

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, November 18, 2007**

**THE FUTURE OF FAITH: THE NEXT 20 YEARS
PART I**

Jeremiah 29:11-14

A few weeks ago we celebrated the first 20 years in the life and ministry of this church since Faith was founded in the fall of 1987. It was a wonderful time to look back and to remember with rejoicing what God has done, how God has led us and provided for us over the last 20 years.

Bible teacher F. B. Meyer once said: “The law for Christian living is not backward, but forward; not for experiences that lie behind, but for doing the will of God, which is always ahead and beckoning us to follow.” It is good to remember the past, to honor it and build on it. But God calls us and invites us, even commands us, to live for Him and to serve Him in the present, and to follow Him into the future He has prepared for us. So, beginning today and continuing next Sunday, I want to invite you to think with me about the next 20 years in the life of Faith. I want to do so against the backdrop of this message from the Lord to His people in exile in Babylon, this message of encouragement and hope that we find in Jeremiah 29.

The verses we read together – verses 11-14 – are just a brief snippet of a much longer letter written by the prophet Jeremiah to some 3,000 Jews who had been taken captive in 597 B.C. along with King Jehoiachin by Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar had forced them to leave their homes in Jerusalem and to go into exile in Babylon, some 800 miles from home, 800 miles from the temple in Jerusalem, which was, to them, the preeminent symbol of God’s presence and favor.

Jeremiah’s letter was a message from the Lord urging the exiles to settle down and get on with their lives in Babylon. He encouraged them to make the most of their circumstances and to bloom where they were planted because, whether they liked it or not, they were going to be there for a long time. Not forever, but for a period of 70 years. He warned them not to be deceived by false prophets who held out to them the false hope that their stay in Babylon would be short. He told them to pray for God’s blessing to rest upon Babylon, and to make Babylon a better place by the witness of their lives and the quality of their character.

And he told them not to give up hope. He told them not to despair. “In spite of what you are going through right now, in spite of your circumstances,” he said, “do not think that God has forgotten you or abandoned you forever. In spite of the way it may seem right now, you have a future and a hope with God – a future full of hope, if you will but turn to the Lord in humility and faith, and seek Him with all your heart.”

Verse 11 has to be among the most hopeful and uplifting in the whole Bible, a message of tremendous hope and encouragement in the midst of discouragement and confusion about what had happened in their lives. And I urge you to hold onto the words of this verse and keep them close to your heart.

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”

Isn't that a most encouraging message?

Perhaps this is stating the obvious, but it is important for us to recognize and acknowledge the fact that our situation here at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church in Kingstowne, Virginia, is nothing like the circumstances of those Jewish exiles who had been taken from Jerusalem to Babylon against their will. Though this world is ultimately not our home – our true home is with God in heaven – we are not in exile here in northern Virginia. We have not been torn from our homes as those exiles in Babylon were. We are in the land of God's blessing, in the place of God's promise and rich provision. As a church family, we have found a home here in Kingstowne. We have found a spiritual home at Faith. We have found a home with like-minded brothers and sisters in Christ in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. We are the recipients of God's magnificent, amazing grace. All of these things give us a reason to rejoice, don't they?

Still, I believe there is a message from God for His church today in Jeremiah 29:11. I believe there is a message for us at Faith. I believe God has a plan for us – for the next 20 years and beyond. Just as He had a plan for those Jewish exiles in Babylon. I believe God has a plan for your life and mine. I believe God has a plan for this church. A good and gracious plan.

I believe there is a bright future ahead for us at Faith, a future full of hope as we build on the blessings and legacy of the first 20 years. In His providence, God has placed us in a land of opportunity here, in a community which, though it is rich in things, is full of people who are missing out on the one thing that matters most in life – a living, vibrant, personal relationship of trusting faith in the one true and living God, who loves us so much that He came to die for us, to redeem us from our sins and to restore us to a right relationship with Him.

Kingstowne is a land of opportunity to know Christ and to make Him known. To declare the praises of God, who called us out of the darkness of sin and ignorance into His wonderful light (1 Peter 2:9). To worship His majesty. To grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:18). To winsomely share the saving love of Jesus with our neighbors. To minister to one another and to our community in the name of Jesus. To be instruments of God's grace and truth, reconciliation and hope in all the places and relationships where God puts us.

God has a good and gracious plan for us at Faith. A plan to give us a future full of hope as we seek first His kingdom and serve His kingdom purposes.

In recent weeks I have reminded you of what the Bible says about the heart. Three weeks ago, we focused on Proverbs 4:23 and its counsel to guard our hearts above all else, because the heart is the wellspring of life out of which all the issues of life flow. Two weeks ago we zeroed in on Proverbs 3:5-6, with its call to “trust in the Lord with all (our) heart” and to “lean not on (our) own understanding,” to acknowledge the Lord and His sovereign goodness and power “in all (our) ways,” confident that He will direct our paths and lead us in the way He wants us to go.

Though I have not preached specifically on stewardship in the last several weeks as we have had stewardship talks by different elders, I hope you understand the connection between the heart and biblical stewardship. Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence and the third president of this nation, was not an orthodox Christian – he would not have affirmed “The Essentials of Our Faith” of the EPC – but he was right on target when he said: “When the heart is right, the feet are swift.” When your heart is right, when you are rightly related to God, your feet will be swift to give generously of your financial resources, as well as your time and the gifts and abilities God has given you, to serve His kingdom purposes. Stewardship, you see, is ultimately not a function of how much you have. It is a matter of the heart and what you do with what you have.

