

Sermon Text for September 18, 2016

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

John 3:5-10, Genesis 45:1-15

“God’s plan”

We are about a month into the start of this new year. What has been different this year? Some of you have started new jobs, others of you have new grandchildren in your midst. Others of you have your children beginning school for the first time. Preschool has started back up and the voices of the little children add so much life and excitement in the life of the church. Things just feel alive. Things just feel like this is how God has planned it.

It is hard to know the details of God’s plans. Our first Scripture tells us clearly that we just can’t know the direction in which the Spirit of God moves and how we come about to where we are in God’s plan. But one thing is for certain, we know that God’s plan for us is one of life and life abundant. But it is coming to that realization, it is arriving at the assurance and the confidence that God wants abundant life for us that is sometimes difficult, in the confusion of life around us.

Our friend Joseph today comes to realize finally what God’s plan was for his life all along. Today he finally gets to see all of the pieces fall into place and realizes that God’s plan for him was one of good, not harm. Or in the words of the prophet Jeremiah in chapter 29:11 - 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. This is one of the most consistent messages that we have in all of Scripture and which Joseph finally realizes today: God’s plan for our lives is to give us life and life abundant. Let’s read.

From the very beginning of Scripture we find that God’s purpose is to give life. We find the Spirit of God in the very first two verses of Genesis, and this Spirit has as its mission to create. We find that all it creates is good. It begins to create life and we find that the life it creates is very good. It is so good, in fact, that God commands all creatures to be fruitful and to multiply, to go pursue an abundant life. From the very beginning we find the work and purpose of the Spirit of God is to create and maintain life.

Today as we have planned and prayed over a day when we celebrate new beginnings in baptism and new beginnings in rededications, we can’t help but emphasize the nature of God’s plans for our lives. These plans fall right into Jesus’ words that we are all to be born again. I know, these aren’t traditional words that we hear from

mainline churches, in fact it is more common to say that these verses speak only of born from again than it is to say born again. There is a stigma against that term because it implies and fundamentalism that is dangerous and close minded. Well, we are going to break that monopoly and say that the term born again simply means that we are embracing the promise of God's plan for each one of us which is that he is providing us with a new life in Jesus Christ. Let's get to Genesis.

Today we finally find Joseph revealing to his brothers who he really is. In an agonizing, gut wrenching revelation Joseph cries out to them, I am Joseph. There is no reaction from the brothers. The brothers just stand there too stunned to speak or even react. Come here, I am your brother Joseph, you know the one you sold into slavery. The one you despised and hated. The one all these years you have kept in the back of your mind and has been tormenting your conscience, well here I am. I picture the scene of Jack Nickolson with his face in the hole in the door saying "Here's Johnny".

At this point Joseph doesn't even let his brothers speak because a tremendous revelation has occurred to him. He hadn't realized this until now. You know while you plotted, God planned. You sold me here, but God sent me here before you sold me. Three times, did you catch it, Joseph tells his brothers that God's plans and God's hand was at work unknown to everyone until right now.

VS. 5 God sent me before you – why? To preserve life.

VS 7 God sent me before you – why? To preserve the life of the remnant.

He sent me – why? To keep alive for you many survivors.

Vs. 8 You didn't send me, God did.

In case you missed it, the purpose of these verses is to tell us and to tell Joseph and his brothers that they were not the ones controlling their own destiny, but God was. God's plan was that which would eventually win out. And guess what God's plan was: that of saving life so that his chosen people, his people of the covenant could have abundant life.

Throughout Genesis God makes himself known in a myriad of ways. He walks in the garden with Adam and Eve. He speaks to Noah, he makes promises and deals with Abraham, he sends angels to save sons, but we don't see any of these clear appearances of God in the Joseph story. Joseph's world feels so much like our world. The dramatic, burning bush appearances of God in our lives are pretty few and far between. There is no audible call of God, we don't walk out in the fields with the corn freshly cut and entertain

and discuss with God, there are no blinding appearances of God. Nothing is direct or explicit in this story at all. Some of us even lose hope that God addresses us with direct speech or even extraordinary promises.

But even in the midst of Joseph's world, which is so like ours, it becomes clear as day in chapter 45 that all along in Joseph's life it hasn't been Joseph's story, it has been God's story. It becomes clear that Joseph's plans are not his plans after all, but rather God's plans. It has been God acting in Joseph's family from when he was a dreamer to today when Joseph can say with confidence Brothers, you didn't send me here, God did. You are mistaken if you think that the universe is made up of atoms. It is made up of stories of God's actions that all point to his plan which is that we are to live an abundant life.

If you ever feel like a small drifting atom with no attachment you can be sure that if you put your trust in God your story becomes inextricably intertwined with God's story. And God's story tells us about God's plans that Jesus Christ reveals in John 10:10 when he says: I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.

This Joseph story takes this revelation of Joseph: I am your brother, the one who was lost and dead and now is found and alive. The reaction of this revelation is paralysis. When we are confronted with God's love and goodness it often leaves us shocked, too stunned to speak. In Mark 16 when the disciples hear from the angels about the resurrected Christ they flee in terror and tell no one. Joseph tells his brother of God's plan and commands them to action, to go and get the family.

But do we know that our life is part of God's plan, and that God's plan is ultimately good and leads to life, abundant life? This past week I sent out an email to 20 youth and their families who are between the grades of 7th-10th letting them know of an opportunity to take confirmation. I need to say, I haven't gotten an overwhelming response. We are starting up our new members classes that are for 3 weeks and give some information but it is more of a session where we can show that we aren't terrible people and pretty normal. Every now and then I bemoan the fact that every person who wanted to join the Christian Church in early Christianity really had to know what they believed. We know so little about what we believe, especially as Presbyterians. I was once told that if you cross a Jehovah's Witness and a Presbyterian you get someone who knocks on doors and doesn't know what to say. I feel that as Jonathan Swift said we know enough to make us hate but not enough to make us love.

My encouragement for us today as we are exposed to God's plans in our lives through Jesus' words to Nicodemus that we are to be born again, and even that was puzzling to the religious leader. He had no idea what he was talking about. And as we hear about the promises and the hand of God in Joseph's life that each step along the way was a step for life for His people, that we would embrace the promises and live our lives in the confidence that God's plans are absolutely for our welfare, and not our harm. God's plans for us in life are for hope and a future.

May our lives reflect that future. Amen.