

August 6, 2023

**A MESSAGE OF ENCOURAGEMENT** (A Story of Jeremiah)

**Jeremiah 29:11**

**I say this because I know what I have planned for you,” says the Lord. “I have good plans for you. I don’t plan to hurt you. I plan to give you hope and a good future.”**

Special Music: “Good Plans”      Red Rocks Worship

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O-3IMrhm8HQ>



## **The Hike**

Anne loved to hike. She loved it so much that she seldom took anyone along. There was something special about being alone on a nature trail enjoying the wonders of creation around her. Today was a great day for hiking and she was so looking forward to it. She pulled out her laptop, opened the maps application, zooming in on the area she would like to explore. Carefully she plotted the path she would take, a path that looked promising, teeming with plants and wildlife, and would eventually return her back to her car. She printed off a hard copy of the map with the marked path. She would also have her phone with her, but out on these nature trails, there were times when she could not get a signal and she didn't want to get lost. One can never be too prepared.

Water bottle, check. Map, check. Backpack, check. Granola bars, check. First aid kit, check. Walking stick, check. Hiking boots, check. Hiking hat, check. Phone, check. Yes, she was ready to go. Ann drove an hour to the parking area at the trail head. Her plan was to spend at least four or five hours on the trail. Throwing on her backpack and locking her car, off she went, a new trail awaiting her. How exhilarating!

The dirt path was well worn and started with a sharp climb up a hill into the trees. It wasn't long before she was surrounded by tree limbs and constant shade from the blocked sun, the sounds of birds and small animals jumping from limb to limb. Occasionally a shaft of light would make it to the ground giving the area a reminder that there was a sun in the sky wanting to break through. The shade made the walk pleasantly cool. There was an occasional deer taking

respite in the shade. Every once in a while, she would stop and use her phone to take a picture of some new unique fungus, insect, or wildlife. Crossing a running creek on some well-placed rocks, she carefully made her way deeper into the forest.

Suddenly, the path diverged. She took out her map only to find that there was no fork in the path shown in this area. She looked around hoping to find a sign hidden by the foliage, but none was visible. Taking out her phone, she checked the map application and just as she feared, she had no signal.

“Well,” she said to herself, “There are only three choices. I can go back the way I came, but that is kind of self-defeating. I’m here to hike and explore. Going back was definitely the safest choice, but also the least enjoyable. Going to the right seemed the most logical choice in order to complete her hike. Going left was the most challenging because it looked less traveled and more overgrown. While standing there, trying to make up her mind, a Park Ranger appeared from the path to the left. He had a smile on his face that said he was there to help.

“You look perplexed, mam. How can I help?” he said with a toothy grin.

Ann explained her dilemma, showed him the map, and he gave a little laugh. “Most of the trail maps have not been updated in years. The path to the right is the one shown on your map. It will eventually lead you back to where you parked. The path to the left is only a couple of years old but it has some amazing things to see with a beautiful waterfall and a pool where you can usually find wildlife gathering to drink. If I were you, I would take the path to the left.”

**“Is it dangerous?” Anne asked.**

**“Well, in these woods there is always a chance of running into a black bear or wildcat. But usually, they avoid humans. If you see one, just keep a proper distance and they will go away. The trail is pretty rough, but you look like you can handle it. I think that you will get the most enjoyment and memories from taking the path to the left. I would never lead you into danger. It’s my job to take care of you and make sure you have a good time. I know that your life will be the better for it. I’m always on the trail around here, so just give out a shout if you need me and I will come running. Have a great time!”**

**With that, the ranger took the path back to the parking lot. Anne stood there a moment longer making her decision. She thought to herself, “I’m here to explore and enjoy nature and I don’t believe the ranger would ever intentionally send me into danger. And, oh, the things I might miss along the way if I don’t trust his judgement.”**

**Taking her hiking stick in hand, Anne took the path to the left. The trail was much more difficult than the other way would have been. There were stickers, underbrush, vines, and washed-out areas. Anne was bruised, scratched and tired by the time she reached the pool and the astonishing waterfall the ranger had promised. While the hike was a struggle and at times she wanted to turn back, in the end, Anne did not regret her choice. And to this day, it is the best decision she has ever made.**

**“I have good plans for you. I don’t plan to hurt you. I plan to give you hope and a good future.”**

Words from our Creator that sound so comforting but that we find so very difficult to embrace. Because embracing them requires a high level of trust. It becomes a matter of faith, believing that God would never, ever lead us into a situation that would harm us. The problem is that we do not understand what the word harm means.

