

Plans for the Future

A Sunday Morning Message on January 18, 2026

Based on Jeremiah 29:10-14

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“Life is what happens when you’re busy making other plans.”

We’ve all heard this quote, right? I love it because it states so simply a real truism about life. Do you happen to know the origin of this quote? I didn’t until I looked it up. It’s often credited to John Lennon since it appears in the lyrics of his haunting song, *Beautiful Boy* published in 1980. However, Lennon borrowed it from journalist Allen Saunders who first included it in a piece he wrote in 1957. Saunders himself was an American writer, journalist and cartoonist who wrote several comic strips popular in the 1950’s and ‘60’s including *Steve Roper and Mike Nomad*, *Mary Worth* and *Kerry Drake*. The *Mary Worth* strip apparently is still in publication in newspapers across the country, chronicling the day to day life of the family of the central character Mary Worth. Who knew?

“Plan your work and work your plan” is another one of those truisms emphasizing the importance of planning before tackling whatever work you need to accomplish. Who originated this one is more debatable but one of its early adopters, as millennials would say, was none other than Margaret Thatcher, Prime Minister of Great Britain during the 1980’s, and a great friend of Ronald Reagan. I first experienced it directly back in the 1980’s during some Dale Carnegie training workshops I took when I was a senior administrator with a fledgling new national real estate company which is now the powerhouse known as RE/MAX. I first heard it when I was in a training for time management as I oversaw a large sales force and the administrative staff who supported them. I was good at that. So good at it that, for a time, I did a lot of work as a time management trainer, a

skill which then followed me into ministry where I also trained pastors, office administrators and volunteers on how to manage their time more efficiently. I will say that this kind of training is very energizing and productive within the business community, especially any kinds of sales organization where the notion that “time is money” is taken quite literally. My forays with this kind of training for clergy, church staff and volunteers were not quite so successful. Oh, people always loved the trainings, would always find a time management tip or two they liked and would use for a while. But most of the time, my training wisdom on how to work more efficiently – to plan your work and work your plan – landed on enthusiastic but highly unmotivated to make real change ears. So, I stopped doing them, more than 20 years ago. And not one of the many people whom I am still friends with and who took one of my workshops has ever asked me about it. I doubt they even remember I used to do it.

Truthfully, I don’t even follow a lot of the tricks and techniques I used to teach. Why? Because I figured out long ago that you can be as organized as possible, you can plan your work and work your plan up the hilt but in the final analysis, none of that matters because life has a tendency to throw stuff at you out of the blue that makes all those careful plans not worth the paper they are printed on, nor the time they took to create them in such detail. Truly, life is what happens while you’re making other plans. Then, the real skill needed is not the ability to reconstruct another plan. Instead, what is needed in all those moments we all encounter is resilience. We need the ability to regroup following the change we’re encountering – enduring is often a better word. We often need to find a new “center” within ourselves but before we can do that we need to pause to rest and refresh our brains and, even more importantly our hearts. When we are investing in creating those plans, they need to take into account both our heads and our hearts. But, too often we allow only our brains into the planning

process which is why change, especially the unexpected and/or unwelcome kind – loss of a job, loss of a spouse, declining health – becomes so very difficult to work our way through. Another way of thinking about this is, if our plans have no heart, how can they succeed in the long run? Honestly, they can't and they won't. Not really. Plans with no heart eventually lead to bankruptcy of the soul, and no amount of strategic planning can get you out of that mess.

This is precisely what the prophet Jeremiah is talking about in the text we read this morning. Jeremiah was the son of a priest who became a prophet to several of the kings of Judah during the failing days of the kingdom. The book contains all sorts of prophecies relayed to Jeremiah from God, most centering on the overwhelming sinfulness of the people God had rescued from slavery in Egypt and led to freedom and new life in a new place. One of Jeremiah's other well known visions/prophecies is found in Jeremiah 18:1-12. This is known as the Potter's Wheel. Jeremiah receives instructions from God to go the local potter's shop and watch the potter create vessels from clay. So, Jeremiah did as God told him and just watched the potter for a while. We don't know how the potter felt about this, but the visit did accomplish what God intended. Jeremiah witnessed how the potter would start on a piece but if it went wrong somehow, not meeting the expectations of the potter for some reason, the potter would smash the piece with his hand and start over. God told Jeremiah to tell the people of Judah and Jerusalem that this is what God will do to them if they do not repent of their sinful ways and return to God's ways.

