

**December 10, 2023**  
**Advent 2: Stay Awhile Series: Plan**  
**Jeremiah 29: 5-14**

A familiar plotline for movies and for life, in general, is a carefully laid plan that goes awry. It's the villain's carefully laid plan that gets thwarted that I find the most entertaining. It's Wylie the Coyote or Cruella DeVille and her not-so-bright helpers whose plans literally go up in smoke. It's the burglars in Home Alone I love to watch as their plan goes painfully wrong.

As I thought about my favorite plans that didn't go as planned, the one that rose to the top for me this week was in the first Jurassic Park movie.

In the movie, there was a nerdy character named Dennis Nedry. He was the designer of the island's computer system. Due to his financial problems, low salary, and feeling underappreciated, he accepted a bribe to smuggle dinosaur embryos off the island. Nedry crafts the perfect plan to deactivate the island's security system (which is what keeps the dinosaurs safely contained in their assigned areas) just long enough to get the dinosaur embryos out of storage and put them on a boat. His plan was to reactivate the security system right away so nobody would ever know of his plan or his theft.

So, as visiting experts head out on a tour of the park, Nedry sets his plan in motion. He disables the security and phone systems, steals the embryos, and heads for the boat. Unfortunately, a sudden and severe storm interrupts his mad dash to the boat, resulting in his plan going awry. With the security system off longer than he anticipated, dinosaurs end up not contained. This does not end well for Nedry. Sometimes, no matter how meticulously we plan, things go awry. I bet if Nedry had the chance, he would plan for weather factors next time. His failure makes for a good story, though.

"If you fail to plan, you are planning to fail." Both Benjamin Franklin and Winston Churchill each had their own versions of this quote. I don't remember when I first heard it, but it has stuck with me. I am a planner. I like to decide what needs to happen and then plan to make it happen. I do not like to "wing it." And the reason I don't like to wing it is not because I want things to be perfect. I do, but when I am in a healthy headspace, I know perfection is not possible. The reason I like a plan, and I avoid winging it, is that I have found that having a plan allows for flexibility.

Almost 7 years ago, when I was called here, was the first time in my career that I had been on staff as the only ordained minister. Unexpectedly, I ended up really anxious about the possibility that, at some point, my sermon writing process would fail me, and I wouldn't have a sermon on Sunday morning. Or something would happen during the week that would keep me from writing a sermon. I had dreams where I would stand up in the pulpit expecting there to be a sermon manuscript and it was gone. The

whole thing was a little unsettling. I knew I had to figure out how to dial back the anxiety around my many “what ifs.” So, I made a plan.

Assuming that one day, what I feared would happen would, in fact, happen, I made a plan so that when it did happen, I would know what to do. What I knew I could not do was preach an old sermon. I knew I could not stand up here and pretend like I had written that sermon for that week. I decided what I could do was stand up here and be honest with you. I decided I could say, “I worked for days trying to get the sermon to come together this week, and it did not. I am hoping next week will be different, so give me your best writer’s block advice.” I decided I could say, “I spent most of this week at the hospital with a member. I know that you know that is more important than anything I could say this morning. Let’s sing some hymns together, share communion, and call it a day.” Yes, I decided I would just be honest with you, and we would get through it together. I made that plan a few months after I came to DCC. I have never had to use it, and having the plan has kept the anxiety at bay, and I no longer dream that the sermon manuscript is missing. Having a plan sometimes keeps things from going off the rails.

This week, once again, we find the Israelites in a place where things have gone off the rails. Like last week, our text is from the book of Jeremiah. We are at a place where the Assyrians have overrun Jerusalem and destroyed the temple. Some of the Israelites remained in Jerusalem, and others were in exile in Babylon. There was tension between the ones still in Jerusalem and the exiles. God had to have a favorite, right? There was that and another source of tension for the exiles. They were in the middle of a culture that was not their own, feeling hopeless and desperate. Many exiles were starting to question their faith.

In the ancient world, most cultures in the Middle East believed that if one army conquered another army, the conquering army’s gods were more powerful than the losing army’s gods. Switching one’s allegiance to the gods of the conquerors made sense from a self-preservation standpoint. From a theological standpoint, if the Israelite god couldn’t protect the exiles, maybe the gods of Babylon could. Into that messy situation came people claiming to be prophets and predictors of the future. They were like, “Chin up, Israelites, it won’t be long, and you will be going home. This is a very temporary situation. Just chill.” It was all a lot.

The author of Jeremiah framed today’s reading in the form of a letter to the exiles from the prophet, who was still in Jerusalem. The letter contained a message from God that was meant to give the exiles hope for the future and to give them instructions about how to live in the present. There was something else, though, some not-so-great news. This is Jeremiah 29:4-14.

<sup>4</sup>Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: <sup>5</sup>Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and

eat what they produce. <sup>6</sup>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. <sup>7</sup>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. <sup>8</sup>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 your dreams that you dream, <sup>9</sup>for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the Lord.

<sup>10</sup>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. <sup>11</sup>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. <sup>12</sup>Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. <sup>13</sup>When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, <sup>14</sup>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.

(NRSV)

It is hard to know if the people felt better or worse after receiving Jeremiah's message. I am sure the assurance that God hadn't forgotten them was comforting. Certainly, to receive some direction about what they were supposed to be doing with their lives was helpful, but I'm sure working for the *welfare* of Babylon was not their preference. And then the news...70 years in exile? Considering the average lifespan at that time, none of them would ever go home. Their only hope was in the generations to come. That must have been devastating. This was not what they had planned. I am sure they would have preferred to believe the so-called prophets who were saying their time in exile would be short-lived.

