

SERMON: "THE CITY OF GOD: *A Vision for St. Andrew's*"

Rev. Geoff Ross: Sunday, September 13, 2020, St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

[It's good to be back! Over the summer that wasn't we got to the cottage/stayed home-worked/did some small building projects;but – like you – my pre-COVID plans fell apart! Looking forward/hard to make plans – but, we do:hope/faith; it's all we can do.]

We start our fall together with an important/packed passage from the Book of Jerimiah in which God spoke directly to the People of God for whom, like us today, were in crisis – and dislocated: nothing was the way it used to be/normal; they were scared/confused even angry at God who they thought had either forgotten them or didn't care. Like us, they wondered whether God's promises or plan for them included what they were going through.

If you're like me, you've had a difficult time adjusting/accepting the way things are instead of life being the 'way it used to be.' In many ways we're like the People of God:frightened/scared/confused – our lives are on hold/jobs paused/lost – everything altered significantly for the foreseeable future:we're in exile in our own homes/city! But know this:God is with us – where we are/need Him – always. Know this: God knows/sees your suffering/pain, hasn't forgotten/abandoned you: He is at work – even through these difficult times.

[Over, the past 6 months people have asked; 'what God is up to?/why God would cause this?' My answer to them/you is this: while God never promised that life would be easy, He does promise this: God is bigger than any storm/crisis/problem we will ever face in this world/life. And He promised that He has a plan for us/always working for our good, even when/where we can't see/or don't fully understand. God is/always has been with us, right in the midst of all we've been going through.]

And this is what people throughout history have experienced as they put their hope/faith/lives in the plan/promises of God; plans of redemption/restoration/resurrection: promises of provision/prosperity/protection. In times both good and bad generations have trusted in God's words first offered in/through Jerimiah: "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." (Jeremiah 29:11)

[Plan? – if we need reassurance/hope/love/grace, so do others/neighbours! We are to care/love/serve the city! No mystery:crisis right outside our doors/streets – city/people in need of God's presence/where we are/were planted. We're called to be a difference/Christ to our neighbours]

In the Jerimiah reading, Nebuchadnezzar/Babylonian empire had conquered the Kingdom of Israel and taken the King/Queen mother/court officials – the leaders of Judah/Jerusalem, the artisans/smiths/professional classes into captivity to subjugate/crush the spirit/will of the People of Israel. This was done to assimilate the leaders/priests/ruling classes by forcing them to live in Babylon so they would forget their traditions/ways-were no longer faithful to God. But they resisted and refused to go into Babylon, choosing to

believe the prophets who – lying – said God would restore/return them to Israel. That's when God sends them a letter/email/text through Jeremiah; and it's stunning/staggering/scandalous! What it says/does is to tell them that they are exactly where God wanted/planned for them to be – in the midst of the city/Babylon; but that, even there, God has a plan and a promise for them.

First, the plan: God directly says *“Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters/etc/etc.”* In other words; live/settle there! Don't separate/withdraw from the city, but literally 'plant' yourselves in its midst and grow/multiply – for generations! Next God says; *“But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf”* – meaning *live there/want the best for the city, but don't give in to their values; remain faithful/pray to the Lord'/ but, third; sacrificially love/serve the city/for “in its welfare you will find your welfare.”*

What this meant then/now is that God wants His People to live as His missionaries/emissaries/ambassadors where God has planted/puts us.

[Twice God says “I carried you into Babylon”/my plan – ‘social forces/circumstances/events/tragedies’ brought you here so you could fulfill my plan FOR YOU/US! God's work is never done/so is ours! Even in times of struggle/hardship/suffering, God is working/caring/loving for us – what God wants us to do/where we are/those around us “ungrudging”/“willing”/‘open handed’ (Deuteronomy reading) – where you are/we are because that's God's plan for us/city.]

As Christians, we know this promise – the promise of 'plans' for us, our welfare/future – has been fulfilled in/through the death/resurrection of Jesus. This was the plan/promise that moved those who came before us to build/planted St. Andrew's in the heart of the city. It was God's plan/promise then – that St. Andrew's be Christ to the City – and today, this is still God's plan for St Andrew's. As we begin a new season – and, really, a new era – we will explore what it means for us to be the heart of God in the heart of the city. Amen.