

June 19, 2011

GETTING WITH THE PLAN

This summer Bruce and I and some other preachers in the Garden are going to preaching through the Old Testament book of Ezra. I am guessing that the book of Ezra is not the book your Bible most often falls open to when you go to read and do devotions. We tend to be more familiar with the Gospels and Paul's letters and maybe the first couple books of the Old Testament – Genesis and Exodus. But the book of Ezra and the story of Ezra may not be one that comes to mind when you think of the great tales that Scripture tells. But Ezra has some very important things to say to a community like ours that is thinking through what it means to be an equipped body of disciples serving Christ. It is of one of the great stories of Israel – during one of the great chapters of Israel's history. We are going to cover each Sunday of the summer one chapter of Ezra for the next ten weeks. So today it is chapter One. We will be reading one other text today, and that is Jeremiah 29: 10-14.

Some of you know that at the beginning of the month I took some study time and went with a group of friends to Israel. It's my third visit to Israel and probably the best. I was there

for about eight days and got to see some things I've never seen before. I took about 400 pictures and I thought I would show each and every one of them today! No, I wouldn't do that to you. But I do have a couple pictures to show you of something I've seen each time I've been there and something you've seen before at least in pictures. It's what's called The Western Wall. Or the Wailing Wall. The Western Wall – is the last remaining wall of the great Herodian temple that was built for the Jews by King Herod the Great. It's just about 2000 years old. It was built just before the birth of Christ – and it was one of the marvels of the world. It was the spiritual home of Israel. It was the center of the universe for the Jews. Muslims have their Mecca. Jews have Jerusalem and this temple. It was where Jews made pilgrimage to from the corners of the world. It was where the high priest made the yearly sacrifice to atone for the sins of God's children. Their spiritual home. But it was destroyed after about 100 years of standing – by the same people who built it – the Romans. After King Herod died there were a couple of more Kings of Palestine under Roman rule – until about 70 AD and the first Jewish War when the Roman government sought to reassert itself in Palestine and clear out the Jews – so they marched in and sacked Jerusalem and tore down the temple and the only thing they didn't tear down was this wall on the Western face of what is called the Temple Mount. It is actually a foundation retaining wall for the temple complex.

Now the amazing thing about this wall is that people are praying at it. Some are wailing at it. And they are praying and wailing because it reminds them of what they don't have. They

don't have any more a temple. It's been 2000 years since they've had a temple. And good religious Jews long for a temple. They long for a spiritual home. An altar of God. Millions of Jews pray for the day that temple will be restored. That God will be worshipped in his temple and that the children of God will have their center again. 2000 years and they have not forgotten.

Now I show this to you ... because the story I just read from Ezra chapter one is a story about the people of God who have lost their temple. Now it wasn't the same temple that they lost. It was first temple they had lost – that had been built by Solomon in about 1000 BC – a thousand years before the birth of Christ. In about 586 BC the Babylonians had swept through Palestine and like what the Romans would do around 650 years later ... sacked the city of Jerusalem and tore down the walls and tore down the temple. Not only that but they took a large part of the population of Jerusalem and Israel and marched them up and over to Babylon (in what is now modern day Iraq) and held them in what is called the Babylonian exile for about 70 years. Over three generations of time. 70 years! 70 years without a home. 70 years of living in a foreign land. 70 years of wailing and longing and hoping that someday they might return and rebuild their homes. Rebuild their temple. And rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. So after 70 years of longing and wailing and praying a new king comes to power in Babylon – King Cyrus – and he decrees that the people of Israel can return home. They can go back home

and rebuild their city and their temple. They can reestablish their spiritual center. They are freed from their bondage and given the chance to return to their spiritual home.

And all this is the unfolding of God's plan. That's what the people of Israel believe. They believe that God has a plan for his people ... and all the events that have taken place are a part of God's plan for them. They even believe that when the Babylonians sacked their city and tore down their temple and took them into exile ... that even that was a part of God's plan. Because they believe that Israel had strayed from the ways of God and that God allowed this foreign power to take from them their home – and that when God was ready he would allow his people to return. In fact, God in his plan was even able to use a Gentile king ... King Cyrus ... ruler of the pagan kingdom of Babylon ... as an agent in his plan. Isaiah calls King Cyrus – God's anointed one. It's what Jeremiah is talking about when he says, "For surely 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."

The people of God were a people who had this faith that no matter what was happening ... no matter what calamity might be visited upon them ... no matter how bad things might seem ... no matter how far they might be taken from their home – that God knows the plans he has for them ... plans for their welfare and not for harm ... plans to give a future with hope.

