

I Know the Plans for You
(based on Jeremiah 29:4-14 - Bethesda)

For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for good and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the Lord.

Often times my sermons are directed for personal reflection, for personal edification; to help an individual in some way. Today, however, my sermon is directed to all of us, collectively as a church.

Jeremiah had been called by God to become a prophet when he was just a boy. His brothers made fun of him. His parents were exasperated by him. He was thin, frail, and had a piercingly whiny voice. Jeremiah spent his entire life telling the people of Israel that doomsday was coming. He warned the kings of Israel that an enemy was coming to destroy her, if she did not return to the ways of the Lord. He was arrested on numerous occasions for speaking against the kings of Israel. He was laughed at, and mocked by everyone.

But the people of Israel had gotten melancholy about their faith. They had forgotten about why they worshipped God. They went through the motions for religiously legal reasons, but they no longer had a heart for their God. They did things because it was required of them, not because they wanted to.

And so, Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, marched onto Jerusalem and plundered the city and sent all but the farmers into exile in Babylon. The temple was ransacked and destroyed, the city was set on fire, the great wall surrounding Jerusalem was toppled and broken, the gates were

disassembled and only the farmers were left to work the land for the King of Babylon. Jeremiah was also left.

Of all the years that Jeremiah spent warning the people of Israel that destruction was coming, he never had a hopeful word to share with them. But when they went into exile, Jeremiah sent a letter to Anikam and all the exiles.

The Lord tells me to tell you, he writes, “Build a house in Babylon, plant gardens. Take wives, have sons and daughters, and let them marry, too. Seek the welfare of the city where you are. Pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare is your own. When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you again and fulfill my promise and bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you, plans for good and not for harm, to give you a future and a hope.”

Seventy years later, Nehemiah was in the court of the king and heard about the waste of his homeland. He returned and helped the people rebuild the wall of Jerusalem in 52 days, and the people were restored to their God.

A plan for good, not for harm, to give us a future and a hope.

Last summer I had gathered a team of people to make a study of our church for a long range plan. Part of that study included a Bible Study of the book of Nehemiah and how he brought the people back to Jerusalem. This team also studied the pros and the cons of what was happening here, of what was happening in the community. They made something called a SWOT analysis, which is listing your Strengths, your Weakness, your Opportunities and your Threats. It is a common analysis done mostly by businesses, but can be adapted for church use, as well.

After the Strategic Planning Team was done with their work, the deacons and the elders of the church went on Retreat back in January of this year to discuss Nehemiah and the findings and the work of the team.

We then set about making some priorities and some plans. Several of them have already gone into effect as the year has progressed. Several of them have been put on the back burner because, as is true in the daily lives of individuals, it is also true in the daily life of a congregation, you realize that your to-do list is just too long to get done. And finally, some things have simply been changed because God always has His own plans for us, as well, regardless of what we might plan.

The biggest change and undertaking was our New Preschool – something that none of us had planned for or predicted would happen this year. But it did and it is going VERY well. We opened on Sept. 9 with 10 students. We now have 13 students and it seems to still be growing each week as the parents are more and more excited about our program and share with their friends. Maybe we, as a church should use them as our role model. 3 and 4 year olds are bringing others to the Preschool because they are excited about being there. Maybe if we were just as excited to be here in church we'd be doing the same thing.

The second biggest change is our staffing – which is a natural progression from having our building used every day. We have an excellent staff. From our long-time partners in ministry like our choir director Carol Davelli and custodian Alvin Werner, to returning organist Judy Howell and her substitute Marsha Brown, from our church Secretary Debbie Bruce to our newest staff additions of Preschool Director Jennifer Wooley, her assistant Debra Mytrysyk and an additional custodian Harry Bruce. I enjoy working with these folks every day.

We have much to offer our community. We have a great deal to offer to you, as a congregation as well. These are part of our strengths. You all, as long-term members, are also listed as wonderful strengths for the building up of this church.

One additional strength is this building itself. Among real estate gurus, you've heard the expression Location, location, location. You are situated at one of the best spots in the town of Elizabeth. You are visually seen by practically every single soul that comes and goes from Elizabeth. We have an outstanding facility and we are currently making some necessary improvements so that this building will continue on long into the 21st Century.

We do, unfortunately, have a few weaknesses, as well. This may be a bit insensitive of me to mention and may cause a few bristles. But there isn't a great deal of continued

Spiritual Maturity – going on among the session members, the deacons and the congregation, at large. I say this with love and compassion as your pastor. But how many of you are actively involved in weekly Bible Study with a group of people? Some of you, perhaps maybe even most of you read your Bibles daily and study God's word. But how many of you are actively involved in a group that studies the scripture together. Jesus didn't set up a church so that people could learn alone. He engaged people in groups, very rarely did he ever teach someone privately. Spiritual maturity happens in the context of the church. If you expect this church to grow – that **MUST** change.

Another topic of concern will always be about **finances**. And it can fall in both the strength and the weakness category depending on your outlook. There will be people who feel that we need to be good stewards of

what has been given to us and save as much as possible and there will be people who feel that we need to be good stewards of what has been given to us and use our finances for the mission and ministry of the church as much as possible. Neither side should have full sway and should be heard over another; we need to be open to one another in dialogue, whenever the issue of finances are raised. We have wonderful givers in this church. You have poured out your blessings time and time again for the great work that this church has always been a part of. You dig deep to give what you can and at no time should we ever discount that or minimize it. It is with great thanks that we have what we have here at Bethesda from the long past when this church was built all the way up to the present. And every time we have a new fundraiser or a new activity or a new mission or a new need, I know you dig deeper. And we are all blessed because of it. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

We have a number of opportunities and threats as well. I'm going to save that list for another time. But I'd like for you to think about what you believe those things might be. But mostly I wanted to introduce these concepts to you through Jeremiah and his story. Because his future vision for the people of Israel in exile is our vision for the future of this church as well.

God knows what plans he has for us. Ultimately, in detail, I don't know what that plan is. But I see it unveiled and revealed each and every day. God has all things under control. It may not always feel like it. Be at peace with me and mostly be at prayer. If you are spiritually empty, ask God for guidance. If you are physically exhausted, ask God for respite. If you are emotionally drained, seek God's comforting words to strengthen your soul.

I chose the Jeremiah passage for this reason too. Sometimes it feels that we are being exiles in the land of being a church. We don't know always know or understand who we are anymore in this crazy world. We don't know what to be, how to be, who to be. And so Jeremiah writes to the exiles, "Build a house, plant gardens, seek the welfare of where you are, pray to the Lord, for where you are, I will prosper you for the future to give you hope. I know the plans I have for you. Plans for good, not for harm.

AMEN.

Moniker – Bethesda – House of Welcome

The prayer for the church:

God, show us what you want us to do in this place, at this time in our community.