Because the heart is the seat or center of our affections and attitudes, our emotions and will, our desires and dreams, the spiritual condition of our hearts is critical to our spiritual well-being. The same thing is true in a corporate sense, as we examine and evaluate the health and vitality of our fellowship as a church. The key to our health and vitality as a church over the next 20 years is the condition of our hearts and our faithfulness in the things to which God is calling us.

If we are to fulfill God’s purposes for us in the next 20 years, if we are to be the church I believe God wants us to be, to experience the fullness of God’s blessing in our life and ministry together and to be the blessings God wants us to be, I believe we need to increasingly cultivate these four qualities in our lives:

- A heart for God
- A heart for God’s Word
- A heart for God’s people (one another)
- A heart for God’s world (a world of people who are spiritually lost without Christ).

I’m only going to touch on the first two today, and then consider the remaining two next Sunday.

A HEART FOR GOD

What do I mean by a heart for God? I mean a heart that is devoted to God above all else. I mean a heart that recognizes the highest calling in life is to love the Lord our God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our mind and with all our strength, as Jesus said in Mark 12:30 (cf. Matthew 22:37; Deuteronomy 6:5). I mean a heart which takes

delight in the Lord, as David said in Psalm 37:4. I mean a heart that ascribes to the Lord the glory due His name (Psalm 96:8) and worships Him in spirit and in truth (John 4:24) – from the heart.

To the Jewish exiles in Babylon, far from their homeland, the Lord said in Jeremiah 29:13: “You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.” With *all* your heart. With an undivided heart (Psalm 86:11). With a heart that is fully-devoted to Him.

Being the person God wants you to be begins here. Being the church God wants us to be starts here. As laudable as it is to have a heart for God’s Word, if we do not have a heart for the God of the Word – if God Himself does not reside in our hearts and reign as King of our lives, our devotion to the Word misses the point. God calls us to love and serve one another as members of His family, but as we must never allow our affection for one another and our commitment to one another to take the place of God in our hearts.

Our EPC Book of Order says that “the first duty of the church” (in terms of its work) “is to evangelize by extending the gospel both at home and abroad, leading others to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and to provide for the nurture of that faith that all might grow in grace and in sanctification” (Book of Government 4-3). That is our first duty. But our primary purpose and highest calling as God’s people is to give God the worship He desires and deserves. So our commitment to ministry of any kind, including our devotion to the work of evangelism and making disciples, must never take the place of God Himself in our lives. Ministry itself can actually become an idol that keeps us from actually knowing and loving God. We can become so busy doing work for God that we fail to cultivate a heart for God – a heart that loves and desires God above all else.

It can happen to anyone. Has it perhaps happened to you? Are you so busy doing for God that you have no time or energy to be with God? Then seek Him with all your heart, for when you do, the Bible says, you will find Him (Jeremiah 29:13). Let your heart be still, and know that He – the Lord – is God (Psalm 46:10).

A heart for God. Nothing is more important in the life of a Christian or the life of a church than a heart devoted to God. A heart for God that overflows in worship, both private and public, personal and corporate, that comes from the heart. In the next 20 years – in fact, from now to eternity – nothing is more essential in your life or in our life together as a church than cultivating a heart that is devoted to God, a heart that delights in God, a heart that desires God and His glory above all. If we don’t put God first in our lives, we will never experience the fullness of His blessing either as individuals or as a church.

In Psalm 73, Asaph prayed:

Whom have I in heaven but You?
And earth has nothing I desire besides You.

My flesh and my heart may fail,
 But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.
 (Psalm 73:25-26)

Can you pray that prayer? Let's make it our aim in the next 20 years and beyond to cultivate a heart for God.

A HEART FOR GOD'S WORD

Second, a heart for God's Word. From the founding of Faith in 1987, the pastors and elders of this church have had an unwavering commitment to the inspired, infallible, unerring Word of God, which is our final authority in all matters of faith and life. That commitment has not changed in the last 20 years, and it will not change in the next 20 years. Or ever, I pray.

We hold firmly to what the Westminster Confession of Faith says:

The Bible speaks authoritatively and so deserves to be believed and obeyed. This authority does not depend on the testimony of any man or church, but completely on God, who is himself truth. The Bible therefore is to be accepted as true, because it is the word of God (WCF 1.4).

We affirm the Bible to be the foundation for our faith, and for our life and work and witness together as a church. It is in the Bible that we discover who God is and what He is like. It is in the Bible that we learn of God's love for the world and His plan of salvation for all who turn to Him in faith and trust in the saving work of His Son Jesus Christ. It is in the Bible that God has made known His will for our lives. The Word of God both convicts us and comforts us. It shows us the way we should go and how we should live as the called-out, forgiven people of God. When we hide God's Word in our hearts, it keeps us from sin (Psalm 119:11). It acts as a lamp for our feet and a light for our path, to keep us from stumbling or falling (Psalm 119:105). It is able, as Paul says in 2 Timothy 3, to make us "wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (3:15). It is useful for "showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, (and) training us to live God's way" (3:16, *The Message*), so that we "may be thoroughly equipped" for every task God has for us to do (3:17).

We must not – and we will not – compromise our commitment as a church to the truth and authority of God's Word. But an institutional commitment to God's Word is not enough. You and I personally must cultivate a heart for God's Word and make it a regular – no, integral – part of our spiritual regimen. You and I need to be in God's Word consistently – daily – in order to know God's Word, to understand God's Word, and to live it out. We must not be satisfied to be "hearers" of God's Word, or even "readers" of it, but "doers" of the Word (James 1:22). It is in living out God's Word that we will receive the blessing.

A heart for God. And a heart for God's Word. These are essential if we are to be useful to God and to fulfill His purposes in the next 20 years.

May it be so in us, to the glory and praise of God. Amen.