

Trinity United Methodist Church

January 10, 2021

Pastor Dan Elmore

Scripture: Jeremiah 29:4-14 (NIV)

4 This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: **5** “Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. **6** Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. **7** Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.” **8** Yes, this is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: “Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have. **9** They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them,” declares the Lord.

10 This is what the Lord says: “When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place. **11** For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. **12** Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to 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 will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you,” declares the Lord, “and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile.”

Sermon

Would you pray with me? Oh Lord, open our ears and our hearts. Let us hear what we need to hear and show us what we need to do to become more faithful disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. In His name we pray, amen.

Some years ago the Washington Post reported on a study of how flippantly people agree to the “terms and conditions” on even the most basic of contracts. In an experiment sponsored by security firm F-Secure, an open wi-fi network was set up in a busy public area. So when people connected to this open wi-fi network, they were presented with lengthy terms and conditions before they could use the network. So just to see how little attention people pay to the “terms and conditions” before checking that agreement box, F-Secure included a “Herod clause” in their terms and conditions—one

that offered up free wi-fi in exchange for the company's permanent ownership of the user's firstborn child. (I got to thinking about that just now. Firstborn? Um, no. Secondborn? Depends on the day.)

Now, pretty much everybody who used the network agreed to it. A company would probably have trouble getting you to hand over said child, even if you were technically contractually obligated, so don't panic too much. But we all know how hapless we are to agree to the terms and conditions. We hit that "I agree" button and then it pops up with another, "Are you sure you agree?" "Yes! I'm sure I agree. Let me get to my stuff." Right?

In fact, a 2011 survey found that 58% of adults would rather read an instruction manual from front to back rather than read through the "terms and conditions." Even 12% said that the phone book would be more palatable than reading through the terms and conditions of a contract.

In last week's sermon, we talked about the differences between contracts and covenants. Contracts are about things and stuff and yes, even property. You think, *well, kids aren't property*, but in many areas of the world today, they're still more or less property. A contract is just that: "We will give you free wi-fi if you hand over your firstborn child."

But covenants are about *relationships*. *I am yours and you are mine*. Language that we just prayed in the Wesleyan Covenant Prayer. Contracts, you can find ways to get out of them. Covenants are serious business and not meant to be broken. Again, I call to your mind the scene from Genesis 15, where God tells Abraham to take these animals, chop them straight down the middle and lay them out with the halves on each side. And in the night a burning torch comes and passes between these carcasses—a symbolism and ritual of God saying, in effect, "May what was done to these animals be done to me if I don't keep my end of this covenant."

Covenants involve promises of blessing. And there are reminders of these promises of blessings from covenants peppered throughout scripture. And one such place we find one of those is in today's reading, a verse that many of us know and love very well—Jeremiah chapter 29, verse 11. "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord. "Plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." That is a wonderful promise of scripture, is it not? That is a wonderful reminder of the covenant that God has made with us. It makes a great memory verse, a great verse to commit to memory if maybe that was your New Year's resolution this year, to commit more scripture to memory.

But it's also one of those verses that I find people don't really read the full terms of the covenant. They don't even read the full terms of the blessing, of the promise. We

just think, “Plans for me to prosper and not to harm me? To give me hope and a future? Sign me up for that! Yes, absolutely! I agree!”

I was struck a number of years ago looking for a graduation card for somebody, how many graduation cards have this verse inscribed on the card, given to a young person on the cusp of the rest of their lives. “God has a plan for you to give you hope and a future, be encouraged.” But it’s taken out of context.

In Jeremiah 29, it’s part of a larger section that’s written to people who are in exile. Babylon had come and sacked Jerusalem and carried off at least half the population back to Babylon. And these people were not feeling like they were on the cusp, on the edge of the rest of their lives. They were feeling like their lives were over, that the world as they knew it was ending. That’s where we get verses of scripture like Psalm 137, which says, “By the rivers of Babylon we sat down and wept. Our tormenters said to us, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion.’ How can we sing the songs of Zion here when we’re stuck with you people, you tormenters?” And that psalm ends by saying, “How we wish that God would judge you. Happy are those who take *your* babies and dash them against the rocks.” (Bekah turned up her nose at that at the 9:30 service, but that’s in the Bible. That’s in our scriptures. Any time anybody tells me, “I can’t be mad at God,” I say, “Go read Psalm 137. Those people were mad.”)

It’s a time of hardship. And Jeremiah is blunt about it. He says that this time of hardship will literally be a lifetime. He point-blank says 70 years, which was the upper edge of life expectancy in those days. This isn’t going to be over quickly, y’all, Jeremiah says. But yet God will not forget them. Why? Because God is a covenant God and will not relinquish in holding up His end of the covenant.