I have a great set of kitchen knives at home. If you have never owned a good set of kitchen knives, you might not know that they need to be sharpened often to keep their edge and be useful in the kitchen. I hate having to fight with a tough piece of meat. But a good, sharp kitchen knife can turn that arduous task into something manageable, keep your rhythm of cooking on pace. Those of us who sew, even occasionally, have the same issue. It is so frustrating trying to cut fabric with a pair of dull scissors. If you have ever had to use an axe to chop wood, you understand that the task is much easier if the axe is sharp. Trying to chop wood with a dull axe can take twice, if not three times, as long.

Here’s the thing, though. To sharpen a knife, a pair of scissors, or an axe, we must file down the edge. We need to remove metal to make the blade sharp. We must hone the edge with a steel sharpener or a honing stone. And the duller the blade, the longer it takes to make the blade sharp. We need to remove the nicks and bends and make the edge as clean and thin as we can possibly get it. Sometimes, it takes a professional to get it right.

When I was in my early 20's, I worked in a print shop in the binary. My main job was to cut paper. I had two machines for that. One was a 36" Miehle and the other was a 48" Miehle. Miehle is a company in Germany that makes industrial paper cutters. The 36" was fairly new and programmable. But the 48" was a relic, left over from the 1930's. There were time when I had to use the 48" and it was a rather intimidating machine. I had to line the paper up with my hands under the blade. To cycle the machine, I had to pull the releases on both sides of the machine. This was intentional design so that I was unable release the blade while my hands were still underneath. If the machinery happened to fail, which was extremely unlikely, the blade would easily remove my hands from my arms. When using a machine like this, you get into a rhythm, much like an assembly line. Load the paper. Align the paper. Pull your hands back and release the levers. Let the machine cycle and the brake would catch the blade and return it to the home position. The blades had to be sharpened about once a month and they were sharper than a razor. They also weighed about thirty pounds. One day, I was cutting paper on the 48" and feeling the rhythm of the work. The cut was made, and the machine cycled. As I put my hands back under the blade, the machine cycled again and I came very close to losing my hands. God was watching out for me, like He always does. The brake on the machine had split in half causing the machine to double cycle.

**"I have good plans for you. I don't plan to hurt you. I plan to give you hope and a good future."**

God does not intend to hurt us, but sometimes the positions that we find ourselves in teach us lessons and hone us to make us better instruments of His purpose. God has to take some of the metal off our edge to make us sharp. To make us better suited to the tasks that He places in our paths. Tasks that are so much harder to do if we are dulled by the ways of the world. We come to realize that we have nicks, chips, and bends within us that keep us from being the best tools. The world will often do its best to beat us down and take away our edge.

But we also need to realize that allowing God to sharpen us can be painful at times. He has to grind away that bad metal to make us new. And that requires a great deal of trust on our part. Jeremiah knew this as he addressed the nation of Israel. It is one thing to say that we trust God completely with our lives and a whole different matter when we see ourselves heading into the grindstone. Suddenly, our trust is put to the test. It is at that moment that our faith often fails us because our trust is not quite as strong as we thought it was.

**“I have good plans for you. I don’t plan to hurt you. I plan to give you hope and a good future.”**

We can see the truth in that statement and even believe that it is true. But when it comes to the metal meeting the grinding stone, our faith becomes challenged. There is this inner voice that screams out, “It hurts! It’s uncomfortable! I thought you were taking me down a path that would be beautiful! I want you to stop!”

