

The Plan

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington

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October 17, 2021

Text

Jeremiah 29:10-14

10 For thus says the Lord: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfil to you my promise and bring you back to this place. ¹¹For 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. ¹²Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. ¹³When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, ¹⁴I will let you find me, says the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

Sermon

Last Sunday we talked about God traveling with us, always, through every wilderness, every place of disruption, every liminal place between here and there. We spoke of God offering manna in the wilderness, even today, as we look forward past the wilderness of CoVid and the future with hope that has already begun. Today's passage comes from Jeremiah's letter to the Babylonian exiles, more wilderness travelers.

A future with hope is our stewardship theme and it comes from the passage Ed just read for you. But as I sat with this passage this week, I wrestled mightily with these words the NRSV translation offers: "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."

Translation is a tricky thing. Scholars wiser than I have poured over these texts and come up with these words which sound so lovely in English. God has a plan for us. Hallelujah, right?

If there is something that worries you about the theology of this translation I want you to hold on while I introduce you to someone.

Kate Bowler is a divinity school professor at Duke whose particular area of study is the history of the prosperity gospel and the evangelical church. She studies the folks who say: believe this, and everything will be fine. And if it's not fine, you didn't believe.

“American culture has popular theories about how to build a perfect life.... I have seen these guides to endless progress for sale in airport kiosks....’Trust God and the path will reveal itself.’...These are the formulas for a meaningful life.”¹

She was always a skeptical outside observer of this theology. And then.

She was 35 in 2015, a rising scholar, a mom of a toddler, when she was diagnosed with stage four colon cancer and told that she was unlikely to live more than two years. She is, thankfully and with the help of new treatments, still living, teaching, parenting, writing and podcasting - and she has spent much of these last few years beautifully pushing back against the notion that we can choose our “best life now” simply through believing hard enough.

Yet, from Kate Bowler’s incredibly funny and poignant work, I have learned so very much about what Jeremiah’s “future with hope” might look like for any faithful person whose life has been turned upside down. For someone with depression or cancer or grief, or any one of us - that is all of us - who have lived through CoVid19.

As she puts it, “Time really is a circle...We are trapped between a past we can’t return to and a future that is uncertain. And it takes guts to live here, in the hard space between anticipation and realization.”²

What Kate Bowler gives to the world are stories of kindness and blessing and humor and joy, invitations to treasure this day and the people around us even if this day is not *our best life now*.

“What if being people of “the gospel” meant that we are simply people with good news? God is here. We are loved. It is enough.”³

By the end of her most recent book - which just came out - Kate Bowler is beginning to hope, and to make plans.

Now that brings me back to Jeremiah.

If I may be so bold, our text is mistranslated in the NRSV.

¹ From *No Cure For Being Human*, Kindle Edition, 2021.

² *ibid.*

³ **Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I've Loved**

Not the future with hope phrase - that's just about right, *tiqvah*, an expectation, a hoped for outcome. Not even the part where God imagines our welfare and not our harm - though, keep in mind the Hebrew is so much richer, God is envisioning our *shalom*.

The phrase that gets to me in translation is "the plans I have for you." The Hebrew translated as "plans" is *machashabah* which could mean *plans* but also *thought*, or *purpose*. Consider the difference. I know the thought I have for you. I know the purpose I have for you. I know the purpose I have for you, of shalom and not harm, a future with hope. As one preacher says, "God dreams for us, hopes with us...works in subtle, mysterious ways..."⁴

The people Jeremiah wrote to were experiencing disruption, trauma, and exile. They were not where they wanted to be. They wanted to go home. Like the Israelites in the wilderness before them, and like so many generations after them, their disruption would not end quickly. Jeremiah preached God's word to a people in pain, God's vision of a future they could not yet imagine, God's dream of their homecoming. Jeremiah's words were intended to help them get to that future with hope. And Jeremiah's prophecy helped them - and perhaps us - understand home a different way.

In their exile, Jeremiah told the people to seek the welfare of the city - yes, the welfare, the shalom of the city. Even in exile, God wanted the people to work for shalom. They were going to be there a while, so they needed to make a home for themselves, and build a hopeful future for themselves. God would be right there with them, all the while, and God would gather them home. Corrine Carvalho reminds us, "We yearn to feel "home," a place full of love, security, comfort. Sometimes "home" is found in a domicile, sometimes in a familiar landscape, sometimes even in another person. Church can feel like home."⁵

Oh, that this is always so. Even when we are in exile - the exile of trauma, illness, injustice, diaspora, pandemic, may we find home right here. Not in a building but in a congregation, not in four walls but in community. And may we always make a home for our neighbors. Jeremiah says that part of getting ready for a future with hope - God's vision and dream for us - is to bless our neighbors and seek their welfare - their future with hope, too.

This moment, this great disruption - none of us chose it. We are far from home and making a new home at the same time. And yet - we are not far away from God. We are

⁴ Debie Thomas, Christian Century July 3, 2019.

⁵ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/jeremiah-3/commentary-on-jeremiah-291-4-14-2>

never far away from God, whose purpose is for our shalom and whose vision is a future with hope and whose love we can rely on. We can be faithful in the midst of it all. We can be kind and compassionate and nurturing and welcoming. And that is the foundation of our future with hope.

Kate Bowler prays it like this:

“What is it Lord, that we can start to build, even though it is bigger than what we could ever accomplish on our own? Blessed are we, O God, waiting before You, for the opening that is the gift, for the certainty that You hold us in love that is for all eternity, for the energy for the next pivot, and the next dance.”

Amen.