Powerful visual, right? Yes, absolutely. It made an impression on Jeremiah for sure. But, still, when he relayed it to the people, they did not listen. They did not return to God, retreating from their "evil ways." Instead, they doubled down. So, eventually, God's reaction to the infidelity of the people came into reality. Judah, and its capital Jerusalem, was attacked and destroyed, defeated by the armies of

Babylon. The Hebrew leaders were taken into captivity at Babylon. As you can imagine, they were in great despair. How were they to survive in this foreign land, amongst these people who were so different from themselves? How were they to worship God when the Temple was all the way back in Jerusalem and had been destroyed – leveled – to boot. Who were they now as a captive people in a foreign land whose God was ... where?

This Babylonian captivity marked a major turning point in the people's understanding of who they were now and of who God was in this new situation. This is the beginning of monotheism – the belief that there was only one God. Up until this point, the people of Israel and Judah – the people who had escaped slavery in Egypt and received the Ten Commandments and all the other instructions for living as God's people that came with them – still thought of their God as one god among many gods. These gods were geographically based. So, their God lived in Jerusalem, the Persian or Assyrian gods lived in Babylon, the Egyptian gods lived in Egypt and so on and so on. This captivity in Babylon forced the Hebrews to change how they understood God, moving far beyond a God of a limited geographic range. Jeremiah as prophet, along with many of the other prophets we will be considering, was a very important part of this new and dynamic understanding of God. The God of Israel and Judah was not simply a passive being who sat on a pedestal in a temple and passively received worship and gifts. The God of Israel and Judah was alive and active in history in a way that no other gods ever were.

So, when Jeremiah ministers to the people, because by now that's what he was doing, he was helping them to find meaning, to make meaning for themselves from their current situation which because of their arrogance and narrow thinking they never saw coming. So, what does he tell them? How did he get them to begin the work of creating a new understanding of who they were as God's beloved people in this

moment of defeat and captivity? Jeremiah says to them, “*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.*” All is not lost, Jeremiah tells them. God still loves you. God knows where you are. God knows you are frightened and bereft. God knows and, in God’s time – which will not be your own – God will provide the answers they seek. Before he tells them this hopeful prophecy, Jeremiah explains in detail how they are to make meaning of what has happened to them. First, he clarifies that it is indeed God who sent them here, into captivity in Babylon. Then Jeremiah explains what comes next:

“Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. (Jeremiah 29:5-7)

Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you, God says. Or, framed in a different way – be the people I created you to be in this new place, this new reality. Nothing has changed but your geography. Have the courage, the strength and the faith to live into this new reality as a people still beloved of God.

Wow. Now that is a powerful message, and a very new one for God’s “chosen people” in Jeremiah’s time. God’s original plans for them did not work out for them, because the people did not stick to God’s plans, believing their own wisdom was more powerful, more accurate than God’s. Hubris, therefore, is the greatest sin. Trusting your own wisdom discerned without guidance and input from God always leads you in the wrong direction. Trusting only in your own instincts, only in your own sense of what the future holds for you

always takes you in the opposite direction from God, whether that is your intent or not. This is a hard lesson for us as humans to learn. We are hardwired, it seems, to believe in ourselves first, foremost and always and as we know all too well, that often leads us as individuals and as communities and even as nations in the wrong direction. We trust too much in our own abilities to “plan our work and work our plan” trusting that this is what will lead us to happiness, success and peace. But it never does. Not really. Jeremiah’s people, the ancient Hebrews, found this out the hard way. But we don’t have to. Instead, we can choose to take our self-initiated, self-directed plans as only one part of our considerations for the future. We can invite God into the mix much more directly, trusting always that God’s love for us includes the future just as much as it does the past and the present. Because, after all, “life is what happens when you are busy making other plans.” Amen.