

11.8.2015 Trinity 23

A sermon by: The Rev. Mr. Christopher Smith
St. Andrew's Anglican Church - Jacksonville, Oregon

"Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be always acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my strength and my redeemer." (Psalm 19:14)

"Stunning, historic, mind-boggling, and catastrophic..." Those are the words one reporter chose to use as he described Hurricane Patricia – one of history's strongest storms – a Category 5 hurricane with recorded surface winds of 200 mph; the highest reliably-measured surface winds on record for a tropical cyclone, anywhere on the earth. As I watched the morning news the day before Patricia was expected to slam into the western coast of Mexico, I was struck by one interview which stood in sharp contrast to the hurried and busy activity of evacuating so many people. The interview was with an Air Force officer – a crew member on a United States Air Force Hurricane Hunter. The Hurricane Hunters are aircrews that fly into tropical cyclones to gather weather data. They operate aircraft which fly directly into the hurricane, typically penetrating the hurricane's eye several times per mission – five of these U.S. aircrews have been lost during such missions.

This is what I noticed as I watched the news: The segments that covered the evacuation showed busy and sometimes chaotic pictures of people crowding into vehicles to evacuate the area. The people that were moving out of the way of the raging storm – that were moving to safety – were hurried and frantic. Then, in the next segment, there was an interview with this calm, cool, and collected Air Force Officer whose mission was to fly directly into the eye of the storm everyone else was rushing to avoid.

In our lesson this morning we heard God speak these words through the prophet Jeremiah (29:11), "For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the LORD, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected

end.”(KJV) Another translation uses the phrase, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” (NIV)

These words that come directly from God... These words that reveal His thoughts of hope and peace toward His children stand in sharp contrast to the fear and distress we often feel as we face the storms in our lives. God tells us that He has plans for us, and His plans are good – so how do we reconcile His truth with our experience? How do we put our faith in His “thoughts of peace, and not of evil,” in a world filled with so many “trials and sorrows”? (John 16:33)

As we look for answers, perhaps the best place to begin is to study this Scripture from the point of view of the original audience. The people that heard these words straight from the mouth of the prophet Jeremiah were living in desperate times. Their kingdom was no longer the powerful country that it was at the time of David or Solomon. These were the last days of Jerusalem - within months, probably, of the siege and destruction of the first temple. This was an incredibly difficult time. Normal daily life was no longer normal. The people had powerful enemies threatening them, and they weren't just looking at losing their job or home; defeat and death were literally at their door. They had every outward reason to ask why God had abandoned His people... Why were they left alone to suffer? While some may have asked those questions, many others wouldn't, for they had fallen into paganism and unbelief.

Through the ages, the normal situation for mankind appears to be something like that. We have seasons when everything is great – days when it's easy to believe in God and His good plans. Those good days are stacked between times of doubt – times in which we feel troubled, challenged, and frightened about what the future may hold. Much like God's people at the time of Jeremiah, we've come out of a time of great good and prosperity, and in many ways found ourselves in a time of frightening change: economic change, political change, and social change; and today, Jeremiah speaks the same message to us that He spoke to those who still trusted in God and would listen to His Word: God has good plans... "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope

and a future.”

From where we stand, we can't always see how God could possibly have a good plan for our lives, but the "expected end" that this verse talks about, when it comes, never fails to solve the mystery of the path that led to it. The greater good, veiled in the pain and suffering, hidden in the secrecy of God's Eternal Mind, is only then revealed. God doesn't give us the details up front. He didn't give them to Jeremiah either. Jeremiah knew that for many who trusted in God the good plans He had for them would lead them through earthly trials and sorrows, and even death; but God's promise wasn't meant only for today or tomorrow. The focus of God's good plans for us will not be bound by time, His focus is eternal!

