

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
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Lee Hanssen
Plan to Prosper
Jeremiah 29:11**

Well, good morning, everybody. My name is Lee Hanssen and I'm the director of Student Ministries. I was going to make a lame joke that they scraped the bottom of the barrel to find somebody to preach over Memorial Weekend and asked me, but I won't do that this morning.

Early in my Christian life, I developed a passion to read. I read all sorts of books. I read books by Chuck Swindoll, and I read books by John Piper. I'm a little bit more bent to be sentimental than maybe some others, and one author in particular captivated my heart with the way he writes, Max Lucado. He penned so many wonderful books. One of his many books that I have come to love is called *In the Grip of Grace*. In this book, Max, speaking of another one of his books, wrote this.

In God Came Near I've told how our oldest daughter fell into a swimming pool when she was two years old. A friend saw her and pulled her to safety. What I didn't tell was what happened the next morning in my prayer time. I made a special effort to record my gratitude in my journal. I told God how wonderful he was for saving her. As clearly as if God himself were speaking, this question came to mind: *Would I be less wonderful had I let her drown? Would I be any less a good God for calling her home? Would I still be receiving your praise this morning had I not saved her?*

Is God still a good God when he says no?

Having experienced this over the course of your life, when something good happens, when the loved one we've prayed for is rescued, when we get the job, or when we get the acceptance letter to the school we've longed for, God is good! God has a wonderful plan for your life! And while I agree with that, God *is* good, and God *does* have a plan for your life, is He any less good, or is His plan screwed up when it doesn't go the way that we want it to? Sometimes in Christendom, I think we say things we think we are supposed to say, or think we should say, because it's the Godly thing to do. Again, I agree with those statements but if I'm honest, there's always this trigger that brings us back to the question, what are you really saying when you say that? And do you really mean it, or do you just mean it when things are going your way and God *does* seem good and feel good?

I think one of the most clichéd Christian sayings is that God has a plan for your life. I agree that it is true, but if you are anything like me, your plan hasn't exactly looked like God's plan. The plan in my head always looked like this [slide shown], this kind of obscure stick figure on the bike, and my plan for my life was a slow ascent, staying smooth to the top. In reality, it's filled with rocks and water and some storms and a little bridge and ups and downs and I would guess

that's what yours looks like, too. When I was growing up no one told me there would be times I wasn't going to be able to pay my rent. No one told me about miscarriages and infertility. The highlight reel in my head that I rehearsed since I was a little boy didn't include cancer and divorce, depression, anxiety or addictions. Sometimes it's been okay but really and truly, other times, it hasn't. In those moments when I found myself frustrated (which I've learned is just a cute word for angry) or disappointed, I think what's really happening inside of me is that I'm doubting that God has my best intentions in mind. Sometimes at my lowest points, I'm doubting if God even really exists. Like, God, I come to church, I pray, I really do try to love You and follow You and know You, but are You there? Do You care? Are You listening?

Or maybe like me, those times reveal our secret motive in following God is that somewhere deep down we think it means we are entitled to a life without hardship. We say with our lips that our hope is in God, but we learn that our hope is really in good health, financial security, and a happy family. In my own life and as I've looked at and been a part of yours, I've observed that God's plans aren't just different, they seem to have different motives than ours. As I've read through the Word, I've observed that God is more concerned with who we are becoming than the specific details and events of our lives.

I want to read from a letter from the Lord written by the prophet Jeremiah, perhaps a familiar text to some, Jeremiah 29:11. It is often found on greeting cards and on pictures in people's homes and reads like this.

11 For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for wholeness and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.

There's a lot going on in this text. If we rewind it a little bit, we find what is not written on the greeting cards or on the paintings. This is a letter written to God's chosen people, the Israelites, when they were being held in captivity. They were literally being held in a place they didn't want to be, Babylon, and not just for a short amount of time. They were held there for over 70 years. There were prophets like Jeremiah bringing God's Word to people, and there were false prophets, people claiming they were hearing from God telling the Israelites it was going to be over soon. "Don't worry. It is going to end quickly and all will be well."

