Into the Future – God’s Plan

Jeremiah 29:4-14 Kimby Young

Esther 4:12-14 August 25, 2024

Romans 8:24-39

My last few sermons have been about who we are as Presbyterians and what we believe as individual Christians. Today I want to move in a new direction building on that. Specifically, who are we at First Presbyterian Church of Gardner and who is God calling us to be as a church. Just so you know, I don’t have the answer. But God does. And I believe you have the answers – even if you don’t quite know how to express that right now. I believe God is calling on you as members and friends, even visitors of this church – God is calling you right now to think about who you are as a church, who God is calling you to be, and to step into that future God has planned for you. Some of your identity as the church is the same as it has always been – you are faithful people called together to serve God and Gardner, to be the hands and feet of Jesus in this time and place, sharing God’s love in every possible way. Loving God and loving others. You are the same faithful community that has met on this corner for 160 years and witnessed to the love of God in Jesus Christ our Savior.

But in some ways – I believe God has some new ministry for you – in the heart of God. God has more plans for you. We know the world has changed or is changing. We know the church has changed and will be changing in the next few years. This is not something to fear. This is the chance to let the Spirit of God move among us. This is a call to trust God and move forward with faith. We look forward in hope to all that God has planned.

Because that is the key to remember. God is in charge, even in times of change. God has got this. God has got us. There is no need to fear. All will be well. God has a plan. God sees change coming and sometimes even God sets the changes in motion. God is working all the time in everything that happens. There’s an old song that says, “God is working God’s purpose out as year succeeds to year.” Believe it. Absolutely. Trust God. And move forward in faith.

The question for today is how to move forward and how to live into that future God has planned. The answer is prayer. Or the first answer is prayer. The last answer is prayer. We must talk to God. We must listen for God. We must pray together. Pray for our church. Pray for God’s guidance. Pray for growth. Pray for vision. Pray for direction. Pray for confidence and a sense of certainty in God’s will. Pray for our leaders. Pray for our members. Pray for our visitors, guests and friends. Pray for our community. Pray for our world. Pray.

Pray. Pray. Pray.

Where do you think God is calling us? What plans do you believe God has for us for our church for our future? We have a million ideas. And they could take us in many different directions. The challenge is not coming up with ideas of how to serve God. The challenge is twofold. First, to focus on God and to sift through those many ideas in order to discover what we believe God has inspired. We can’t do everything well. We must discern where God is calling us to focus. And second, to move those ideas into a reality that will serve God well and faithfully. To implement the ideas into a sustainable ministry or program that will do what we believe God wants us to do. It is actually a very exciting time to be a part of this church. You are all being called by God to see where God is leading us.

As I said, the first step is to pray and to listen for God. As I was doing that, and reading today’s scripture, several thoughts came to me. Both of the Old Testament readings take place during the exile of Israel from their home land - a very difficult and frightening time. Both scriptures remind us that even in difficult times, God is active and in charge. God is working for good in the world and in the lives of those who seek God.

In the story of Jeremiah, the promise – I have plans for you for a future with hope – Gave the exiles something to hold onto, even in those troubled times. God plans our future. There’s a line in an old song I love – We don’t know what the future holds. But we know WHO holds the future.

In the story of Esther, maybe you remember the story, but I will remind you anyway. Esther was born in exile and by God’s plan became Queen in that foreign land. When a plot arose to kill all the faithful Jews, Esther’s uncle challenged her to speak to the king and save the people. His famous line in the last verse is “Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.” That phrase, “such a time as this” is a call to all of us to listen for God’s guidance, to use our time and talent and circumstance to serve God faithfully. Be conscious of God’s work in our world and in our lives and rise to the occasion God places before you. For Esther, there was a great deal to fear. She could be killed if she took a misstep. Her uncle called her to trust God and move forward in confidence that God was directing her every step. Fearless faith rings out to us, down thru the ages, to trust God, to step out in faith, and to follow wherever Jesus leads.

The scripture from Romans is one of my favorites. It speaks of a hope that cannot be seen. It speaks of a God who hears us, even when we don’t know what to pray or how to pray. The old translation was - God hears our “sighs – too deep for words.”

Of course, we don’t know what the future brings. We don’t know if our plans will fail. We don’t know if we have the right plan. But we do know that God loves us, that Christ is with us, that the Spirit fills us with every gift we need. We do know that God has a plan and God is working out that plan in every single detail. We do know that God has us in God’s hand and God’s heart. We are held. We are loved. We are blessed by God to be used by God. Our future is certain because our future is in God’s plan.

So I am back to where I began. Trust God. And move forward in faith. And don’t forget to pray. For God speaks. Where will Jesus lead us? Exactly where God needs us to be. By the grace of God.