

25 Years: Living Letters of Hope

Jeremiah 29:4-14 & II Corinthians 2:14-3:3

“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.” Jeremiah 29:11

Jeremiah 29:4-14

⁴ Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵ Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they 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. ⁷ But 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. ⁸ For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, ⁹ for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the LORD. ¹⁰ For thus says the LORD: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. ¹¹ 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. ¹² Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. ¹³ When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, ¹⁴ I will let you find me, says the LORD, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the LORD, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

II Corinthians 2:14-3:3

¹⁴ But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing him. ¹⁵ For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; ¹⁶ to the one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? ¹⁷ For we are not peddlers of God's word like so many; but in Christ we speak as persons of sincerity, as persons sent from God and standing in his presence. 3:1 Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Surely we do not need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you or from you, do we? ² You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all; ³ and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.ⁱ

I would like to take a few minutes to set the context for our Scripture readings this morning. Both of our readings are letters sent to the people of God to encourage them and warn them to live for God. The reading from the Old Testament book of Jeremiah was written sometime around 586-585 BC. Jerusalem had just fallen to King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. For two years, the city of Jerusalem had been surrounded and finally fell. King Nebuchadnezzar literally destroyed the city, knocking down all the walls, burning most of the buildings and completely wiping out the temple; taking all the treasures and killing most of the people. The king takes around 4,600 people into Babylonian captivity. Most of the captives are the best and the brightest of Jerusalem. In Jewish history, this is the time of the exile. Their homeland, along

with their temple, has been destroyed and they are forced to live in a foreign land under the harsh rule of a tyrannical taskmaster. Times are desperate!

The writer of our Old Testament lesson is God's prophet, Jeremiah. Jeremiah was not taken into captivity; he was living among the ruins of Jerusalem and encouraged the people that remained amongst the ruins. Jeremiah sat down with pen and parchment paper and wrote a letter to the captives, the exiles in Babylon. This letter has been considered one of the most important documents of the Old Testament.

Undaunted by the eight hundred miles of desert that separated Jeremiah from his mission field, Jeremiah wrote the letter. It was delivered by Elasah and Gemariah.

Listen to the first three verses of chapter 29: *“These are the words of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the remaining elders among the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. ² This was after King Jeconiah, and the queen mother, the court officials, the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the artisans, and the smiths had departed from Jerusalem. ³ The letter was sent by the hand of Elasah son of Shaphan and Gemariah son of Hilkiah, whom King Zedekiah of Judah sent to Babylon to King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon.”*

Principle 1: God-Fearing Families

Before we get into the text of the letter, I would like for us to reflect on the first principle in our reading this morning. How easy it is for us to read these names and not recognize the importance of them. We are told that Elasah was the son of Shaphan, but does that have any real meaning for us today? Are these just names written in some book a long time ago? Shaphan is a faithful priest who is not taken into captivity. Shaphan remains in Jerusalem and tries to clean up and restore the temple. Shaphan could have given up. Shaphan could have quit. Instead he begins by cleaning the temple. What joy! He finds the scroll of the Law among the ashes in the temple.

Our first important principle is that we must never forget the power that one God-fearing family can have on history. Shaphan remains after Jerusalem is destroyed. After all of the destruction in the city, it is miraculous for Shaphan to find the Scroll of the Law! Shaphan's son, Elasah, is chosen to carry Jeremiah's letter of hope to the exiles--800 miles away. What a powerful principle. We must never forget the power that one family can have—impacting all of history; all because of the family's faithfulness and hope in God.

As I thought about Elasah and his father, Shaphan, I reflected on the names of those recorded on the charter of this church. I had Brenda, our Office Administrator, make copies of the first bulletins of this church. She printed out the very first service from October 7, 1984, when a faithful few gathered in Round Rock High School and held their first worship service on World Communion Sunday. She also copied the bulletin from April 21, 1985. The faithful followers of Christ were ready to be chartered as a Presbyterian Church. This past week, I used these bulletins to write the liturgies we are sharing today. As I read the bulletins, I ran across lists of names—those who were joining the church. I kept reading and found the list of the newly elected Elders of the church --- Laverne Adams, Billie Blankenship, Bonnie Brockway, Phil

Griffin, Dennis Hazel, Terry Holten, Jody Kelly, Sherrill McCullough, Bob Rhoades, Carl Rogers, David Solomon and Rose Suenram.

I wish I could read all of the names of all the charter members! As we celebrate and remember our past twenty-five years, it is important that we never forget the power one God-fearing family can have on history. Thank you to all of the founding members who gave of their time, their talents, their treasures--their blood, sweat and tears so this church could be here today. **What we see here today as we celebrate the 25th anniversary of RRPC: the power of God-fearing families!**

Principle 2: Settle, Seek and Pray

How many of you are natives of Round Rock? (A dozen teenagers raised their hands.) According to Round Rock history, in 1970 there were only 2,700 residents living here then. In 1980 there were just a little over 12,000 residents of Round Rock. Today there are over 100,000 people who call Round Rock home. In Jeremiah's letter of hope he calls the exiles to settle down, build houses, plant gardens, give their sons and daughters in marriage and increase in number. He also exhorts them to seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which they've been carried into exile and... pray. ***Settle. Seek. Pray.***

Some interesting facts: In 25 years of ministry RRPC has settled down—from wandering nomads at Round Rock High School, they bought the property here in 1986. In November of 1988 RRPC built their first church—the Fellowship Hall. In 2002 this sanctuary was completed and the first worship services were held April 21.

