a story on the increasing number of U.S. soldiers suffering from *pre-traumatic stress disorder* – a fictitious syndrome involving involuntary, intrusive images and flash-forwards of violent events and actions soldiers could experience during their future deployment. While the article was made up, here's the irony: Many mental health experts say that *pre-traumatic stress* symptoms are no longer the stuff of fiction or satire. It's real and they are seeing it manifest in people.

*Pre-Traumatic Stress Disorder* is defined as a condition characterized by prolonged, significant anxiety about a potential threatening or otherwise devastating event. The individual remains in a constant state of worry and heightened stress at his or her perceived helplessness to prevent the expected future trauma.

I have not known to call it Pre-Traumatic Stress Disorder, but I see it more and more every day. You do too. And many of you probably experience it or at least know immediately what it feels like. We are bombarded by an unrelenting stream of bad news, from climate change to threats to democracy, to pandemics,

and more. Furthermore, we know more is on the way, and at the same time we feel powerless to do anything about it. Often, we react by detaching emotionally, retreating, and finding ways to shield ourselves from it. We live on social media, stare at screens, binge watch streaming movies, and in various ways build walls, bunker up and hunker down as we try to cope with despair – which is defined as having no hope. We go into denial, or we get ready to fight and make America great again.

Last week Jerry Williams and I were having coffee and trying to solve the world's problems. By the way, these are the problems that Bob Choate and I didn't resolve when we were drinking coffee a couple of days before. Anyway, Jerry utilized his sociologist brain and was describing some of the challenges we face. He said in part, "COVID-19, the lockdowns, and our social isolation severed our commitments and connections to social institutions. We are now isolated and lacking a shared narrative to make our lives feel meaningful and purposeful. Soon a new social narrative will arise that will be informed by the right or left or something else. Perhaps this is an opportunity for Austin Heights to reconsider how its story fits in all of this."

I think Jerry is on to something. What's our story when the old stories have fallen apart? How do we, how does Austin Heights deal with *Pre-Traumatic Stress Disorder* while many of us are also dealing with *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder*? And what does it all look like? What do we do when the familiar world we know seems to be crumbling and the one in front of us often looks like some sort of dystopia? As one meme said recently, "*The Handmaid's Tale* was not an instruction manual."

The first thing we do is go to Scripture. While kind of an instruction manual, it does not instruct us in simplistic ways. More than specific instructions it transforms our imagination, it changes how and what we see, so we learn to see from the perspective of the crucified and resurrected Christ.

The Scripture lessons for today do just this. Jeremiah tells us the people of Israel were in exile in Babylon. Their *post*-traumatic stress disorder was that their social institutions were not simply severed, they were a pile of rubble. The city of God, Jerusalem, was destroyed by the Babylonian Empire, and the Temple of God was demolished. Then the Empire removed all leadership of Judah. Anyone and everyone who could help rebuild Judah and Jerusalem, or train others to lead and rebuild, were either killed or taken away to the far reaches of the Empire. This was their *post*-traumatic stress disorder. Everything that gave their lives order and sense was gone.

Their *pre*-traumatic stress disorder was that the future looked just as bad, if not worse. Living in Babylonian exile meant assimilate or die. The worst catastrophe in their history had befallen them, then they were forced marched to foreign lands and cities, dispersed, isolated into a few small barely surviving communities and told in no unclear language, either you become Babylonian and learn to believe Babylonian or you will die a painful death. Meanwhile you'll know that your children will become Babylonian whether you like it or not, or they too will die.

So, the Jews in exile responded in one of several ways. There were some who said God was going to return them immediately to their former glory. God would destroy Babylon and Nebuchadnezzar soon and make Judah great again. It is interesting that many of these were the same ones who had been in denial that

God would ever allow Jerusalem to fall in the first place. Others said, we need to learn to be good Babylonians and assimilate. In the middle of it all, Jeremiah, who was still in demolished Jerusalem, wrote a letter.

And let me add, that this letter is at the heart of who Austin Heights has seen itself over the years. This letter is central to our story.

In the letter Jeremiah tells them the truth and much of it the people do not want to hear. They had been warned by Jeremiah and other prophets to change their ways, but they kept following other gods. They had been warned and they lived in denial and had political leaders in denial and kept on their old ways. As a result, God said you'll reap what you sow.

Sometimes we discover that the God we worship is more than we realized and perhaps more than we want. We want consolation in our grief and fear, and I believe God is a God of comfort and consolation. But the God we have is also a God who holds us accountable and tells us the truth. If we live by violence and an extractive economy that destroys the Earth and destroys people, sooner or later those things come back upon us. And it's not only someone in political office's responsibility. It's our responsibility. We are accountable. Repentance and change begin with us.

That's what Jeremiah tells the people in exile, and it is what he tells us. God holds them accountable – but he also gives them a mission. They are in despair, having no hope, and God gives them work to do.

One of the dangers of despair is we give up and give in. Sometimes we're exhausted and often we're burnt out and overloaded because we try to do it all ourselves. Our overwork is likely connected to despair because we're not sure if

we can trust God anymore. God does not seem to come through in the clutch for us and we're done.

We need hope, but we want it up front ahead of time. If we had hope, we would be energized to do more of the mission God calls us to. But Jeremiah challenges our thinking.

Hear this sentence from Wendell Berry in one of his early essays, "Hope lives in the means, not the ends, then hope does not depend on having figured out what the future will be" ("Discipline and Hope" in *A Continuous Harmony*, p. 131).

