PLAN OR CHANCE

Jeremiah29:11

The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

For several weeks I have been devouring a book written by Erwin McManus entitled *The Unstoppable Force.* Actually, it has been such a powerful book for me I am getting ready to read it again for the second time. In one of the later chapters he tells a story of standing in line to get tickets for the television game show, *The Price is Right.* He wrote that he was not really a fan of the show, but as he put it, "I'm a great fan of my wife, so I went." For five hours he stood in line. As the line moved along he struck up a conversation with the family next to him who happened to be from Uzbekistan, a republic of the former Soviet Union. They talked about many things and during the hours of waiting this pastor shared with her about the grace of Jesus Christ. Her question to him was, "How can I believe in a God who comes only to people in America and not to people around the world?" Her real question was, "How can I believe that God loves me?" McManus wrote about that moment in line. "I summarized for her what was so obvious to me in that moment. God had brought me from El Salvador via Miami,…to be sitting in Los Angeles in line at *Price is Right* to see a show that I didn't even want to go to. And here she was from the former Soviet Union, having lived in a small town in a nation-state whose name I could not even pronounce. If God could bring her from one part of the world and me from another part of the world and move us to the exact same place at the exact same moment so that she could learn that Jesus died for her, didn't she think that God was both creative and powerful enough to bring life to everyone who would cry out to him? There in line at *The Price is Right*, her heart softened and she turned her life over to Jesus.

Is life about divine plan or random chance? Those of us who have had experiences similar to Erwin McManus know that the word "plan" is the right answer to the question. In his book *How Should We Then Live,* Frances Schaeffer, a philosopher and theologian of the mid 20th century, argued that a man who lives believing life is governed by chance and coincidence would not go into the woods to pick and eat mushrooms at random. Such a belief could not be consistently applied to life. Certainly, our text for today, one suggested by Joan Finn and Laura Stewart, points us toward the reality that we do not live by chance but within the plan of God.

Jeremiah 29:11 takes us to a world so different than ours. In 587 BC Judah was overwhelmed by the Babylonians, the walls of the city of Jerusalem were leveled, and the people were taken into what is known as the Babylonian exile. For 50 years these exiled Jews lived in a strange land always longing for their return to their homeland. It was in this place of hopelessness, this place of despair, this place of separation from everything which was precious that this Word of God came to the people. Let us listen now to this 11th verse from Jeremiah 29.

> For surely I know the plans I have made for you
> says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for

harm, to give you a future with hope.

How reassuring it must have been for those exiled people to hear through the prophet Jeremiah that God had not forgotten them. Not only had he not forgotten them, but He had plans for their future. Their future was not going to be determined by their past or present circumstances, but by his divine plan for them.

What powerful word this is for us! What a strong word of hope this is for us! How wonderful it is to know that God has a plan for the future of this church. Here is a word that tells us that God can be trusted to work through our circumstances to being us to the future He has planned for us. What we regard as weakness and deficiency is of no concern to Him as He seeks to move us toward the future He has planned for us. Here is word which tells us that God can be trusted to provide leadership for the ministries He is calling us to fulfill. I learned this lesson years ago at the St. John Church in Columbus. At the time of the lesson we were a young congregation struggling with everything and one family so important to so many things announced a job transfer which would take them out of the area. It seemed to me and others that we could not afford to lose this family. We would not be able to make it. But, we did because we learned that the Lord brings people into a congregation who are needed for its life. I have seen it happen again and again over the years. God does have a plan for this church. He has something He wants done in this community and in the world and He is counting on us to be about it. Exactly what God's future is for us we cannot yet see, but it is certain that He has plans for this congregation.

And at a different level, it is important to realize that our life is within the plan of God. The Word of God tells us He knows the number of the hairs on our head. It tells us He sees our rising and our sleeping. While some folks get uneasy talking about God being involved in the ordering of our life, living without such an awareness creates a whole lot more uneasiness. What comfort there is in knowing that there are no circumstances so overwhelming that we are pushed outside of God's providential care. Bad things do happen to all of us, but the Word of God assures us that no measure of misfortune can take us outside of God's care. God has a way of using even the worst of things in such ways that their power to overcome and diminish our life is destroyed.

Just as Esther was in the Kings court with influence for an important time in the life of the Hebrew people, so does God bring people into our lives to help us and so does He enable us to be important people in crucial moments in the lives of others. Life is not about coincidence. Life is about God being at work in our lives and the lives of others in such ways that we are enabled to know the fullness of God's plan for each one of us. Look for the people God is sending into your life this week. And expect to be one who is sent into the life of another.

This sermon preached by the Rev. Bill Strickland at the Richmond Hill United Methodist Church in Richmond Hill, Georgia on July 2, 2006.