As I mentioned last week, there is a lot about this ancient context we can't relate to. On the other hand, we know what it feels like not to have life go as planned. The exiles had expected to be in Jerusalem, worshiping at the temple, working at their trade, and raising their children. Most importantly, they had expected to be at home. When has your life not gone the way you planned? Maybe you didn't get into the school you hoped to or get the job you worked so hard for. Maybe starting a family wasn't as easy as you expected it to be. Or the person you thought you would spend the rest of your life with wasn't that person. In whatever ways your life hasn't gone as planned, I want you to know it's okay to grieve it. It's okay to feel sad, hopeless, and even angry. It's okay to doubt and reconsider what you believe about spirituality. It's okay not to know what to do next and to feel like your anchor has been brought up amid a storm and you are adrift. There is a message in this ancient text for all of us who have felt like that or who are feeling like that.

And we will find it in verse 11. This verse is probably the most familiar verse in all of Jeremiah, "I know the plans I have for you...plans for your welfare and not for harm, to

give you a future with hope.” Never fear...I am not offering that to you as a way of saying, “There, there, God has something better in store for you. A better job, a more suitable life partner or whatever.” Christians have been plucking this verse out of its context and using it like that for a long time. We hang it on the walls of our children’s nurseries. We pair it with “God won’t give you more than you can handle” as we try to convince people their crappy circumstances are really a gift, “Everything sucks, but the Bible says...” and then we quote this text.

The comfort in this verse for me is found in the truth that this verse wasn’t meant for me or for any of us as individuals. This verse is comfort for us who do not believe God is a heavenly puppeteer, pulling strings and controlling all of life’s details, thwarting some of our plans and making sure others work out. I need to believe there is something bigger than me and my life happening in the world. I need to believe in the grand scheme of things; when all of my plans go up in smoke, there is something else.

Even when I’m mad that my plan has gone awry, it is comforting to know that, in the words of Jeff Goldblum’s character, Ian Malcolm, in Jurassic Park, “Life finds a way.” Verse 11 is a communal promise given to remind the people of God’s covenant with all of God’s people. “You will be my people, and I will be your God. Life will find a way. And you will have a home.” That was the plan then, for the Israelites, and that is the plan for us and for all of creation today. In the middle of verse 11 is the word “welfare.” This word was also used in verse 7 amid God’s instructions on how to live in that moment,

“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.” In other words, my welfare, your welfare, is attached to the welfare of others. Even the other-y others. In his 1967 Christmas sermon, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. preached, “It really boils down to this: that all life is interrelated. We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.”

The Hebrew word translated as “welfare” in both verses is the word shalom. If you’ve been around DCC for a while, you’ve heard me talk about shalom before. The best English translation is “wholeness,” so welfare isn’t too far off. God’s plan for all of creation is wholeness. That means that one day, everyone will have enough to eat. One day, everyone will have access to the healthcare they need. Everyone will have a safe home. Everyone will live free from violence and oppression. Everyone will be equal, and justice will be a reality for all people. And everyone will have a place to belong. All of creation will have not only what it needs to exist but what it needs to thrive.

And here is the most important thing. I cannot have shalom if you don’t. We cannot have shalom if our neighbors are suffering. The United States cannot have shalom while immigrants suffer at the border and people are forced to flee gangs, war, and poverty in other countries. Shalom will not coexist with border walls, guns, hunger,

houselessness, fear, and hatred. Israel cannot have shalom unless Palestine does. Ukraine will not have shalom until Russia does. Verse 7 reminds us that it is in the shalom of others that we will find our shalom. Whatever plan you have or have had or will have, know that shalom is God's plan, and all of creation is invited into it.

We are invited to plan for a world in which shalom is not only possible but real. But to do that, we need to be able to imagine what that world will be like and act as if we expect it to happen. Let's plan for shalom by bringing wholeness and healing to this world one fragment at a time.

Remembering the wisdom of Ben and Winston, "If we fail to plan, we are planning to fail."

We must plan for what we want to happen. This is true for big picture things, but also for little things like inviting guests to our homes or to the church. Planning matters. Planning has a way of saying this is important. And this is worth it.

When we invite guests to our home, we don't pick that time to have a fend-for-yourself night for dinner. I am not a cook, so the best example of this I can come up with in my own life is that when our grandchildren are coming, we plan ice cream with candy eyes for dessert.

Every single time, their eyes light up when they request eyes on their ice cream, and we have them. I plan for that moment. The planning and the looking forward to their visit are part of the fun. Planning is part of hospitality. Planning tells our guests they matter, they are worth our time and effort, and their visit was greatly anticipated. Our table display over here is beginning to take shape. Judging by what's on the table...a white tablecloth, fine china, fancy glassware, shiny silverware, chair covers... Whoever we are expecting must be really special.

We probably could have used a lot of visual metaphors this season to help us talk about hospitality. The reason the table metaphor works so well is that very often, the good stuff happens when we sit at tables and eat together. It is there that we get a little glimpse of shalom. I think Jesus must have known that. So many of the stories we have of his life and the ways in which he loved and included people who had been left out were at the table...by sitting with them and eating a meal. At tables, there is laughter, and there are stories. There is food and drink. There is connection and belonging.

At tables, we find evidence that we have not been forgotten, that Love is at work in the world, and that there is a plan for something bigger than all of us, but it will take all of us to get there. As we anticipate the celebration of Jesus' birth, let us celebrate his life by creating glimpses of shalom for our families, friends, and neighbors. Amen.