This is an amazing way to look at life, don't you think? Looking at the world ... looking at the course of our days ... looking at the ups and downs of life ... looking at the calamities and the successes ... looking at it all and believing that despite the evidence to the contrary – God is in his heaven and that God has a plan ... and it is a plan to prosper us ... and not to harm us. That someday ... though we are far away ... God is going to bring us home.

It is an amazing way to look at life.

It all probably got started with Abram and Sara in the land of Ur ... and hearing that voice of God that he wants them to pull up stakes and wander to the land of Canaan. A land they did not know. A land far away. But they believed that God had a plan for them ... a plan to prosper them and not to harm them. A plan for a future with hope.

It's the way that Moses looked at life. Leading his people out of Egypt across the wilderness for forty years. The strongest of us would have turned back. Forty years of wandering is too much. But Moses doesn't turn back ... because he believes that God has a plan to prosper and not to harm.

Joshua faces into all the enemies of Canaan. Crosses the Jordan and faces into all the giants of Canaan. Leads his people to establish themselves in the Promised Land. He believes the plan of God is to prosper them.

Little boy David faces off with the giant Goliath. Takes on the challenge of facing down the Philistines --- and without a lick of armor ... meets the giant in the valley of Elah and with his five smooth stones and a sling – does what no other Israelite will do – goes toe to toe with the great warrior – because he believes that God’s plan is to prosper Israel.

It’s an amazing way to look at life.

I suppose that was what was behind Martin Luther King’s last speech before his assassination in Memphis. With death threats coming in by the hour and with a mission to help the sanitation workers of the city, Martin Luther King concluded his speech by saying: “I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land!”

“For surely 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.”

Victor Frankl, author of *Man's Search for Meaning*, tells of his holocaust experience during Hitler's reign of terror. And how after his deportation to the death camp he had hold of only one thing. His coat. And sewn into his coat was the one thing, other than his family, that had meaning for him – and that was the manuscript of his life work and study. But as soon as he got off the train – they took his coat and with it his life work. And in its place they handed him another coat and he put it on and he found in one the pockets not the pages of a manuscript but one little scrap of paper – and written on it was the Shema Yisrael – the greatest of the Jewish prayers: “Hear O Israel the Lord our God, the Lord is One. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength.” Frankl took from this a message from God. That somehow God had a plan. And the result was Frankl wrote one of the most profound books of the 20th century. And from his experience he learned many truths and one of them was this: “He who has a *why* to live for can bear with almost any *how*.”

The people of Israel had a why to live for ... it was the promise that God would not let them go. That God knows his plans. And his plans despite exile, despite ruin, despite calamity

... his plans were to prosper them and not to harm them. To give them a future with hope. God was going to bring them home.

It's an amazing way to look at life.

Because you know each of us is in our own place. Each of us in our own place. And for some of us that place may feel a thousand miles away from home. For some of us that place may feel a thousand miles away from God. For some of us that place may feel a thousand miles away from where you hoped you would be at this point in your life. For some of us ... we don't even know where we are supposed to be. Each of us in our own place. And if you are like most human beings you look around the world from where you are and you see a lot of things you don't understand. The world may feel like it's going to hell in a hand basket. You might feel like you're going to hell in hand basket. And if so, welcome to Babylon. Welcome to the place that feels far from home.

But welcome also to the promise – that God knows his plans. And his plans are to prosper you and not to harm you. Plans to give you a future with hope. Plans to bring you home.

It's an amazing way to look at life.

Remember when the prodigal son ends up in the far country feeding pigs in a pig sty starving to death – God didn't put him there... he put himself there. But God had a plan... a plan to prosper... and not to harm. And the boy got up and went home.

Long ago I sat with a young couple beside the bed of their little 8 year old girl who was fighting a losing battle with leukemia. When you're the parent of a little girl dying you feel far from home. You feel lost. You feel like nothing much makes sense. Questions wrench your heart. You feel like an exile in Babylon. And you don't understand why God let's these things happen. And when the time came in the wee hours of the night and their little girl slipped away – I walked from the hospital room with her dad – and he said to me, “There's a lot I don't understand about all this. I've got a lot of questions for God. And I know God didn't give my little girl cancer. But I couldn't live right now if I didn't believe that somehow God still has a plan. That God has a plan for my daughter, for me, her mother and for all those who loved her. If there's no plan ... then what's the point?”

Good question.

Maybe that's what Paul was trying to say when he said, "We know that all things work together for good, for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose."

His purpose. In Babylon. In Jerusalem. In Sarasota. In shadowed hospital rooms. And even in the place where you find yourself. All things work together for good, for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. God's going to bring you home.

I know the plans I have for you. Plans to prosper you and not to harm you. Plans to give you a future with hope.