God's Word says, "For I know the plans I have for you, plans for wholeness and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope", and I don't know about you, but if I were the Israelites, I would be beginning to wonder if this was really true. I'd be wondering if God forgot about me or if something was wrong with His plan. If we back up even more and read the text that comes before this, Jeremiah 29:5-6, God says something rather strange and bizarre to his chosen people, who are not where they want to be. They are not in the Promised Land. God says this to them.

5 Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. **6** Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease.

Not only does it not match up, it seems strange, like it can't be right, but it also seems very consistent with the life of Jesus, our Lord and Savior. His life was full of miracles and intimacy with God the Father but it was also marked by suffering and grief. He was a man acquainted with sorrows, who ended up being beaten and dying a horrific death on the cross to pay the

price for our sins. It was not necessarily a life or a plan that the Jews would have had for their Messiah. I think a piece of the why and a part of understanding the why is found in the text from Jeremiah 29:11.

11 For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for wholeness

I've always loved God's Word here saying "plans for wholeness." That word in Hebrew is *shalom*. Many of you have heard it often simply translated as peace. Yes, that word *shalom* could mean peace but in this text, its predominant meaning is belief in this idea of becoming whole and complete. That's interesting because it changes things for me. As I read this text, as I think about the way this passage has been taught to me my whole life, I feel like what's happened is we've skipped over the wholeness piece and jumped to the promise that God is going to give us a future and a hope. Like we hold God accountable to that end part but we don't really want the first part. The thing is, we can't really have a future and a hope, one worth living anyway, if we skip God's process of making us whole.

As I've looked around and seen wholehearted people who live their lives for Jesus, I wonder, what does that process of being whole look like? I think sometimes it's a journey where we *let things in our lives die*. Perhaps those things are our false hopes or things we worship like comfort or control or happiness or living a life being anything other than who God created us to be. I think other times in the process of becoming whole, things in us need to *come to life*, things like learning how to be content in hardship or trusting who God says He is over our circumstances or how we feel.

I think of the time in my life that God used to get me in this journey of becoming whole. It was about six years ago when I had left my first job after college. I was very familiar there. I had been on staff for four years. It was comfortable. I was known. I was cared for. I knew what my future was going to look like, but it seemed like there was something else for me. At 25 years old, I had a quarter-midlife crisis or whatever you would call it. I tend to be a bit dramatic and a bit emotional. I remember I was having surgery and I went to the doctor's office. This doctor had no idea what he was getting into when he asked me how I was doing. I had never met this man before, and I had full meltdown. I'm like, "Dude, I am not okay! I quit my job. I don't know how I'm going to pay my rent. I'm a mess!" For real, I was not okay.

I remember finding myself in Tulsa, Oklahoma in a hotel room. I had had a wonderful life, a good career. I had successfully graduated college. I had partnered with God to do incredible things, and here I found myself for the very first time at 25 years old suffering intense anxiety and horrible panic attacks. I will never forget that I was so afraid that I didn't even want to walk out the door of my hotel room. I was hungry, and I remembered seeing a vending machine down the hall. It took every ounce of my strength to get out of bed and put my feet on the floor. I took one step and I stopped and said, "Okay, God, I'm going to trust You for one more step so I can make it to the vending machine." I took one more step and said, "Okay, God, I'm going to take one more step and I'm going to trust You that I can get to the vending machine." When I look back on that time in my life and that season and in that experience, I can't tell you exactly why that was a part of my story, but what I do know is that when I read Paul's letters and he says that Jesus is our peace, I claim Jesus as my peace in a very different way. When I look at how God has brought me to a church I love, with a wife I love, and a family I love, when I say God is my provider and God is faithful, it is not just lip service anymore.

