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HISTORICAL SERIES, 13

For Surely I Know the Plans I Have For You

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(The Rev. Telmor G. Sartison was the second National Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada [ELCIC], serving in this ministry from 1993 to 2001, when he retired. This sermon was preached at the Opening Service of the Church's eighth biennial convention on 4 July 2001, held in Waterloo, Ontario, and thus his last official address to the Church. Prior to this ministry he had been the first Bishop of the Saskatchewan Synod of the ELCIC, 1986 to 1993.)

Text: Jeremiah 29: 1-14

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. It has been a marvellous eight years in this office, and before that, eight years in the Saskatchewan Synod. I have enjoyed this call immensely. I have been pushed to the limits of my endurance; at times I have been pushed past the limits of my ability. I thank God for the whole experience.

Over the period of nineteen years in Synodical and National calls, the travel loses its shine, but the people and the events at the other end of each journey always makes it worthwhile. You, dear sisters and brothers in Christ, make it worthwhile. Thanks be to God! What a privilege you have given me to serve as your Bishop.

But there is a turn in the road. I look forward to that turn. It is gift. It is opportunity. It is time to exercise my life and my vocation in another direction.

Where to from here? We have talked and prayed about that. The Holy Spirit will lead, as in the past. We have heard and lived with the promise: *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.*

It's interesting to discover the words and advice that come your way when you set your mind to retire. A friend sent these words by

email a couple of weeks ago. It is called, “Everything I need to know, I learned from Noah’s Ark.” Here is some of the advice:

- Plan ahead – it was not raining when Noah built the ark.
- Stay fit – when you are 600 years old, someone may ask you to do something really big.
- When you are stressed, float a while.
- Remember, the Ark was built by amateurs; the Titanic was built by professionals.

As for me, though, I think I must stick to the promise from Jeremiah: *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.*

That is the word of God spoken to the people of God by Jeremiah. It is our text for this assembly.

Unlike us, the people hearing the word from Jeremiah are in exile. They are the leaders and the main movers of the chosen people of God. They are in exile. They have been moved out of their country by the enemy to a place a long way from home. All the furnishings and vestments of their life are sacked, stolen, and abused. All that they held dear, from land and home to temple and worship, are in the hands of the enemy.

Home for these people is today’s Israel, but they are in Babylon. They are anxious to get back home. They press their cause with tears and prayers and outrage and hopelessness. They feel abandoned. “Where is God?” “Cannot God act against the infidel?” “Where is our protector?”

Listen to their life in exile: They have set themselves apart from the society around them. They will be different. Being different will preserve them and identify them. But the word of God to them is so contrary to this action of separation and hiding! Listen to that word of the Lord:

Build houses and live in them. Plant gardens in your exile and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters. Multiply where you live. Even in exile. Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile. Pray to the Lord for that city, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

To these people, these hopeless, displaced, and frightened people, these people turned in on themselves, these people who live in a ghetto of self-concern and self-interest, Jeremiah brings a word from

the Lord: *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.*

They are crying, they are hurt, and they are afraid. Can they trust this word? Lord, how about some action now?! We want to see something happen. Where are you? Not just a promise, please. Action! Jeremiah continues. Here is the word from God:

When you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me. If you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me. I will restore your fortunes. I will gather you from all the nations where I have driven you. I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

Note the words: I will hear you; I will let you find me; I will restore; I will gather; I will bring you back. Promise, promise. *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.*

No fretting. No stewing. No driven into hiding by fear. Instead, “Call upon me, I will hear you.” “Pray to me, I will listen.” “Search for me, you will find me.” “Seek me with all your heart, with all your fears, with all your doubts, with all your questions, with all your sins, with all your honesty. I will let you find me; I will restore; I will gather.” “I will bring you back.”

Promise, promise.

We are gathered here for many reasons. But this year is more than an ordinary convention. For one thing, we celebrate the ordination of women in our Church, a gracious, decisive, and hope-filled leap into the future that was taken by our Church late in the last century. I remember the discussions and the debate. We heard the call to change direction. We heard the words, and in faith we acted. *I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord.*

We celebrate a relationship long in progress: the relationship of full communion with the Anglican Church of Canada. This is not a merger. This is the table of the Lord open to one another’s members, a recognition of ministries, confirmations, and ordinations. This is the first of what I hope will be many agreements between ourselves and other denominations to commune together and to work together.

It is a bold step in our expression of unity in Christ, but a carefully worked through step. It is new to us. But we have heard the call to exercise our unity in Christ and in faith to act.

I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord.

Through prayer, conversation, and decision we will elect a new Bishop. There is excitement in the air. We all have our ideas about who the person should be. People are willing to let their names stand. One will surface in what can be for others a painful process of selection and call. Some candidates will express relief. Some will experience pain. Some will ask, "Where to from here, Lord?"

For this whole Church and for all the candidates, God's word from Jeremiah is a good word to us today: *I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord.* You see, we begin this journey with promise.

We are Christ's body, the church. We conduct our business in the all-too-human ways we understand, and trust in the promise of God. It is God who in Christ created and gives life to the whole creation. It is God who in Christ created and gives life to the church. It is God who through Christ paints such variety in this magnificent and saved community of sinners. Why should we ever bother to be afraid?

We are the people of hope. We hope in the promises of God. *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.*

Call. Search. Seek. I will hear. I will let you find me. I will restore, gather, and bring you home. Amen.