In other words, the paradox is that we start now doing what God calls us to, and hope will grow. That's what Jeremiah is saying – start *now* with what you can do. Don't try to do everything but hope will come from what you can do. Don't worry how it all turns out and make your hope dependent on that. Instead, God says hope will come when you are in the means of doing what I call you to do.

Jeremiah tells them God calls them to settle into their place and seek shalom. Shalom is translated as peace or welfare, it also means wholeness and healing, justice, and right relationship with God, with one another, and with Creation. It means to make peace and just relationships with your neighbor, with your watersheds, with your topsoil, with your wildlife, and your enemies. To share in-common and work toward wholeness and healing in your city, but also celebrating together, and learning to rest. Sabbath is part and parcel of shalom. Shalom means helping one another, including city and school leaders do the right thing. It means accountability but it also means encouragement. Seeking the shalom of the city means nurturing and growing a commonwealth.

God says for you to build and nurture commonwealth in the fullest sense of the term, I want you to plant gardens and eat from them.

They are called to garden partly so they will have something to eat that is healthy, and partly so they will eat foods that are kosher and not pagan Babylonian food. What you eat is what you become and if the people are going to remain God's people who live God's shalom in a hostile world, they need to grow and eat God's food.

Gardening, or sharing in someone else's garden, remind us that our lives are a part of something much larger than ourselves and beyond our control. We can work the soil, plant, and tend the garden, but in practical detail each day in the garden we are dependent upon the gifts of God which are beyond our control – fertile soil, microbes and nutrients that nourish the plants, rain, and sunshine. Gardening is about literally putting down roots and growing out of a place. Not just living on a place. And it is about learning to give up control, receiving the gifts of God, and being people of grace and gratitude.

So, give thanks and eat! Enjoy good food that you've grown, and your neighbors have grown. Participate together in gathering around tables and sharing God's gifts of food and relationships

God says, I want you to put down roots that go deep and which become entangled with each other. And I want you to get married and have children, and I want you to have grandchildren.

Whoa! Have children? Jeremiah we're in a foreign world full of violence and tyrants and domination, and meanness, and the future is not good. We can't

have children. The essence of despair, having no hope, is that we do not want to bring children into this world.

This is the big one, isn't it? This gets down to the nitty-gritty of whether we are a hopeful people or not. God is not saying that the future will be easy. And we know whatever the future is, it will not be like the past. But God is saying to the people in exile, have children in a community in which everyone takes care of one another. Grow food, put down roots, nurture relationships so that you all are interdependent upon one another. Break your addiction to the Empire, far-flung markets, supply chains, fossil fuels, and corporations. Depend on God's people known in covenant community who are committed to one another and who trust one another even with each other's kids.

Hear this truth-telling God. The days where church means occasional attendance on Sundays are ending. You are entering a foreign land and a changed world of angry, scared people, where the covenant community called church is about surviving together and even thriving together as the peaceful people of Christ. But you will need to grow, nurture, and nourish (notice the gardening terminology) your community in Christ.

And God says, "I have plans for you. Your days are not over. The future is more open than you think, and there is more going on than you know. I have plans for your shalom, your wholeness and not for harm. I have plans for a future with hope," (Jer. 29:11).

God says, "All this is going to take a while – at least 70 years. Long enough that those of you who are adults will not be here to see my plans come to fruition. This is long haul kind of plans. You did not get here overnight and you're not going to get out of this overnight."

Everything in the Bible is slow like that. Sometimes I wonder that perhaps we only know God in a kind of slowness. We live in a world that prizes speed, and in which the ultimate speed is violence. Violence cuts through everything else with force. No waiting. No patience. No listening. Just get it done! Now! Power! Speed! In such a world, God works slowly.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, there are treelike creatures called Ents who speak Entish. Treebeard, their leader, says they speak “a lovely language, but it takes a very long time to say anything in it, because we do not say anything in it, unless it is worth taking a long time to say, and to listen to.”

Some things take time. Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama says God is slow, a three mile-an-hour God. He says the average person walks three miles-an-hour, and because God walks with us, that is also God’s speed. Koyama says slowness is the speed of love. Love takes time. Shalom takes time. God takes time.

So, Jeremiah tells the people in exile that this is going to take 70 years of time and patience and work. And we all know it is difficult to be patient in an emergency.

But there is more going on here than just my schedule and more than my individual life. When you read Jeremiah 29:11 carefully, notice that God’s “plans for good” are not for Jeremiah or any other individual, including me or you. The word “you” as in “the plans I have for you” is plural. We might say, “The plans I have for you all,” or “the plans I have for y’all.”

On Christmas Eve, we have our brief and reflective Christmas Eve service of candles and carols. Together we come in and line the railing with candles, and then we sing. Now, as an individual I could stay at home and raise a candle on my own



that night. Perhaps it would be nice, but it would be different. There is something of grace and deep joy in being in the room singing carols together and having all those candles together.

But I also remember that one week before Christmas Eve, we have a giant bonfire out at Steve and Kay Chism's. We all gather around one big flame (and we will do this again on Sunday night, Dec. 18). So, on Christmas Eve I realize that our many candle flames are smaller parts of the one big flame. And the one big flame is part of the even bigger work of God's Pentecostal fire.

I don't know about you, but I receive courage in that. And it gives me hope.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,  
Mother of us all. Amen.