

All Things Are Yours!

A Promise Full of Potential

Jeremiah 29:4-14; I Corinthians 3:1-15, 21-23

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

You have had a wonderful beginning this season. I have heard glowing reports of the last two Sundays, and then I listened to the tapes and realized that the glowing reports didn't tell the half. I was moved by Peter's sermon and his epistle, the First Epistle of Peter to Christ Community. I was fascinated by Bob's leftover macaroni and cheese and his call to us to continue to find fresh expression in the course of our religious quest together. Now, it is good to be back and to have this opportunity to have my share in the launching of another church year, what promises to be an exciting year of transition, a year which will be the beginning of a grand new beginning. I had thought about the fact that the more common phrase is the beginning of the end, and then I realized that is nonsense. Nothing is ending. What we are entering into is the possibility of a grand new beginning, and this is the beginning of the beginning, and I am so pleased with what I hear and what I sense and what I experience and the positive joy and confidence and the expectancy of this community. You are a great people and we are well launched on our way in this most significant year. I couldn't be happier about the way you all are - our leadership stepping forward in such significant fashion, and so many of you, pew after pew after pew, a wonderful, loyal, faithful people who comprise this Christ Community. So, we embark on the beginning of a grand new, beautiful beginning.

That reminded me of beginnings three decades and more ago as I went back and thought about some of the old texts that had been the trumpet calls of those early years. One of them was the passage from Jeremiah, the 29th chapter, a chapter that I had found personally very important and had claimed personally at a very difficult time in my life. For some of you who have been around here forever, this is perhaps old hat, but nonetheless there are enough of you who don't know the story that I think it is worth remembering those opening days of another beginning some three decades ago.

I sat alone in my flat in the Netherlands and had to write a letter to my parents. Now, if, as was my case, one is warped from the womb, if one is prayed over and massaged and nurtured and gently nudged to the realization of one's parents'

dreams, then when one has entered into those dreams and fulfilled them, one has to write to them to say, "I sit here alone. The family is gone. My marriage is broken, and obviously my ministry is in jeopardy." I concluded the letter with Jeremiah 29:11, in which I wrote to my dear parents, "Nonetheless, I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for good and not for evil to give you a future and a hope."

After a few months, I came home to see the children and you learned about it and you invited me to preach one December Sunday in 1970, and I preached. I was a skeleton, if you can believe it. (There are some good things that happen in troubles.) One dear saint went out and said to me, "The doctor just said I had to lose 40 pounds. What's your secret?" I said, "You don't want to know my secret."

In the succeeding weeks, things began to happen in this community and before I knew it, before I was to go back to the Netherlands, there was an invitation to me to become a pastor again of this congregation. I was amazed all over again last night as I looked at those old files. I was amazed again at the courage, at the boldness, and at the grace of the leadership of this congregation to invite one to come to be their pastor whose first item on the agenda was a custody battle, and secondly, a divorce! This was 1971. Unheard of. Absolutely incredible, because at that point in the dark ages of those times, ministers didn't have problems.

Nonetheless, here I was, back here as your pastor, and the inaugural text was Jeremiah 29:11, "I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for good and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope." Now it was more than just a personal word that I hung to. Now it became a wonderful declaration, a promise full of potential for all of us together. I think the amazing grace of the leadership at that time and the congregation as a whole, the expression of grace, the courage, that kind of spirit spoke volumes and things began to erupt around us and within four months we held a special congregational meeting which was really well attended for congregational meetings, in the summertime, and there were two items on the agenda - the first item was whether or not without any budget provision whatsoever we should extend an invitation to Gordon VanHoeven to become an associate pastor, a co-pastor. Gordon had come out of this church, you will remember, had gone to seminary after accusing me of praying for him, but as a matter of fact, having seen a vision which I think now was just the sun in his eyes, but nonetheless, Gordon was invited to come here and the congregational meeting numbered 124 and the vote to invite Gordon, not knowing how in the world we would ever support him, was 117 to 7. Wonderful majority. Gordon spent the next 18 years trying to ferret out those seven who voted against him.

