

**The Bible Doesn't Say That: God is in Control
aka, God Has a Plan (for Your Life, for the world)
Jeremiah 29:4-14 Phil.2:1-8**

Our series: the Bible doesn't say that. I was going through my files this week (spring cleaning) and came across this clipping from a local small-town newspaper. It contains a line in it that isn't in the Bible, but got used a lot starting in the late-1700's. And it sounds like a Bible quote. Here's what the short news clip says: "Village Dry Cleaners has relocated to 14 High Street, right next door to St. Joseph's Church. After March 1st, cleanliness is next to godliness." For all you Methodists out there, that phrase was coined by John Wesley from a sermon that he preached in 1791. It's funny what makes its way into our thinking and into our traditions and gets taken as gospel, even if it isn't actually in the gospel.

Speaking of... the phrase(s) we're going to look at today that is commonly thought of as being in the Bible, or is a Biblical teaching is: God is in control. Or, God has a plan (for your life, for the world). Those are two ways of saying the same thing, and I'll be using them interchangeably here.

Philippians 2:1-8

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the

same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.

This is the word of the Lord.

If you watch sports, you have very likely seen a post-game interview with a player from the winning team, who says something like, “I’d like to thank the Lord for bringing us the victory today.” I found a cartoon, with a bit of a different take on that... (slide) “First, I’d like to *blame* the Lord for causing us to lose today.” If we thank the Lord for causing our team to win, I guess the Lord gets the blame for causing the other team to lose. Does God cause certain teams to win or lose? Talk amongst yourselves over lunch about that one...

This is a somewhat debated subject. I have acquaintances who would say, without a shadow of a doubt, that God is in control, and/or that God has a plan. For everything. And these good folks, to my observation, believe this and say it, because if it *isn't* true, then it means that God isn't in control of anything and everything is left to chance or free will of humans. So, God *must* have

a plan, otherwise God isn't powerful and sovereign, and isn't working his purposes out. So the thinking goes.

I think this phrase, God is in control (or, God has a plan), like other phrases, is another way of comforting ourselves, or trying to comfort someone else, when life gets tough, or we're trying to make sense of things. Someone needs assurance that God hasn't abandoned them, or forsaken the world, and there must be some divine plan and purpose in what's happening. And assurance *can* be given, and *is* given in Scripture, but with a different idea of what it means for God to be sovereign, and powerful, and for God to have a plan.

To my thinking, if we say that God is in control, or that God has a specific plan, then we are practically forced to believe that every tragedy, war, mass shooting, or painful event in our personal life is part of some divine plan. Or, we have to believe that the God who is in control and has a plan is mean or capricious, and doesn't care about peoples' pain.

Journalist Valerie Tarico travelled to Rwanda, about 20 years ago, to see what was happening as the country was rebuilding following the 1993 genocide. Here is part of one of her reflections from her time there. She is being given a ride from the capital city of Kigali to another town...

Our driver on the ride is an animated father of four who shares his country's bright hopes for the future. As we stop at a cultural site I walk behind his SUV for the first time. There on the hatch is a bumper sticker that reads: God Never Fails. I take another step, then turn back and stare. What the hell does that mean in a place where 800,000 people were hacked to death, most of them Christians, many of them in churches where they had sought refuge, some with clergy opening the doors or directing the slaughter?

I don't have the guts to ask our driver what it means to him, but over the next hour, the question haunts me. At first, I am simply incredulous. In my imagination I see those ordinary people who put their faith in the Christian God, and his sanctuaries, and his servants, begging God for their lives or the lives of their children as mobs of young men armed with grenades and machetes batter holes in the church walls. If something so horrific could ever be reduced to a slogan--which it can't--what comes to mind is the phrase, repeated occasionally in testimonials by former believers, "Nothing fails like prayer." What can the opposite, "God never fails," possibly mean in *Rwanda*?

But then I become curious. What does it actually mean *anywhere*? Certainly not what it seems. On the surface, *God never fails*, is phrased like a statement of fact. It would appear to mean that God is in control of everything that happens. If you define God, as most Christians do, as an all-powerful, benevolent, interventionist being, then the statement is factually false--or, benevolence must be defined in such a way as to make the statement supremely irrelevant to what most people care about.