But also, instead of assuring them that their captivity will be short, God through Jeremiah first advises them to settle down. (I think that could be great advice for us right now, too.) Settle down. I think if we all took one big, collective, deep breath, we’d be a lot better off. Settle down. Build houses. Plant gardens. Make a life for themselves, God says, in this new reality in which they find themselves.

And God says also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it. Because if it prospers, you too will prosper. That word “prosper” is the Hebrew word “shalom,” which means “the greatest good,” the greatest blessing that we could give to somebody, that we could seek for ourselves. Seek and work for the *shalom* of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if the *city* has shalom, *you* will have shalom.

I find it no coincidence that this imperative command—it’s not like God says, “Hey, and while you’re there, you might want to consider this”—it’s a command. “Seek the welfare of the city to which I have carried you.” It’s no coincidence that this

command comes before that great promise that we read in verse 11, of the plans that God has for us, to give *us* shalom. Because the fact of the matter is that our covenant blessings from God are inextricably tied up in blessing others in turn. It's how God set it up from the beginning. In Genesis chapter 12, when He first makes His first covenant with Abram, as he's then known. He tells Abram, "Hey, leave everything you know. Step out of your comfort zone. Go to this other land you've never been to before that I'm going to give you. And by the way, you'll know you're there when I tell you you're there." Thanks, God. That's pretty much like God usually operates.

But God gives a covenant to Abram. He says, "I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you." Now if God had stopped right there, that would have been pretty good on its own, right? Abram would have been, "Okay, sure, let's go, Lord. I'll go where you show me, and let's do this blessing thing." But God continues. "I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you, and all peoples of earth will be blessed through you."

We're *blessed to be a blessing*, folks. And God's covenant with us is intended to make us covenant people as we live in covenant not just with God, but with each other and with the world around us. Not just those of our tribe, not just those of our political affiliation, not just those of our nationalities or ethnicities, not just those of our class or any of the above. *All peoples on earth*.

It goes back even further, really, than Genesis chapter 12. All the way back to Cain and Abel, where God shows up on the scene and asks Cain, "Um, where's your brother?" And God knows exactly what happened, but God wants Cain to fess up. And Cain stammers back, "Uh, uh, uh, am I my brother's keeper?" Trying to weasel his way out of it. And God barely dignifies that question with a response of, "What have you done?" Implying, of course, that we are, indeed, our sisters' and brothers' keepers. We are to seek their blessing and their shalom.

And so as our church Strategic Planning Team discerned together and with feedback from you all of where God is calling us next as a church, this passage of scripture became one of the foundations for the plan that was discerned and crafted. To seek the shalom of our community, because when our community has shalom, we will have shalom.

So our vision statement reads, "To be a vibrant community that reflects the Kingdom of God." Not just Trinity Church's preferences and values. Not just our United Methodist flavor of the Christian faith, even though I happen to think it is the best take on Christianity that is out there. Not just to be a bunch of do-gooders, even. But to be a community that reflects the Kingdom of God through love and service to one another.

Therefore, our mission statement is, “To be a witness to Jesus Christ in the community by building *authentic relationships* and leading through impactful service.” We’ll do these things through four different goals and supporting strategies, the first of which is that Trinity will cultivate deeper connections with the community.

A lot of the feedback that was received from within the congregation and especially from outside in the community—we’re known already as a community church. “Oh yeah, that’s the church that lets us use their parking lot for the Farmer’s Markets and other town events.” “Oh yeah, that’s the church that we have Souper Saturday at,” and things of that nature. We want to cultivate and deepen those connections with the community so that we can better bless our community. Through the use of our physical spaces, through strengthening relationships with local government agencies to meet the needs of the community, in deepening relationships with other churches and faith communities to foster greater unity that benefits the community, especially brothers and sisters in African-American churches in our town and area.

Now, I know just in that very brief overview, without giving you something written to take home, you’re probably not going to remember much if any of that. But you’ll almost get sick of it by the time this year is over. You’ll hear it again. But for now, what I want us to think about is, how can we be in covenant with our community? What does it mean to live as covenant people with our community around us? Such that even if we don’t get one single new person coming to Trinity, much less joining in membership, out of all of this that we’re seeking to undertake and do, if we don’t get one person? Furthermore, if people end up not joining us here at Trinity, but they do end up joining over at (gasp!) *Liberty*—we’re about the Kingdom, right? They’re still getting to know Jesus like we know Jesus. And that’s the goal. We *hope* that they’ll come and join us in following Jesus here at Trinity because here’s the thing: Here’s what might happen—at some point, someone might ask, “Why are you doing this in our community? You’re a church. Why are you doing this over here? Doesn’t seem church related, necessarily.” And we can answer back, “Because Jesus loves you, and we do, too.”