About that time, the wives of the elders, which was the wont at the time, exited from the meeting to the kitchen where they cut the pies to be served with the coffee which would follow after the next item on the agenda, which was to change the name of this congregation after 100 years from the First Reformed Church of Spring Lake to Christ Community Church. I heard tell and I do believe it, that

Kathryn Kruizenga was taking bets in the kitchen, saying, “He’ll never get that kind of a majority on this issue.” Well, as a matter of fact, the name change passed 120 to 4, and I have had all kinds of people, pastors asking me in subsequent years, “How in the world did you do that?” I said it was just a piece of cake.

Those were heady days. We changed the name of the church. I read again last evening the sermon I preached the Sunday night before the congregational meeting, and the theme was “It is reasonable and responsible to change the name of the church to something that will define us and give us an identity such as we are seeking.” The text was I Corinthians 3:23-25.

“Enough of this ‘I am of Paul, I am of Apollos,’ for all things are yours. Life, death, the present, the future, all are yours and you are Christ’s and Christ is God’s.”

Christ Community, a community of people who are set free.

As I visited again that text, I was a bit nostalgic, I have to admit, and I recognized at significant points in the last 30 years I have come back to those texts, but every time there was a certain slant or an angle on those texts, and I use them today with a different angle than I have ever really used them before, and that is that both of these passages are addresses to communities, communities who are going through some kind of difficulty or crisis. In the case of Jeremiah 29, of course, as I mentioned with the reading, the people of Judah had been taken into captivity through that great world empire, Babylon, and they were now living in Babylon and they were feeling very sorry for themselves. And this letter of Jeremiah, who had been a prophetic voice of judgment before the crisis actually occurred, and had been imprisoned by the use of the Patriot Act for the treasonous crime of speaking truth to power, when finally the exile came, Jeremiah’s was the voice of hope and encouragement, and this is a marvelous letter that he wrote to the exiles. He says, “Look, *deal* with it. Get on with your life. Build houses. Tend gardens. Give your children in marriage, have grandchildren. Don’t decrease, increase. Pray for the welfare of the city that has taken you captive, because as that city prospers, so will you. So, come on.”

If you want to know what bad religion can do for you, dealing with these very people to whom Jeremiah wrote, let me read you Psalm 137. These are the down-in-the-mouth Jews in Babylon feeling sorry for themselves: “By the rivers of Babylon there we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung our harps, for our captors asked us for songs and our tormentors asked us for mirth, saying, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion.’ How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land? Because, as a matter of fact, you see, we don’t really think that God is able to spill over into the foreign land. O, if I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither, let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy.”

Now, this is where bad religion comes in because if you're all caught up with Jerusalem and the temple and a particular understanding of God, if you're all locked into something like that, then you begin to become angry. "Remember, O Lord, the Edomites, the day of Jerusalem's fall, how they said, 'Tear it down, tear it down, down to its foundations. O daughter of Babylon, you devastator, happy shall they be who pay you back in what you have done to us.'"

Listen to this now: "Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock." That's what bad religion will do for you and that's what was going on in Babylon when Jeremiah wrote the letter. He said to them, "Come on, build your houses, plant your gardens, get on with your family life. Pray for the welfare of Babylon, for goodness sakes."

It was a community in despair and Jeremiah had to remind them, "I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans of good and not for evil to give you a future and a hope."

Paul's situation was a bit different, of course, in the infant church there. He scolded them because he had been the founding pastor, but Apollos had come in becoming the preacher, and some delegations from Corinth had come to Paul wherever he was to let him know, "This community is fractured. There is the Apollos group and there is the Peter group and there is the Paul group." Paul writes to him and says, "You're infants. How immature! Don't you know that I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase?" Then he begins to soar, as Paul often does as he gets excited in thinking about this whole thing. He begins to soar and says, "All things are yours! Don't get so narrowed down and obsessed with one particular pattern. Open your mind, open your heart, recognize that all things are yours. It is as big as the world! Peter is yours and Paul is yours and Apollos is yours. All the great traditions are yours. The future is yours, life is yours, death is yours, all things are yours. So, you are Christ's and Christ is God's."