I think the phrase "God never fails" isn't about facts. It doesn't express something rational but rather something emotional. It is a way of saying, "I trust that I am going to be ok, that as I venture out into the world, good things are going to happen and bad things won't. I entrust my wellbeing to something beyond myself." Like a mantra, it may be a way of inducing an altered state of mind, in this case a sort of assurance or comfort that makes the world more manageable.

I think she's onto something when she observes that the phrase isn't about facts, but emotions. It's an attempt to make sense, or bring comfort.

But there are many who think it *is* about fact; that it's a theological and biblical assertion. To me, it begs the question, if God is in control/has a plan, then what about human agency and free will? Are human actions part of God's plan, even when we aren't aware of it? Are we all just like chess pieces on a board, being moved and placed according to God's game plan?

I question one line in the song we just sang (a song which I love, by the way), "I sing the mighty power of God." Wonderful song. But I question the line that says "...and clouds arise and tempests blow by order from thy throne." Well, with global warming and climate change, caused by human action, I'm not sure every cloud that arises and tempest that blows are by order from God's throne. I get the affirmation, though, that God is powerful and sovereign. Lines like this, however, reflect an 18th century belief in a God who causes or determines everything: if it happened, we must say that it was God's doing. Because, God has a plan. God is in control.

So, what does the Bible say about this? Let's look at our two readings this morning.

First, from the prophet Jeremiah. We love that great promise in Jer.29:11: "For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord..." Think about how this would've sounded to the people to whom this was directed. They are in exile; the

false prophets are telling them, “You’ll go home soon; God has a plan!” And the people hear this promise (“*I know the plans I have for you...*”), and in response you can hear the Israelites who are in exile saying, “Great! God has plans! Let’s hear the plans...” And God simply says, my plans are for good, and for a hopeful future. “Okay... *AND...*” You can hear them saying, “Is that it? That isn’t much of a plan. Where are the specifics? Can we have some details about the good and hopeful future? What you said is nice, but unsatisfying.”

We love that promise, and it’s often recited to assure people that God has a plan for their life. But we need to clarify two things: first, the “you” here is plural. This was a message to an entire people group, and not to an individual. And second, we have to define what “plans” means. In this passage, as in other places, it means that they were to live their daily lives: plant gardens, build houses, have families, etc. All the things you would do each day, do those things, no matter where you are. Make yourself at home, is what God is telling them, even though you are in exile.

Let me pause for a moment to say, this is a good word for us, today. We are living in a time where everything and everyone is in a kind of exile. We’re in unfamiliar territory, unmoored and displaced from what we have known and have been comfortable with for most of our lives. That’s what exile is: a displacement,

whether it's a literal displacement, or a figurative displacement because so much has changed and continues to change. It can be disorienting. And to people in exile, God says, "Live your life. Do the good and right and normal things that you know to do, and (I love this so much) "Seek the welfare (literally, the *shalom*) of the place where you are. Because in its welfare you will find your welfare." That is such a rich admonishment. Do good. Be people of peace and wellbeing—work for peace and wellness where you are, even if it feels foreign to you—and you'll find then that whatever good you do for your community will ultimately be good for you as well.

And that's a great word for God's people today: be people of peace; do good. Even though things are in turmoil and transition, choose to live your life, and seek the wellbeing of the place where you are. Because in its wellbeing you find your wellbeing.

Btw, this is what the visioning task force is seeking to do! Come to the conversation next Sunday as we seek the well-being of the place where God has put us.

Back to Jeremiah: "Plans" here, then, means living your life, and seeking the wellbeing of where you are. In Jeremiah and elsewhere, God's plan, if you will, has more to do with *what kind of people* God wants his followers to be, and not

with specific and detailed plans for what happens on what day and at what time. And even if God did have those kinds of specific plans, notice that God says “I know the plans I have for you...” not “You know the plans I have for you.” The invitation here is to trust. Be peaceful, shalom-seeking people, who trust in their God.

This exile story is the same as the exodus story. In the exodus story, God freed his people, they cross over the Red Sea and begin to journey through the desert. And before too long the people become impatient because they want a plan. There is a promise of arriving in a good land, but they aren’t told when that will happen or how they will get there, specifically. Because, God was more concerned with shaping them, forming them, teaching them, to be a kind of people who would learn to trust, to do good, and be a light to the nations. *That* was the plan, if you will. To live one day at a time, and become people of shalom.