During the past 25 years, RRPC has had 78 weddings, 45 funerals, 216 infant baptisms, 36 adult baptisms. The church has put five members into full-time, ordained ministry; supported three seminarians from foreign countries—two from Africa and one from Scotland; and one more seminarian with a call to campus ministry. RRPC has helped to educate and support ten seminary interns from Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary. Presently we have six members in the Lay Leadership/Commissioned Lay Pastor program—with one of them already serving a call to the First Presbyterian Church of Luling. (That's 25 people in 25 years!) What a rich history RRPC has of Settling, Seeking and Praying--for the prosperity of RRPC and Round Rock and the world! What a rich history of God-fearing families making a powerful difference!

Principle 3: God Knows us, He will not forget us!

The most powerful verse in this letter to the exiles is verse 11:

“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 Hebrew word for “know” is “yada” and is a very intimate word—meaning “completely known.” God “yadas” you and me. He KNOWS US inside and out. The fascinating note in verse 11 is that word for “plans” is plural. God “yada” not just of a plan, or one plan, but God knows us very intimately and God knows of many plans for us—for our welfare. The Hebrew word for “welfare” is “shalom” which is usually translated with the word “peace.” “Shalom” in the Hebrew language means “peace, completeness, health, welfare, or good.” The plans, the

many plans that God knows and has for us are for peace, welfare, completeness and good. Do you believe that? Not only are these plans for good, they are to give us a future with hope.

Today is a time for us to look back and to celebrate what God has done for us during these past 25 years! It is also a time for us to forward. For some here today, you may feel as though God has forgotten you—you are stuck in exile. Maybe you are going through some difficult times—for some it could be your physical health. For others, your difficult times could include your financial security. For some of us, we may be going through broken relationships of children, parents, spouse, coworkers, friends or family. Maybe you are here today wondering why God would call you to an area of 70 days over 100 degrees every summer! ☺ The promise of verse 11 is that God will give us a future with HOPE.

This is a living letter from Jeremiah to the living exiles of Babylon and to us. God was telling the exiles: I KNOW YOU. I HAVE NOT FORGOTTEN YOU IN THIS GOD-FORSAKEN PLACE! I REMEMBER YOU AND I HAVE PLANS FOR YOU.

Principle 4: Call, Come, and Pray

Jeremiah's promise is threefold: Call out to God, come to God, and pray to God.

I truly believe that during the first 25 years of ministry at RRPC, Pastor Davis Taylor, Pastor Bill Peterson, Interim Pastors Bob Bruce, and Allen Kuntz, and Pastor Julia Farrell were faithful pastors in calling RRPC to do just this. This is exactly what worship is all about: ***Call out to God, Come to God and Pray to God!*** This church has grown from its first chartered Sunday of 132 members to 365 members. We have 109 children on the baptized roll, for a total of almost 475 people that we minister to and with. This number of 475 does not include our faithful friends and visitors every Sunday. RRPC has 194 God-fearing families...families who are ordained to make a powerful difference in God's world!

This past year we have opened our doors to the Ye Rang Korean Presbyterian Church to come to God, call on God and pray to God with us and in our buildings. Talk about exiles in a foreign land! What about our brothers and sisters in Christ from Korea and other nationalities. We have invited them to join us this morning in worship. May they always be welcome here!

We are reminded by Jeremiah to call to God, come to God and pray to God. I believe that we can do that corporately in worship, but we are also called to do this individually. The promise that Jeremiah gives us this morning is that if we seek God with all our hearts we will find God. No hide and seek games with God! The game plan is simple --- seek and find Seek God with all your hearts and you will find God! What a wonderful promise from a living letter! So let us remember to call to God --- come to God --- pray to God every Sunday and every day of our lives. Let us seek and find!

So What?

So what are the plans that God has for us? My illustration for the "so what" comes from Paul's letter to the church in Corinth. Paul planted this church early in his ministry. Paul is now in Ephesus planting the church there. Paul writes both of his letters to the Corinthians from Ephesus and Macedonia. The Corinthian church is experiencing some hard times. Corinth was a

very wicked city and false teachers had infiltrated the church. Paul calls the Corinthians to be the aroma of Christ but, more importantly, he tells them, ***“You, yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everybody. You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.”***

Have you ever thought of yourself as a living letter? Do you ever see others reading you? What is the aroma carry—the fragrance of Christ? Paul’s challenge to the Corinthians and his challenge to us is that we are called to be a living letter written not with ink or pen, but by the Spirit of the Living God.

Would every one who can stand, please stand up? I want to give a charge to you:

We are the aroma of Christ. We are a living letter from Christ—written with the living Spirit of God! You are called to settle, to seek and to pray—to make a powerful difference in Round Rock, Texas, and the world. Write your letter, O Divine Master, upon our hearts so that we, too, can be living letters of good, peace, and hope!

What will happen in the life of this Church? Really, only God knows because He knows the plans He has for each one of us. God’s plans are for our welfare, for our good, for our peace and for our future--filled with hope. May we all be living letters of hope! May we settle down where God has called us! May we seek the peace of the city and may we pray to the Lord for its prosperity. May we, individually and corporately, come to God, call to God and pray to God. Remember God does not forget! Surely God knows intimately the plans that He has for each one of us, and for RRPC --- plans for good, for peace and not for harm and a future filled with hope.

Let us pray Be thou our vision!

Round Rock Presbyterian Church
Round Rock, Texas 78681
25th Anniversary Sunday
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Reverend David Peters

ⁱ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.