

PLANS AND PROMISES

April 15, 2007

Sermon preached by Rev. Edee Chase Fenimore

Texts: Jeremiah 29:7-11, John 20:19:31

We human beings make plans all the time. Some of us are more the dreamer kind of planners, having mental lists of things we would love to do, places we would love to go, people we would love to meet. And some of us are more the engineer kind of planners, with written lists, and lots of details, like dates, costs, times, all neatly calculated and written next to the items with which each belongs. Whatever our style, we human beings make plans. Questions are asked of us regarding our plans. What are your plans for vacation? Do you have any trips planned for the summer? Where is your daughter planning to go to college? What are your retirement plans? Does your son plan to live in the city? We plan our work and parties and trips and days off. We plan what concerts we want to attend, what operas we want to hear, what plays to see, what museums we want to visit. And we note our plans in our electronic devices; our PDA's, Blackberries and Palm Pilots or we use the old fashioned method and write everything down in our calendars. We get upset when our plans go awry. And, of course, they do. At times it seems as if the old saying is always and absolutely true. Life is what happens to us while we are making plans.

Both of our lessons for this morning are about plans. Even before the scene that was described in our second lesson, the apostles, the disciples of Jesus, his followers and closest friends had plans. They had plans for Jesus and plans for themselves. They expected and therefore planned for Jesus to fit their picture of what Messiah should be. They planned for Messiah to come as a mighty warrior who would conquer all the enemies of their country. They expected and planned for Messiah to be an influential ruler, a king like David or perhaps an emperor or governor. Jesus changed all their expectations and plans. His ministry of healing, teaching and preaching, emphasized serving, caring, justice and peace. He asked his disciples to follow him not into battle, not into the courts and palaces of power. Jesus said, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." He said, "Follow me. Feed my lambs. Follow me, tend my sheep." And perhaps the most frightening statement of all, "Take up your cross and follow me." And of course, the followers of Jesus did not want all that. They had other plans, other expectations.

In fact during that last dreadful week, when the authorities charged Jesus, when he was tried, sentenced and crucified, it was apparent how far apart the plans of his followers were from the ministry in which Jesus had engaged and certainly the reaction to that ministry. The followers distanced themselves from what was going on. One betrayed Jesus. Several slept when he asked them to wait with him. One denied Jesus. They all scattered, not wanting to be identified with this man who did not meet their expectations, their plans.

Then we come to that scene that was described in our second lesson. The disciples are still operating in fear. They had gathered in a locked room afraid that their enemies would come for them. It is not clear whether or not they have come, at this point, to believe the story that the woman had told; the story of the empty tomb. It is absolutely clear that they have made no plans at this point to continue the ministry that Jesus had begun. Jesus comes to them, in a way that words can never fully explain. And Jesus gives them their marching orders. He greets them with “Peace be with you.” And this wonderful greeting is immediately followed by the words, “As the father has sent me so I send you.” It is almost as if Jesus is saying to them, “If you planned to hide away and be fearful, forget it. God has another plan. The ministry of love and justice that we began does not end here. Get going. You are sent by me as I am sent by God, to love and serve this world.” That is the message of the resurrection. That is the message of this Eastertide for the followers of Jesus then and now. God’s plan of love cannot be defeated by the powers of this world.

Luckily, the followers then and now are not sent out with only their own energy and skills. As the story is told in the gospel of John, Jesus breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit”. The Holy Spirit is with the followers of Jesus, then and now. As they and we continue the ministry to which we are all called. God has always had this plan for God’s beloved children.

