

Three Sermons on Being Good Stewards
1: Stewards of the Time

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“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.” – Jeremiah 29:11

This is a sermon to launch a stewardship campaign in the midst of a pandemic. I’m not the only pastor experiencing this disorienting situation for the first time. As I wrote to you last week, we’re all having to improvise our way into the future. We’ve never been where we are now – sort of, and I’ll return to that qualifier in a bit – so we don’t know for sure what future the present is pointing us toward.

That’s the way many of us are feeling, but many of us haven’t got it quite right. We’re feeling that the present is what determines the future. We hear that all the time. The steps we take now will help prevent flare-ups of infections later. The decisions we make now will determine whether we can reverse the damage of anthropogenic climate change. Lose some weight now, our doctors tell us, and we might add some years to our fourscore years and ten down the road. What we do now determines what will happen then. So goes the widespread and conventional thinking.

True to a point, but only to a point. People of faith look deeper into reality than conventional thinking and much deeper than the digital buzz. And when, with the help of the prophet Jeremiah, we take a deeper look into the present, we discover – or, rather, we are reminded – that it is not the present that controls the future, but God. When you leave God out of the conversation, and all you have left is time, you allow time into the driver’s seat of reality.

But people of faith stubbornly refuse to leave God out because we believe that God created time and so is the master of time. God, we believe, was in charge of the past, God is in charge of the present, and God is already in charge of the future. That’s part of what we mean when we say with Psalm 90, “from everlasting to everlasting thou art God.” It’s also what we mean when we sing, a bit more rustically, “He’s got the whole world in his hands.” The whole world includes time.

This isn’t an easy thing to believe right now. It’s much easier to follow the global throng and believe and behave as though a virus were in control of the world. Be we believe differently. We have to come together regularly as a community of faith to remind ourselves that God has not handed the world over to a virus, even a novel one. Appearances notwithstanding, God is still running this show. That’s not necessarily easy for us to see right now because things aren’t going the way we want them to, and so we’re tempted to think that God has done a runner.

And we're not the first people to face a situation like this and come to such a conclusion, and we won't be the last. When things take a catastrophically bad turn, the perennial temptation is to think that God isn't God anymore. Or that God doesn't care anymore. Or that God isn't listening anymore.

These were just the sorts of misgivings the prophet Jeremiah had to address when he preached to his Jewish contemporaries about 2,600 years ago. I've taken some of his words as my text this morning. Jeremiah felt called by God to reassure the people of God that their anxious present did not determine their even more anxious future. Here's what he said: "For thus says the Lord . . . Surely I know the plans I have for you . . . plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope."

A future with hope. That, my fellow believers, is what's waiting for us – a future with hope. The future is not given to us by the present; it is given to us by God, just as God gave a future to Jeremiah's contemporaries that they could not see from inside the dark clouds of their present. And because God gives us the present, we are called to be good stewards of it. We are called to be good stewards of our time.

That's the first of three topics related to stewardship I want to speak with you about this year – being good stewards of our time. And to help us get some perspective on our time, let's step back briefly into Jeremiah's.

Jeremiah was preaching to people who were just as anxious, just as uncertain, just as confused, and just as beaten down as we are feeling today. The world of Jeremiah and his Jewish contemporaries was one of collapse – everything, it seemed, was falling apart.

Babylonia and Egypt were the reigning superpowers, struggling for control over what was to them the known world. Israel was a rinky-dink little strip of land between them, smaller than the state of New Jersey, about 250 miles top to bottom and 85 miles across its widest point. As a country, ancient Israel wasn't much to fight over, but because the major trading and communication routes going to empires in the north, south, and east passed through that narrow corridor between the Mediterranean and Jerusalem, all the great powers in that region wanted control. Israel was simply a pawn in a perpetual and deadly game of chess.

And all the bigwigs and all the know-it-alls thought they knew who the players in that game were. They chiseled their names into monuments and sang songs about them. But only the people of God, like Jeremiah, factored in the most important player of all. Jeremiah, and the people who would listen to him, knew that the times were not in the hands of the Babylonians or the Egyptians or, laughably, the Israelites. No, the times were in God's hands, because God had created time itself.

And God had given that time to those ancient movers and shakers whether they recognized that fact or not, just as God has given us our time and our place whether or not we recognize those precious gifts for what they are. Some of you have probably seen the ad on PBS of the chairman of Viking River Cruises reminding us that time is the one resource we never have enough of. As much as I appreciate the seriousness of the topic, I'm not sure I agree with the sentiment. We DO have enough time if we are wise stewards of it. Time is the most precious gift God entrusts to us, and like good stewards everywhere, it is our job to take care of that most precious commodity.

Lots of us today are wishing this time were past, but I'm not among them. I wish the threat of COVID-19 were past, but this time that God has given to us is as valuable and as useful

as any other, if we steward it well. We can make good use of this time if we can step away from our anxiety, uncertainty, and frustration. If we orient ourselves toward possibility rather than loss and creativity rather than lamentation, the time – yes, even this time – is ripe for blessings.

Many of us are telecommuting to work now, and for the first time in living memory, the smog has cleared from our asphalt jungles. Do we really want to bring it back?

Lawn signs are reminding us that we live in the midst of heroes – people risking their lives armed not with guns and grenades but with bedpans and stethoscopes and lesson plans. Can we ever thank them enough for their service to our country?

The empty spaces on supermarket shelves are making us aware of the long chain of labor and commitment that's necessary for our daily bread to get from farms to tables. Do we really want to forget the vital contributions of all those unseen, unnamed, unheralded people that keep us from going hungry?

To be good stewards of time is not to take any time for granted – not a single, precious moment of it. “Tell me,” the poet Mary Oliver asks, “what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”

Friends, even in the midst of a global pandemic, we still have our own wild and precious lives, framed by the gift of time, and God asks us to be good stewards of this time just as we are called to steward any other. The troubles of our day are obvious; the blessings are harder to see, but they're there for those who will open themselves up to the leading of God's Spirit, which was waiting to be our companion even before time began.

I will continue to speak of what stewardship means over the next couple of weeks because stewardship concerns the future of our church, which does and does not depend on us. We will have a church for as long as we want to have a church. It may not look like our grandparents' church – packed pews, overflowing Sunday School rooms, a thundering choir – but that's not the definition of church Jesus gave us. He promised us church when even a handful – two or three, he said – gather in his name, and we're well more than a handful. If we are willing to commit ourselves to “the cost and joy of discipleship,” we have years ahead of us of being God's people in God's world as Christ's church.

Christians do not fear the future because we know that the future is where God is waiting for us. God has made plans for us, and those plans are for our welfare and not for harm. Those plans may not be known to us, but they are known to God, and for the people of God, that's more than enough. Thanks be to God.