

GOD'S PLAN FOR THE HUMAN RACE
a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, May 27, 2018
Based on Jeremiah 29:10–14; Ephesians 1:3–18

The sermon this morning is the conclusion of a spring sermon series entitled, "Fulfill Your Destiny." Next Sunday will be the beginning of a new series entitled, "Why Believe." Both series have a related book. For the summer sermon series, there will be a book appearing at the end entitled, *Why Believe*. The book will be different from the series, but will deal with the same themes in more depth. For the current series, the related book, currently available, is *Hope in a Time of Chaos and Evil*. It is actually about the book of Revelation, and is completely different from this series, but it relates, in that both the book and this series deal with the future, and where God is leading us.

In the passage we heard from the prophet Jeremiah, the Lord said, "Surely I know the plans I have for you, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope." (Jeremiah 29:11) These words were first spoken when the people of Israel were in exile in Babylon. They were in a dark and discouraging time; but the message was that God had a plan, which would include not only their deliverance from exile, but their growth in a relationship with God. That plan unfolded. Through a series of amazing events, the people were set free from exile, they returned to their homeland, and they entered a period of extraordinary spiritual growth. But then this same message comes through in the Scripture with regard to humanity as a whole—that God has a plan to bring us out of even very dark and discouraging times into a bright future in fellowship with God. Paul talks about that plan in the passage from Ephesians that we heard this morning, which was the same passage that we used at the very start of this sermon series, when he says, "With all wisdom and insight God has made known to us the mystery of his will . . . as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him." (Ephesians 3:9–10) We will consider that overarching plan this morning. {moment of prayer}

Last week I quoted from a renowned Methodist preacher of a century ago by the name of Clovis Chappell [*served Methodist churches 1908–1949*]. One day Rev. Chappell preached a sermon on the theme of "Why I Am Glad I Am Not a Baptist." He implied that someone in the church had put him up to this. At any rate, in that sermon he told a story about a Baptist preacher who was kicked out of one church and then hired by another. All this put the preacher into great mental turbulence, so much so that he went to see a doctor. He needed someone, he said, to fix his brain. The doctor said, "This is going to take some time. If you can leave your brain here, I can have it done in a week." The preacher said, "That'll be fine. I'm going to the Baptist conference this week. I won't need a brain there." So he left his brain, went to the conference, where he had no trouble, then came back a week later. The doctor said, "O my goodness, I am so sorry. I never got around to

fixing your brain. It's not done yet." The preacher said, "That's all right. I've decided to join the Methodists. I won't be needing a brain at all."

Well, now, suddenly we Methodists don't like this story so much. It was all right when it poked fun at the Baptists, but now it is getting downright inappropriate! Clovis Chappell, himself a Methodist, went on in the sermon to make the point that we are all flawed and that in the end, no group of believers should claim to be spiritually superior to another.

That story by Clovis Chappell actually can illustrate two major aspects of what often happens when people think about God's plans. First, when people think about God's plan for the human race, what God has in store for us, they often want to think that God has a bright future in store for us, but not for those other guys. Secondly, when it comes to specific ideas about the future—concepts about the last days or the end times—people often seem to leave their brain someplace.

In the book that we recently published about the book of Revelation, I note how the book of Revelation has been woefully distorted and abused over the years, as people have wildly speculated about its meaning; and I review a number of the really crazy ideas that people have spun out of the visions of Revelation about what God is supposedly going to do in the future, or when it all is supposedly going to happen. I won't be going through those speculations this morning, because it takes a book to gradually recount just the main ones. But there is a reason why our Methodist founder John Wesley said that we come to clear understanding through four sources of truth—Scripture, where we need to pay attention to what the Bible actually says and not what people might imagine it to say, Tradition, where we pay attention to the wisdom of ages past, Experience, where we are inspired by God in our own hearts, and Reason—God has given us all a good brain in order that we might use it. So when we look at the Bible, we need to do more than just speculate off the top of our head; we need to draw on sound Biblical scholarship, which is something I seek to do throughout that book. With regard to the future, Biblical scholarship will lead us to see that the Bible is not a set of predictions. The Bible speaks, rather, of God's overarching intent or goal for humanity; the Bible speaks, as we have seen in this series, in terms of destiny.