Was God in control in those big events (exodus and exile)? Certainly, *in the ways that God chose to be*. And God certainly chose to intervene in a tangible way in both the exodus and the exile stories. But God only intervened when it was either absolutely necessary or when it seemed appropriate to God to do so, to increase their faith. But God wasn’t controlling every step and action. God was present to them, but in a moment by moment, day by day sort of way.

Let's put it this way: God is not a control freak. God *could* control anything and everything, every person and situation if God wanted to. But that isn't who God is, because God isn't a control freak. We can say that indeed God is sovereign, God is almighty and powerful, and so forth, but that doesn't mean that God rules everything and moves things around like pieces on a chess board. God chooses to use his power and might otherwise.

This brings us to the Philippians reading, and the beautiful and clear example that Paul gives here of the ministry of Jesus Christ. Because Jesus Christ is our example of God—almighty, powerful—who chose not to be a control freak, but to set aside his power, set aside his status, to empty himself in Paul's words, in order to be a servant, for the sake of love. Was God, in Christ, in control? Absolutely. What that means, though, in the person of work of Jesus Christ, is that he used his control, not *over others*, but to *empty himself* of power, privilege, status, so he might love the world.

And love is not controlling, but freeing. And part of our being free people is God's choice to give us free will, and exercise it. For good, or not.

Here is the key: to make sense of how God acts, or simply to try to understand God, the majority of people – both trained theologians and normal people 😊 – begin with the concept of power: God is powerful, God is almighty,

and so forth. Many, if not most of the hymns and songs we sing do that, and our oldest creeds do that, like the Apostle's Creed: "I believe in God the Father... *Almighty*!" Therefore, this mighty and all powerful God must be in control, because that's what mighty all powerful people do: exercise control, execute a plan, etc.

But as I understand the gospel, that's the wrong starting place. The starting place, is love. God's primary way of relating to creation is not power, not control, but love. Love precedes power in God's nature. Love precedes power in God's nature.

The gospels are a good example of this. They start with God coming to earth in love, vulnerably, as a baby. Or, in John's gospel, by "moving into the neighborhood" (Message translation of John 1:14). "Full of grace and truth," as that passage says at the end. If the beginning point in the gospels was power and might, Jesus would've appeared/descended as a mighty king, powerful, taking charge, etc. And his life would've ended, not with death, but with smiting all of his (or Israel's) enemies.

1Cor.13: think of this chapter as a description of who God is (because, God is love): "love (God) is patient, love (God) is kind..." Then there is this line: "Love

does not insist on its own way.” In other words, love is inherently uncontrolling.

Therefore, God does not insist on God’s own way.

God chooses not to control, but we could say that God, by nature, *can’t* control, because God is love and it just isn’t in God’s nature. God can, and does, love. And sometimes love intervenes, not to control, or fulfill a plan, but to protect, to bless, to be present with, and so forth.

At his birth, Jesus was called Emmanuel, which means “God with us.” God present with us, always and everywhere, in love.

Years ago, I had the joy of watching and listening to a concert pianist, a gracious and talented man getting toward the end of his career, who began his concert by telling his story about becoming a Christian as a young adult, just from reading the Bible. The Jesus he met there spoke to him, and assured him that he was never alone, and never would be alone. He latched onto Jesus’ promise: “I am with you always, to the end of time.”

At one point as he was talking about his career, and his many many concerts over the years, the highlights and the hard times, he said, “And you know what? Jesus has never missed one of my concerts! He’s always there, sitting in the front row, cheering me on.”

That has always stuck with me. Jesus has never missed one of my concerts. And we could say that about our lives and activities too: Jesus has never missed one of my... work days, never missed one of my doctor appointments, travel days, sad/hard or lonely days. Cheering, consoling, teaching and guiding, protecting and guarding our hearts and minds as we journey through our days.

Eternal Father, Strong to Save. Today is Trinity Sunday, so this hymn covers that. And, Memorial Day. And, the idea of “strong to save” has more to do with protection than providential planning or control.