**God never promises that our life will be without pain and struggle. As a matter of fact, He promises the complete opposite.**

**16 “I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore, be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.**

**17 Be on your guard; you will be handed over to the local councils and be flogged in the synagogues.**

**18 On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles.**

**19 But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time, you will be given what to say,**

**20 for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.**

**21 “Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death.**

**22 You will be hated by everyone because of me, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved.**

#### **Matthew 10: 16-22**

**That sounds like a really hard, life doesn't it. Jesus isn't pulling any punches. Taking that path to the left, the one Christ has chosen for us, the one where we struggle every day, begs us to ask why would we choose to**



do that to ourselves when that path to the right is so much safer and without the perils?

**22 You will be hated by everyone because of me, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved.**

The path is hard. If the path isn't hard, then maybe we are on the wrong path. Maybe we are headed safe and secure back to the parking lot, but we miss the waterfall with the cool pool beneath it. Have we forgotten what Jesus tells us?

The writer of Hebrews gives us comfort when they say in Chapter 13:5, **"Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."** This is actually a quote from Joshua 1:5, but it is pertinent to the lives of the Christians in the early church, and it is so relevant to our lives today. Jesus will not abandon us to walk that path alone. We may not see him all the time, but rest assured, he is there. Just like the ranger in our story, we need only call upon him.

Every day I read new stories of struggles within the church. Everything from clergy inappropriateness to heroes standing against all odds in countries that do not welcome Christians. I read about the authoritarian nature of the church and Christians who push to exclude others, to those churches meeting secretly in basements and caves just to be able to worship our Creator. I read about those who take the right to

worship for granted to the point that they insist on forcing their views on others, to believers that are being assaulted and killed for their faith.

Sometimes, I think we have it too easy here in America. And then I hear about a gunman entering a church and opening fire on a congregation. Do we believe that there is something lacking in the faith of those who have lost their lives for their faith? Or could it be that they understand the dangers and value the prize more than life itself.

James tells us this in Chapter 1:1-4

**2 Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds,**

**3 because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.**

**4 Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.**

We persevere by pushing through our struggles knowing that God walks by our side. That we believe in the plan He has for us. That He will not abandon us in the struggle.

The map for our lives includes a path that leads us into the joy of knowing and embracing God through His son Jesus Christ. That path is the most fulfilling and precious path we can take and, yes, there is the promise of the waterfall and

cool pool at the end. But we won't find the joy of being in that place if we insist on staying on the safe path back to the parking lot.

This week, I want us all to think about that. Every time we meet with a challenge or a struggle, let's ponder what God wants us to learn, what He is trying to teach us, how He is trying to sharpen our spirits. Let us have patience with those we encounter. Let us offer them a place at the table explaining to them that Jesus has prepared a place just for them, a reservation card with their name on it. Let us meet them with open arms and joy in our hearts.

I want to leave this with you today, a message from our Catholic brothers and sisters. It is entitled "A Franciscan Benediction," and it is a message that is my earnest plea for you as well:

### *Franciscan Benediction*

*May God bless you with discomfort...*

*Discomfort at easy answers, half-truths and superficial relationships,*

*Discomfort, so that you will live deep within your heart.*

*May God bless you with anger...*

*Anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people,*

*Anger, so that you will work for justice, freedom, and peace.*

*May God bless you with tears...*

*Tears to shed for those who suffer pain, rejection, starvation and war,*

*Tears, so that you will reach out to comfort them*

*And turn their pain into joy.*

*And, may God bless you with foolishness...*

*Foolishness to believe that you can make a difference in this world,*

*Foolishness, so that you will do what others claim cannot be done.*

*Amen.*

There will be trials, folks. There are people out there who will not receive the message well. They may curse us. They may hurt us. They will laugh at us. They may do us harm. They may beat and batter us. But Jesus walks beside us and that should comfort us in every step that we take. We can either view the trials as attempts to separate us from the love of God, or as opportunities to draw closer to God and embrace His plan for our lives. Listen carefully to the words of God through his servant Jeremiah:

**“I say this because I know what I have planned for you,” says the Lord. “I have good plans for you. I don’t plan to hurt you. I plan to give you hope and a good future.”**

**God bless you all.**

**AMEN**

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