Our first lesson from the 29th chapter of Jeremiah tells of the Jewish people living in exile off in Babylon. They were away from everything they held dear. They were even concerned that being in a foreign country, being away from Jerusalem, meant that they were away from God. Much like the disciples locked away in that house, the exiles were operating out of fear. They planned to remain separate from their captors, to show by their separateness that they were not a part of this land to which they had been exiled. But the prophet Jeremiah gives them a message from God. With those “listen up” words, that prophets use, Jeremiah proclaims, “Thus says the Lord.” The prophet, speaking for God, says that the people are to settle in, build houses, plant crops, marry and have families. Then there is an even stronger command. Hear again the words of Jeremiah, speaking for God. “Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.” And the prophet does not stop there. The prophet communicates God’s promise to the people. Remember that passage from John, our second lesson. After his “get going, continue the ministry” speech, Jesus breathed on his followers and reminded them that they had with them the Holy Spirit. Now in this passage, Jeremiah, speaking for God after saying “Seek the welfare of the place where you are in exile” says, “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.” Throughout time, God challenges human beings to be about God’s business, the business of loving and working for peace and justice. Throughout time God communicates that we are not alone in doing that ministry. In fact with each other and with God’s spirit is the only way we can do the ministry. It is part of God’s plan for us, plans for our welfare and not for harm to give us a future with hope. The exiled people planned to remain separate. God had other plans. The disciples separated themselves and planned to remain away from the

world that did not conform to their plans. God had other plans. It is interesting how plans are made and changed.

A little more than four years ago, I retired from the active interim ministry. I planned to spend my time in the small town of Neavitt, Maryland, population about sixty five, on the eastern shore of the Chesapeake Bay. I planned to swim and sail and maybe learn to make crab cakes. I planned to tell stories at the Maritime Museum, read till my eyes grew dim and work on improving my golf game. Someone had other plans. And for a long time I thought possibly that someone was Jon Walton alone. The conversation went something like this. "Hello Edee, this is Jon". "Hi Jon, how are you?" We had not spoken for some time so there was some small talk. Then came the sentence that began to change all the plans I had made. "The Interim Associate Pastor here at First Church is leaving and I think you ought to apply for the position." I said, "No, I'm retired". I said I was beginning to get involved in life on the Eastern Shore. We chatted a bit more and hung up. The next day, Jon called again and invited me to think of this not as a call from a friend and former colleague but to think of it as a call from God. I believe that I laughingly accused him of not being fair and that playing the God card was beneath him. I said that another interim position was not in my plans and we hung up.

The third day--oh, watch out for those third days, just about anything can happen. Jon called and said, "Come on up to the city for a day. I'll treat you to lunch. If you hate the city, if this church doesn't appeal to you, if you don't feel suited to the work, I'll not ask you again." My husband, Bob rolled his eyes. After all these years, he knows me all too well. For by the time I reached the corner of 12th Street and 5th Avenue, I was in love with this amazing city. Half way through lunch, I was captured by this congregation's energy, diversity and desire to live out its faith. And from the beginning the work has been an absolute joy. So that is how it began.

And now we are at the end of the interim period. This congregation has elected Sarah Segal McCaslin as its Associate Pastor. I am delighted with your choice of Sarah to share the ministry with you. And I am confident that her energy, intelligence, imagination and love will blend with yours in ways that will enhance the journey of faith that you share.

This is the thirteenth time I have served as an Interim Pastor. I always fall a bit in love with the people. I plan on that. And I know that leaving is always bittersweet. I plan on that. My plans always are to leave with some grace and a bit of dignity. But we know what happens to plans. There has been a lot of graceless and undignified sniffing going on this week and I have a wad of Kleenex stuffed in my pocket right now. There have been people that I have not been able to talk to in the last couple of days, because of the lump in my throat. But even if I sniffle a little bit, I need to say some words of thanks.

Thank you for sharing what has been a truly amazing time. Thank you for sharing stories, struggles, joys, dreams, time, questions and faith. Thank you for being people who continue to care even when there are doubts, who continue to serve even when no thanks come, who continue to dream in the midst of discouragement. First Church will

always have a special place in my mind and heart. I did not plan to fall completely in love but that is what happened. Here in the midst of this huge city I found a place that is home for me and people who will always be family.

Here I learned the truth of God's promise; "I know the plans I have for you, plans for your welfare and not for harm to give you a future with hope." May it be so for us all. Thanks be to God.