God sees the end from the beginning, but this side of heaven it's difficult for us to keep an eternal perspective – to “set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth”. (Colossians 3:2) We tend to look at our difficulties from the perspective of right here and right now. That attitude is another trait we share with the people from Jeremiah's day – the attitude that can be summed up in these words: I know what I want, and I want it now! God if you aren't going to give me what I want right now... I'll replace you with another god that does. The god of money, the god of power and manipulation, the god of “I'll do, and say, and believe what I want, not what You (God) say is true.”

This attitude is easy to arrive at, but it's backwards. It's literally “dead wrong”, for it assumes that eternal life is either an illusion or insignificant compared to the urgency of here and now! I ask you: How can right now be more urgent or important than eternity? The plans God has for us include today and tomorrow, but the focus is much wider – the focus is on the plans for everlasting life. This life is now, this life is real; it can be very bad, it can be very good, but whether good or bad, it has a definite end. This earthly life that ends in death can't be our focus. The future God has in mind for us is not one of eighty, ninety, or even one hundred years; it is eternal.

The future God has planned for us is spelled out in the Gospel. This earthly life is to be lived and enjoyed as far as we can, but it's not the future that

Jeremiah spoke about. The future God has planned for those who listen and believe is a future beyond death, a day when “God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away”. (Revelation 21:4) It is that life to which Jesus invites us, and for which He died that we might live. God’s good plans for us are found and perfected in our Savior Jesus Christ.

When we consider our trials and sorrows from an eternal perspective His promise is more than enough, but God doesn’t stop at more than enough. God has not only revealed Himself to us as our hope for the future, but as our help for today. Listen to what the book of Hebrews tells us about Jesus the Son of God (4:15-16), “For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

God has not insulated Himself from the trials and sorrows of this world, instead, He left His throne on high to be born in a manger and to die on the Cross; like a Hurricane Hunter, He flew directly into the eye of the storm. Jesus understands every storm, every trial, every sorrow, and every weakness because He was tempted and tried in every way that we are. Now, He meets us... in the eye of the storm.

In the Gospel of Matthew that truth is illustrated for us perfectly (14:22-33). There we read an account of the disciples being out on the water and Jesus coming to them in the midst of the storm. This is what the Gospel tells us, “But the ship was now in the midst of the sea, tossed with waves: for the wind was contrary. And in the fourth watch of the night Jesus went unto them, walking on the sea. And when the disciples saw Him walking on the sea, they were troubled, saying, It is a spirit; and they cried out for fear. But straightway Jesus spake unto them, saying, Be of good cheer; it is I; be not afraid.” These verses reveal the truth about how Jesus meets us – how He ministers to us in the midst of the storm. Notice...

When He comes to us: The verse says “in the fourth watch of the night Jesus went unto them...” The fourth watch of the night is just before dawn – the darkest hour. Jesus comes to us at the darkest hour – at the time when we need Him most – that’s when He enters the storm.

How He ministers to us: When the disciples saw Him walking on the sea, they “cried out for fear. But straightway Jesus spake unto them, saying, Be of good cheer; it is I; be not afraid”. His disciples – this group of grown men – “cried out for fear” when they saw Him. They were caught in a great storm and didn’t understand what was happening. Nowhere in the Bible does it say we will understand every storm. What the Bible says is (Romans 8:28) “we know that all things work together for good”. We may not understand, but we know! We know God’s thoughts and plans for us are good.

He comes to us victorious over our greatest fears: “...Jesus went unto them, walking on the sea.” The disciples were terrified – caught in a raging storm – and Jesus put it under His feet. Whether it’s a difficult storm or our worst nightmare, Jesus puts it all under His feet. Pain, sin, sickness, sorrow, suffering, even death; He is victorious over every storm, every trial, and every sorrow. (John 16:33)

Our Savior Christ is a Hurricane Hunter. When storms come our way, we do everything in our power to avoid them. We fight, we struggle, and like the disciples on the sea – often we cry out for fear, but not Jesus. He flies directly into the storm – in the eye of the storm is where we find Him. There He says to us, “It is I; be not afraid. For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you hope and a future.”

"To the only wise God our Savior, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now

Thanks to Pastor Robin Fish and John Maxwell for their contributions to this sermon.