We noted earlier in this series the real difference between destiny and fate. Fate is the idea that the future is fixed, and one must just accept fate. The kind of end-times thinking that has been so widespread in recent decades is generally fatalistic in nature. For example, a little over a year ago, one end-times prophecy group predicted that the world would come to an end at last year's solar eclipse. They got this by observing that in 2017 it would be 70 years since the 1947 founding of the nation of Israel, and they took that as a fulfillment of the 70 years in our passage in Jeremiah, where the Lord says that "when Babylon's seventy years are completed, I will visit you and fulfill to you my promise" (Jeremiah 29:10)—a reference, they imagined, to the Second Coming. They joined that to a

vision in Revelation which says, “A great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head.” (Revelation 12:1) This was taken to represent a solar eclipse. Thus the end of the age would arrive at the solar eclipse in 2017. This prediction was so crazy it did not even make it into my book; but I mention it this morning because it illustrates three key features of typical end-times predictions.

First, in such predictions, Biblical passages are wrenched out of their context and are arbitrarily lined up with contemporary events. Biblical scholars, who pay attention to the original intended meaning of Biblical passages, know that the woman in Revelation is actually a symbol for the church, and the years under Babylon refer to the people of Israel’s exile in Babylon in the sixth century B.C. Neither passage has anything to do with predicting today’s events. Secondly, end-times predictions are fatalistic in nature—there is always the idea that some sort of cosmic clock is inexorably ticking, and a predetermined end will soon be upon us. Third, end-times predictions are always wrong. But this does not stop the predictors from going back to the drawing board and making new predictions.

What is particularly significant here is the sort of hope that emerges if one has this kind fatalistic attitude about the future. The presumption in typical end-times scenarios is that the world is a lost cause, and God is about to bring down the curtain on this age, so the hope is simply that the end comes soon, so that we can enter into a new future. It is a passive hope—waiting for God to act—and it is an attitude that is actually hopeless about the present. The hope purely is for a future that is entirely disjoined from the present.

But the Biblical idea of destiny, which we have considered in this series, is quite different from this. The idea of destiny is that there is an intended future; but the exact pathway to that future is not predetermined, and we have a key role to play. This can be seen in that passage in Jeremiah and the story of the people of Israel in exile. God’s destiny and plan for them, declared by Jeremiah, was for them to return out of exile, but they had a key role to play. As God opened doors, they had to take the initiative to move back to the Holy Land and to rebuild the temple (that had been destroyed by the Babylonians) and to rebuild the whole city of Jerusalem. So when God said that God had a plan and was giving them a future with hope, it was an active hope to which God was calling them, a hope in which they were involved in building a positive future. And it was a hope in which there was real hope for the present day, because the bright future toward which God was leading the people could begin already to illuminate the present. You see exactly the same sort of hope at work on a much broader scale in the New Testament.

Today our world is very much in need of hope. Some people say that there is no overarching divine plan, that we are just on our own in the universe. If that is the case, then we are in serious trouble, with no grounds for any sort of hope, because humanity on its own produces a world full of chaos and evil. But the Biblical Word is that there is there is a plan—a plan of God who has created us and who is leading us toward a bright destiny.

We have seen the contours of that plan in the course of this sermon series. We have seen that God has created us to be his children; and though we often forget God and estrange ourselves from God in sin, God has acted through Christ to remind us who we are and to reconcile us with God. As we trust in God, God has sent His Holy Spirit to empower us to share in the unfolding of God's plan, to reach out to the world with the good news and love of Christ. Through it all God is leading us toward a glorious and eternal future in which we can live as a part of God's family forever. As we take hold of that plan of God, we can live in genuine hope.

Of course, the simple fact that there is a plan does not seem to guarantee a good outcome. The Cavs have a plan to win another national championship, and having Lebron on the team gives particular reason for hope, but as amazing as Lebron is, he is not infinite in ability, and so the outcome remains uncertain. But it is different with the plan of God, because it is the plan of the Creator of the universe, who has come to us in Christ, who has already won the victory over sin and death; and because Christ is on the field with us, we can look to the future with a sure hope.

So we fulfill our God-given destiny as we put our faith in Christ, who moves us now not to sit back expecting God to create a new future and do it all, but to join with Christ to share in building a positive future for humanity. In the book, *Hope in a Time of Chaos and Evil*, I conclude by pointing out what this means for the sort of hope that we now can have:

It is not the passive hope of an audience watching a bad play, just waiting for the curtain to fall. It is the active hope of athletes on the field, who are engaged in mighty struggle. The opposition may be daunting, and the outcome may appear in doubt, but in fact, victory is assured; because in the case of the faithful struggling in the face of chaos and evil, our destiny is in the hands of God. So the faithful are encouraged to press onward with vigor, trusting in the One who leads them, confident in the triumph to come.