It was a community in trouble because they had gotten fascinated with a particular form or human leadership or a particular way of doing things, so Paul had to get after them. Sort of like Jeremiah did. Grow up! Grow up! Become mature and recognize that your world is too small, your God is too small. There's a whole world out there and all things are yours. The future is yours.

Do you see the slant of those texts this morning? I don't have to write a letter like Jeremiah did, and I don't have to scold like Paul did, because you are Christ Community and you've been living a dream for 30 years. You moved into a dimension of freedom that has enabled us to soar, to find a life together that is marked not by some crimped, dogmatic statement, not by some rigid ecclesiastical structure, not by some overpowering past, but rather, we have discovered a freedom that has enabled us to live, not just a freedom from, but a

freedom *for*, a freedom for a grace that is as expansive as the cosmos, a grace that has moved beyond the ignorance and the arrogance of exclusivism. We have entered into a freedom that has enabled us to embrace our brothers and sisters in other great faith traditions, honoring and valuing the insights and the beauty and the goodness and the truth that is there. We have entered into a freedom that has enabled us to put behind us the kind of social issues that divide society and polarize congregations. We have been able through the freedom that we have found in Christ to affirm the world as it is emerging and as it is coming to expression in all of the disciplines of human learning. There is no place where we have to close our mind or shut our eyes or bow our heads. We celebrate it because we believe that somehow or other, at the core of everything, is that creative spirit that is emanating forth out of an abyss of love that in the course of some 15 billion years has resulted in the gathering of a community of beautiful people like this. We have learned that all things are ours. We don't have to be crimped and cramped and narrowed down and we don't have to be pinched in, barriered out, but rather, we can live with fullness and joy, with excitement and anticipation, because the plans for us are plans of good and not for evil, and all things are ours, the future as well as the present. Promise is full of potential. We are on the threshold of something very wonderful.

I am not unaware of the wisdom and the conventional wisdom of church leadership of all of those denominations that are dying that say when you have had a long and happy relationship as a pastor and people, a people need time to grieve. "By the rivers of Babylon," I suppose. Hang up your harps for a while. Come on. That's ridiculous. Some even say that, as sometimes we grow angry with loved ones who die on us, so a pastor could be the recipient of the anger of people who are mad about the fact that he got old on them. Come on! That may be true in traditional and conventional places, I don't know, but it's not true here. There are no wounds we have to bind up. There are no fractures we have to heal. And the identity? Do we know who we are? Yes, we do, thanks to the fires through which we have been put. We know who we are. We know why we're here, and to those voices that come to me once in a while and say, "You just don't know," I say, "Look, my people are emotionally mature and intellectually acute, and they'll handle it."

"But, it's going to feel different."

Of course it's going to feel different.

"But it won't be the same."

Of course it won't be the same, can't be the same, shouldn't be the same. If it was the same, we'd be doomed to death. What has to happen is what happened 30+ years ago, it has to happen all over again, it's going to happen all over again because, as a matter of fact, it's not Cephas or Apollos or Paul or Bob or Peter or Don or Dick, it is a matter of the community. Continuity is in the community.

Continuity is in the community. Say it after me, continuity is in the community. That means it's *you*.

I have been accused of being a Johnny-one-note with grace, but the story I told you this morning will tell you that I didn't bring grace here, grace brought *me* here. There was a community here that had the vision and the boldness and the graciousness and the love to invite me here, to have me experience grace so I could become the agent of grace. It is in the community, dear friends, it is in you. You have embodied it. You, and I'm with you. I want to be right on the sidelines cheering. I want to be right there. (We may have to move out of that pew, honey, but could we maybe have an honorary pew with a little brass plaque?)

Oh, isn't it good? Isn't it wonderful? I know the plans I have for you, said the Lord, plans of good and not for evil to give you a future and a hope, because the future is yours. All things are yours - life and death, the present, the future, all things are yours and you are Christ's and Christ is God's, and all God's people said, "Thanks be to God. Amen!"