And as we seek to lead our community through impactful service to others, if we *lead*, what does that imply? That others are going to want to *follow* us, right, in doing what we’re doing. And then we can teach them, as they serve alongside of us. “Hey, don’t just follow us here at Trinity, but follow Jesus, who we’re seeking to follow as we do these things.” Because we’re already doing great and wonderful things to these ends. Even during COVID-tide, we are still hosting blood drives in our FAC. We’re still known, and we look forward to the day, when we can have Souper Saturday in there again. We already have members who are active in all kinds of ways and levels of our local government and community.

The question is, how can we do more? And not just how can we do more, but how can we do it with more *intentionality*? Such that we bless because we have been blessed.

So we let the blood drive come in and use our space. “Sure, yeah, come on in and use it. Our church admin will let you in if the doors are locked.” Or, “Sure, park in our parking lot. Come and go as you please. Whatever.” How can we be more *intentional* about blessing the people who use our spaces?

One of the bigger ideas that was beginning to be talked about—I’m starting to label the time frame before the pandemic started “P.C.”—“Pre-COVID.” You know, it’s like B.C., Before Christ, right? In the time of P.C. (that’s a loaded term, right?), in the time before COVID, Carrie Bruce, Bettye Thomas’ daughter—Bettye is a longtime member here at Trinity, and Bettye struggles with dementia, and Carrie is her primary caregiver—Carrie had been doing research to help herself and other caregivers like her out. In doing this, Carrie found that there is an organization that will certify your town or community or city as a “Dementia-Friendly” town or city. And how awesome would that be, for Trinity to lead the way in helping Smithfield become a certified Dementia-Friendly Community? I have no idea what that entails. I imagine it’s things like better signage and so forth. We’ve got to look into it. But how awesome would that be, if Trinity led the way in blessing our community in that way?

Because here’s what might happen: Somebody who’s retiring to the Smithfield area, or trying to decide *where* they’re going to retire, might be checking out Smithfield, checking out the town’s resumè, look at it and say, “Oh. You know, I’ve got dementia in my family and it might be something I’m going to be facing someday. This is a Dementia-Friendly Community. What’s that about? How did you become that? Oh, Trinity Church led the way in helping be a better community in that regard.” That person and their family then might say, “Hey! That’s a church I might want to check out when I move to town.”

You see how these things work? I love seeing the forest. I love seeing how all these things can fit together. That’s why I need people like many of you who see the trees, because I see the forest sometimes so much that it’s like, “What? Trees? Oh, okay.”

Another P.C. item was in the Smithfield Times, it was being talked about all over town, how the town has been moving away from many of the family-friendly events that the town used to have, towards these events that bring in more money, but they’re more adult-focused. And the younger families were starting to speak up and say, “What about these family-friendly events? You know, the Bacon, Bourbon and Music Fest is fun, I like to go to it, but I can’t take my kids to it. I’ve got to find a sitter for the day. Or I can’t take

my kids to BobFest,” or whatever the case might be. And in the midst of that conversation, those who have been running the Christmas parade were talking about nixing the Christmas parade, partly because it was the same people, I think, had been doing it for years and got tired of it. Also, one of the things I heard was, “It doesn’t bring money to the town.”

So I thought, “Wow. What if Trinity took the lead on providing these family-friendly activities, not just for our church, but for our town, for our community?” What if we took on the Christmas parade? It might mean that we have to stop some of the things that we do internally that we’re used to doing at Christmas time, but it’s for the sake of—what? *Blessing the community*. Right?

And it wouldn’t be necessarily just Trinity Church. What if Trinity took the lead in organizing it, but we partnered with all the other churches in our area such that the banner at the front of that parade that everybody packing the sidewalks would see would say, “This event is brought to you by people who love Jesus and love you. Ask us more.” How awesome would that be?

There’s all kinds of ways that we can bless our community around us as we have been blessed to be a blessing. Not just corporately as a church but as individuals, as members of the body of Christ as well.

Those of you watching online and in places beyond Smithfield and Isle of Wight County, how can we all seek the shalom of the community wherever we find ourselves? How can we build those authentic relationships? How can we lead through impactful service?

Because you see, friends, our God is not just a covenant God. But our God is a God of unlimited possibilities. God has things in mind for us that we haven’t even dreamed of yet. But led by His spirit, we will. And I’m excited for the ways in which we can move forward together, because we have been so richly blessed, have we not?

So let us go forth to be a blessing for others. Thanks be to God. Amen.