

“I Know the Plans I Have for You”

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

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It was back in the summer right before my 8th birthday. I was in Vacation Bible School...that's where I learned , the song which taught me the books of the Bible...Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers Deuteronomy, etc...I also learned to memorize chunks of scripture...including one passage from the book of Jeremiah in chapter 29:11, which Anna read this morning, “Behold I know the plans that I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for your harm, to give you a future with hope.”

We had what they called sword drills, pulling on the idea in scripture that the Bible is the sword of the Spirit-- the word of God and full of truth. The leader would call out the reference, for example, ...Jeremiah 29:11 and hands would shoot up. The first one would stand and recite the verse or verses and get a prize.

Those verses stuck with me in that VBS class throughout my childhood...and even now, popping into my mind when I need an encouraging word in the face of a fork in the road.

So, what encouragement did the people in Jeremiah's time need?

The Israelites were in exile at the time. They were away from their home and Jeremiah speaks to them from that vantage point. Jeremiah envisioned a beginning to the healing needed, both communally and individually, in the openness and the courage to give up unrealizable hopes and other harmful practices that seemed to offer a false sense of security.

He encourages the exiles to begin establishing roots and work towards building a possible life in community, a ‘home away from home’—in a distant place/the city. Jeremiah urged them to accept that the places where they were settled within Babylon were home; they needed to stop living out of their suitcases, begin establishing roots, affirm, maintain and continue ties with family, and work towards peace and community building in their own neighborhoods. For Jeremiah, the key to survival and hope lay in joining God in the “creation of a just and compassionate counterculture, a place of new shapes and social alternatives where violence, exploitation and idolatry do not reign. (ideas from Stulman, Louis and Hyun Chul Paul Kim, You are my People: An Introduction to Prophetic Literature, Nashville: Abingdon, 2010.)

As Christians, the message we take all these years later, is that here on earth, we live in a sense, counterculturally to the messages in our broader society: the powerful win, the strong prevail, some people are better than others...and we stay separate in like-minded groups--you get it. Here the message is, our theology must be moved into the public space to address issues affecting people, especially those on the margins of society, those that suffer from social, cultural—and here in Jeremiah even political insecurity and discrimination.

Margins are the space of God's visitation, for God is discernable and present in the margins. We are called to journey from the centers of power to the fringes of society to experience God in new ways and in new forms, because God is present in the disturbing and unsettling questions raised by experiences at the margins.

In this passage, God gives us a view that we are part of something bigger than our own lives, and calls us to see the bigger picture. How do we fit in and how has God been guiding us all along? Here's one story...

My name is Ezra, I am a 32- year- old Samaritan, and for the last 7 years I have suffered from leprosy. No one really knows how I got it, but once the lesions appeared on my body, my life would never be the same. I had to leave my home immediately to protect my family. I had to abandon my beloved Miriam and my 3 children. That, of course, left them having to return to her parents' house because I had no way of providing for them. I miss them so much. My heart aches even more than my body does.

With no other choice, I moved to a colony of others like me...no one wants to be around us. I am the only Gentile in this group of Jewish men. They have to be here because as per Jewish custom, they are ritually unclean. Our common disease erases the differences of our faiths. Here we are all the same. We all are steeped in shame, even though we did nothing wrong. But the result is the same. We have all been destroyed.

We look grotesque. Some of us are worse off than others. Our symptoms start in our skin and peripheral nervous systems (outside the brain and spinal cord), then spread to other parts, such as our hands, feet, face, and earlobes. Most of us can be spotted due to the disfigurement of our skin and bones, twisting of the limbs, and curling of the fingers that make our hands look like claws. My once somewhat handsome face has changed in the last few years to include the thickening of my outer ear and collapsing of my nose.

They say that tumor-like growths may form on my skin and in my respiratory tract, and then my optic nerve may deteriorate. The hardest part, though, is the danger which may come from not being able to feel pain or hot and cold due to nerve damage. Just the other day one of the other men in the colony suffered severe burns when he didn't realize he was near a hot surface.

Needless to say, I wouldn't want my wife to even see me, and my children? I'd scare them to death. I want them to remember me as I was. But I miss them...God, do I miss them. I ache for human touch, but now my touch is deadly to others. I feel desperate and lonely. I am depressed most days and what little hope I had left long ago. I hate my body. I hate my life. I wonder if life is worth living.

Then, the other day...word got to us that a man named Jesus, known to be a great healer, was coming near to where we live. His name was Jesus. Could it be true? Could the rumors we have heard about him curing diseased people like me really work?

The day came and here's what they described it:

Reading of Luke 17:11-19

On the way to Jerusalem, Jesus was going through Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, 10 lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" 14When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean. 15Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. 16He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. 17Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? 18Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" 19Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

Let me try and explain to you what that experience was like. After years of shame and self-hatred from the disease I bore, to be healed in an instant was beyond what I could imagine. Jesus, the great healer, the son of God, the lover of humanity cared for me and wanted ME to be healed. God saw me and restored me...but I wasn't the same. Because of what I had experienced, all of the pain I had endured, I was changed. I became more than what I was. I had a different sense of compassion for other who suffered.

I HAD to go back...the other 9 did what they were told to do. In their custom, they must see the priest in the temple for healing to be complete. But I HAD to see him again...to fall at his feet and even while sobbing, to thank him for saving me, for saving my life, for giving me hope that my life was worth living. I could now have a future with the family that I love...Miriam and my 3 children. I could now be reconnected with my community—even after they rejected me. I know it was only out of fear that they didn't know what to do with me.

But there's something else that's changed. In going back to face my healer, Jesus, and to thank the God who made me and who loves me, I also see that my life is called to be for something bigger than just for me and my family. There is a bigger story of love and grace and gratitude and the restoration to wholeness that each and every person can experience and can participate.

One of my Jewish brothers who was in the colony with me was a scholar of the ancient prophets. He told me about the story of the Hebrew people who wandered in the wilderness, like us, away from their homes. Even in the darkest times, he would say, the prophet Jeremiah once said, "Behold I know the plans that I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for your harm, to give you a future with hope."

What he said was true.

The texts tell us several things.

First, healing and becoming whole are two different things. We may experience healing without experiencing becoming whole. In this case, the becoming whole entailed a reconnection of the man with body mind and spirit. We don't know if that came for the others or not.

By coming and expressing gratitude, this man received blessing upon blessing because of the incomprehensible grace which was given to him by God.

That's how important gratitude is, friends. When we express our thanks to God for the blessings in our lives, we receive blessing upon blessing. Something multi-dimensional happens. It's unexplainable.

Second, God calls us to be healers, and to reach out to others who are suffering. I've mentioned this to some of you-- that the Presbyterian Church, during our last General Assembly, took action on this idea, recognizing that there are many who are suffering from some sort of mental health issues. At that national gathering, they voted to put aside \$250,000 in grants of up to \$10,000 each for mental health ministry initiatives. In the face of our Day of Recovery and Wellness on Nov 2, I applied and we will receive 8,600 to help us with this day and several more events after it. This day will provide practical healing help to people who are suffering-- maybe even some of us.

So, first, God desires us not only to be healed, but to be made whole—to be restored. Praise be to God. The timing and what it look like are different matters.

God desires us to reach out to those who are suffering and to offer a word of hope and healing.

“Behold, I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord. Plans for your welfare and not for your harm. To give you a future with hope.”

AMEN!