Just yesterday I was texting with a friend and she responded. I actually needed a favor. I texted her and asked her for the favor, and she said, "Well, give me until Monday. I need to get out of the hospital." I said, "Oh, my gosh, what's going on?" Her text message sat with me the rest of the day, and this is what it said. It said, "It's a miracle, but the cancer is all gone. I don't even need chemo. Cancer is the best thing that ever happened to me, the refiner's fire! I know you know what I mean." I said, "I'll send you my sermon. I'm preaching this weekend, and I'm going to preach about this." This is the part that stayed with me. She said, "Please do. We have zero cancer in our family. Was stunned when I learned I had it. By thanking Jesus for my trial, I found joy in cancer." I had this thought and was thinking, Gail, what do you know about God that I don't that you can say you found joy in cancer, and what did God teach you? And what did you learn about His character and His comfort and His provision and His intimacy and His love as you walked through cancer with Him that you can say, "I found joy in cancer."

I think about the Israelites receiving this letter from Jeremiah. While we know some of the details and events of how the Israelites got there and why that happened, we don't know the whole story. I have to wonder what God had for them in captivity and the ways that they knew God differently living there that they wouldn't have or couldn't have had living a life of comfort in the Promised Land. Sometimes I think when we get stuck trying to understand and know exactly why things happen, that's the wrong question because I don't think we can always know for sure why.

So what *do* we do? What do we do when we're frustrated or angry, when we are sad, when we are confused, when we don't know? A wise teacher and a good friend of mine said, "In those times we interpret what is unclear through what is clear, and we understand what we don't know through what we do know."

I love the way this letter from Jeremiah ends. This is what the Lord says. He says,

12 Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. **13** You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. **14** I will be found by you, declares the LORD, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the LORD, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

I don't know why bad things happen to good people. I don't know why life is hard sometimes. I don't know why situations don't turn out the way I want them to all the time, but I know that when I call on God, He hears me. I know that in the midst of the lowest and darkest moments of my life if I seek God, I will find Him. I know He has no greater desire even than to bring me back and restore me into wholeness. I see how faithful God is in the life of Jesus Christ, who came for the very purpose of bringing us back and restoring us to a God who is wildly crazy about us. That is a God worth knowing, and that is the God we are trusting.

One of my favorite parts about speaking that I've shared before, and I'm sure I will share again, is that I get to spend so much time just reading and studying and talking to God and praying. In the process of getting ready for this weekend, I had a Max Lucado moment, and it seemed as if God was asking me, "If your life looked more like Job's for the rest of it, if I took away your life and your finances and your health and your family, would it be enough to know that I still love you? If I took it all and your life never looked the same, would it still be enough to know that I

love you?" I don't know. I don't know how to answer that question, but I know God is asking me to press into it so that is what I'd like for you to do.

Over this next week, I'd love for you to ask yourself these two questions. Write in your journal. Ask your spouse. Talk about it with your kids. Talk about it over dinner, on the way to school, whatever it is for you, but ask yourself these questions. **Is it enough to know that God still loves me in sickness and health and poverty and wealth?** And second, **what is the invitation?** What is God inviting me to in this journey of wholeness on my own personal journey?

- Is He inviting things in me to die, things that are getting in the way of me following Him more closely, things that I hope in, things that I worship that aren't God?
- Or is God inviting something in me to come to life, a dream that He has planted in my heart, the unique talent that He has blessed me with that I can give to the world? What is the invitation for me?

My hope is that in this process we would walk together in the journey of becoming wholehearted people and accept that invitation so that we can experience a future and a hope worth living. Pray with me.

God, the only life worth living, though we try so many others, is the life of walking in commitment with You. So often that looks different from how we think it should or thought it might or hoped it would. In those times, God, when we don't know if it's enough to know that You love us, when it feels real and raw, would we find the strength and would Your Holy Spirit whisper Your promises, that when we call on You, we would be fearless, when we seek You, we would find You and know that Your greatest desire is to restore us and bring us back to You. Do what You did on the cross for us, Jesus, Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.