

The Reverend Patricia Phaneuf Alexander
Proper 19 (C) ~ 14 September 2025
St. Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Bethesda
Jeremiah 29:4-14
Psalm 98
Luke 15:1-10

The Plans I Have for You

I.

I expect that most of us here today are familiar with the work of Gary Larson, the brilliant (and keenly observant) artist best known for *The Far Side* cartoons. His work is funny because it is so *true*: He manages to capture the ridiculousness of the human condition in the space of just one frame.

My very favorite *Far Side* comic, bar none, always makes me say, “Yup. You got me. That’s it.” You probably have seen it – or, if not, you can picture it. It shows a young boy heading into school for the day, textbook in hand. He is pushing, with all his might, on the door, standing back a bit to give himself leverage. What he fails to notice, of course, is the big sign over his head that reads “Pull.” But that’s not the best part: The “punch line” of the cartoon is the bigger sign on the lawn in front of the building: “Midvale School for the Gifted.”

It's funny because it is so *true*.

How many of us spend way too much time in life “pushing on the pull door,” so to speak? Convinced of our own rightness, certain that we really are exceptional, we waste untold time and energy trying to force things to happen according to *our* will. I think this is particularly true in our spiritual lives, where we show up to God with a laundry list of things we would like to see happen, thank you very much.

All the while praying, day after day, week after week, “Thy will be done.”

I highly doubt that I am alone in this.

It sounds ridiculous when I put it like that, doesn't it? Insisting that we know what we're doing, that we've got all the answers... Yet on we go, pushing on the pull door.

We've got it. We know what we're doing.

It's amazing that God hasn't given up on us yet, given our proven track record over the course of human history.

"Midvale School for the Gifted," indeed.

II.

The past couple of weeks we have been engaging the question of how we are called to help build the Kingdom of God here on earth, help to realize God's vision for Creation – in the face of what seem to be insurmountable challenges. Last Sunday I made the point that God's Kingdom comes with a warning label, of sorts: "Some assembly required." God gives us the "parts," the building blocks of faith, and we must figure out how to put them together in some coherent way.

For Christians these parts include the life and teachings of Jesus, Who shows us that the Way of Love – the way of compassion, of understanding, of forgiveness, of mercy – is always better, and ultimately more effective, than the ways of self-interest and hate. Hate is like an out-of-control wrecking ball, swinging wildly through the air and threatening to demolish anything and everything in its path. We saw, yet again, this week the destructive power of hatred at work – in Utah and in Denver – and we commemorated that darkest of days 24 years ago when the wrecking ball struck in Arlington, in New York, and in the sky over Shanksville, Pennsylvania.

We're pushing on the pull door, my friends, and in the prophetic words of Pete Seeger,

When will we ever learn? When will we ever learn?

III.

This morning through another prophet, Jeremiah, we hear God's assurance that, despite how things may seem, despite our very human capacity to mess things up, God is at work – even now – in our midst.

I'll say it again: God is at work.

Walter Brueggemann, the renowned scholar of the Hebrew Bible, the "Old Testament," wrote that the Book of Jeremiah is a collection of

meditations on the abyss of the exile when Jerusalem was razed and destroyed, the Temple terminated, the leading residents displaced, and the easy assumption of divine favor and protection unmistakably nullified.¹

Remember that Jeremiah lived and preached in the Southern Kingdom of Judah, which includes Jerusalem, from just before to just after Judah was conquered by Babylon and the Jews were hauled off into captivity.

Jeremiah knew exactly what that wrecking ball looked like, and he tried valiantly to warn that it was headed in their direction. For a people whose identity was tied to place, the idea of being ripped, forcibly, from the land was utterly devastating.

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Preaching Jeremiah: Announcing God's Restorative Passion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2020), xv.

As the Psalmist puts it,

*How shall we sing God's holy song
upon a foreign soil? (Ps. 137:4).*

Or, to quote Brueggemann again,

Questions swirl around that abyss of displacement:

Why did it happen?

Is God faithful?

Does God punish?

Is there any future?²

Is God faithful?

Is there any future?

I know that these very questions are on our own lips and hearts today.

This is why we need to hear – and heed – the Word of God as preached by the prophet Jeremiah:

Do not listen to your dreams that you dream.

(Translation: Stop pushing on the pull door.)

And when Judah's captivity in Babylon is over, God says,

I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place.

For surely I know the plans I have for you...

plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.

² *Ibid*, xvi.

The original language here says that God will “raise up,” or “cause to stand” God’s “good word.”³

Which is to say, God is and will be faithful – not just to the people of Judah in the sixth century BCE.

Not just to us, in our own day.

But to God’s own “good word” – God’s vision for Creation – God’s architectural rendering for the Kingdom.

Put another way, God has an investment – an enormous investment, millennia in the making – and God’s not about to lose it now.

Jesus touched on this idea last week, when He asked,

which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? (Luke 14:28).

God is determined to finish the “building project” God began in Creation, in us – and we must not allow the wrecking ball of human self-interest and hate threaten to destroy it.

IV.

So:

As people of faith in “the abyss of the exile,” as it seems more and more each day, how are we to live? How *are* we to continue singing God’s holy song when it feels as though we are on foreign soil, in an unfamiliar land?

A few thoughts:

³ <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/hebrew/nas/quwm.html>

First: When God says “I will fulfill to **you** my promise,” that “you” is plural. (Or, in the words of my Old Testament professor at Duke, “We’re in the south – it’s y’all!”)

In other words, despite our tendency to read Scripture as speaking to us exclusively and individually, here God addresses *all* of us – all of humanity, all of Creation. It’s not *my* future, it’s not *your* future, it’s *our* future – and that of our children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and so on.

God has invested in us and entrusts that investment to our care.

Which brings me to thought #2:

Here I direct your attention to the beautiful cover art on your bulletin. Sue Carroll, our Liturgical Artist-in-Residence, did not consult on our “sermons” this week – my verbal, her visual. We rarely, if ever, do. Yet the image she created for today expresses perfectly the next point: That *we* are called, like the little construction workers diligently fashioning the rainbow, to bring God’s building project to fruition. It is up to us – we’re in this together, *y’all* – to participate in the project and to safeguard against the wrecking ball of human self-interest and hate that threatens to destroy it.

Which brings me to my third and final thought:

You may have noticed in the Jeremiah text that God says, “when Babylon’s seventy years are completed, I will visit you.” Let me stop you before you start checking your watches: This timetable is *metaphorical*. It is figurative language. Remember that in the Bible the number seven – and, likewise, its multiple, seventy – is the number of completion, of perfection. When Peter asks Jesus how many times he should forgive, Jesus answers “seventy times seven” (Matthew 18:22) – meaning continuously, without end.

We know that we do live in a time of exile, a time when God’s perfect vision for us and all Creation is not yet fulfilled. But we also know that God is invested in the outcome of that vision and has no intention of not finishing it.

And God needs our help.

Friends, as children of God and disciples of Jesus, we are called to work together to build God's Kingdom:

We are called, first and foremost, to hear and to heed God's assurance that, despite how things may seem, despite our very human capacity to mess things up, God is at work – even now – in our midst.

God has a plan to give us and our children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and so on a future with *hope*.

God's got this.

As for us, we need not to listen to our dreams that *we* dream, but rather to the dreams that *God* dreams. We need to stop pushing on the pull door.

When will we ever learn?

Amen.