

I want to begin our time today by asking a question. Have you experienced the feeling of change in the air? I'm not talking about the change of seasons. It's the first Sunday of September, my daughters are back in school, and college football is on, so I've definitely been made aware that summer is ebbing. But the kind of change I'm talking about is something different. Have you ever sensed- somewhere inside- that a change of plans was in order?

It was 10 years ago this fall that I found myself experiencing this type of restlessness. I had been working as a youth minister at a church in North Carolina for almost 10 years and I felt compelled to make a change. It's hard to describe this sensation. It's like an internal compass is calling to a different true north. I suppose it's no coincidence that an opportunity presented itself- a classmate from college was getting ready to plant a church and called me up wanting to know if I'd be interested in joining the effort. My heart was ready to say yes before my mind had the chance to evaluate. They had already picked the name of this new church and- you can't make this stuff up- it was to be called True North Church. The call seemed like an answer to the spiritual discontentment I had been experiencing. By the end of that winter my family and I had relocated and I found myself setting up for the first worship service of this new church.

"This was the job I had been waiting for." I thought at the time. Leading worship. Helping a fledgling group of Christ followers to grow and multiply. It was meant to be- until it wasn't. After a year and half of working at True North, they let me go. Financially our little church wasn't doing well. There just wasn't enough provision for two full time staff. Suddenly True North was no longer my true north (that's literally and figuratively).

Sometimes plans change. Sometimes- in fact, more often than not- our ideas about how things should progress don't turn out the way we want them to. This can be unpleasant. Some of us have been heartbroken by a change of plans. Maybe today you still look back with regret on hopes that never materialized; dreams that went unfulfilled; a promise that wasn't kept. On the other hand, sometimes we are surprised to learn that a change of direction is more wonderful than anything we had imagined. Hindsight being 20/20 we thank God for redirecting us because the outcome has surpassed our expectations.

When plans change sometimes it thrills us and leaves us breathless. Other times we find ourselves confused and off balance. Still other times we are left feeling crushed and defeated.

My guess is you understand what I'm talking about. Live very long on this planet and you're bound to face a change of plans. In fact, we here at Harbor are experiencing this very thing right now, aren't we? Our beloved lead pastor and his family are getting ready to embark upon a new ministry back in the Midwest. Next week Jed will get up here to teach and we'll go to the baptism celebration together as a church and then we'll be saying goodbye.

What do we do next? How do we respond when plans change?

Throughout the summer we've been in a sermon series called "God Breathed." The cool part of this particular series, for me at least, has been the fact that these are your favorite passages of scripture. We've been looking at bedrock texts for your lives. These are the verses that have sustained you through difficult times. They've motivated you to action when you were complacent. These are core texts for our lives because they've been there for us when we needed to hear them. Some of these words are filed away in our memory banks. Today's passage is one of these, and they are timely words for us here at Harbor. *"For I know the plans I have for you," says the Lord.* This is Jeremiah 29:10-14. Let me read it for you.

**10** *This is what the Lord says: "You will be in Babylon for seventy years. But then I will come and do for you all the good things I have promised, and I will bring you home again. 11 For I know the plans I have for you," says the Lord. "They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope. 12 In those days when you pray, I will listen. 13 If you look for me wholeheartedly, you will find me. 14 I will be found by you," says the Lord. "I will end your captivity and restore your fortunes. I will gather you out of the nations where I sent you and will bring you home again to your own land."*

That's good stuff. I don't know about you, but those are just the words I need to hear right now. I'm going to spend a bit of time here in a moment helping us to understand why God spoke them in the first place, because context is important, but there's a reason why, for generations, people have put these words to memory. Hearing them, especially in times of change, brings peace and comfort to hearts that are uncertain. The God who utters these words is surely one of mercy and love.

So what are the circumstances that have brought about this kind of a declaration from God, you might be wondering. Well, they are bleak, unfortunately. Israel, God's chosen people have been conquered by Babylon. They should have seen it coming. God had warned them that this would happen if they continued to be disobedient to his commands. But the people did not listen, so as the prophet Jeremiah writes these words, the Israelites are being hauled off as captives. They are going into exile.

The Babylonians are utilizing a brilliant strategy for world domination. Rather than forcing the peoples that they conquer to become slaves in their own lands- which would in time inevitably result in uprising and revolt, and instead of wiping them out completely- which would reduce their potential work force, the Babylonians adopted the practice of removing the leaders, the young and the influential from their homes, taking them back to Babylon where they were indoctrinated into Babylonian culture and then returning them much later to their homes as good Babylonians.

Well this seems to spell disaster for Israel, right? They have been a nation set apart for the one true God, but now their best and brightest are marching off to become polytheistic, worldly and very much a part of Babylon's culture. You'd expect Israel's leaders to communicate a message of strict isolationism and that's exactly what the exiles were hearing from back home. But in a curious twist, God instructs Jeremiah to tell the captives to do the opposite. Vs 4-7 of chapter 29 precede our text and here's what they say:

*4 This is what the Lord of Heaven's Armies, the God of Israel, says to all the captives he has exiled to Babylon from Jerusalem: 5 "Build homes, and plan to stay. Plant gardens, and eat the food they produce. 6 Marry and have children. Then find spouses for them so that you may have many grandchildren. Multiply! Do not dwindle away! 7 And work for the peace and prosperity of the city where I sent you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, for its welfare will determine your welfare."*

God had a different plan for His people than the one they hoped for- they're headed to exile- and in addition His desire for them in captivity is not what they expected. They are to work for the peace and prosperity of the city they've been sent into. How strange this instruction must have seemed. His plan for them involved serving and even praying for the city where they would live in exile. For 70 years! What does this mean?

I love Tim Keller's perspective on this passage. He actually uses these verses as a purpose statement for his church in downtown Manhattan. God is not calling His people to live as separatists from those in the city (divided, exclusive, etc). Nor is He calling them to completely conform to the culture of the city (losing their identity, calling, etc). He's asking them to be distinctive while serving the city and seeking its prosperity.

This is a radical way of viewing our role as God's people in this world. If you're a follower of Christ, you've been given a very challenging path to navigate. Living distinctively while simultaneously loving and serving those around you is no easy feat. There's tension between those two poles.

God's call to Israel seems odd, but really it's the same calling He's placed on those of us today who choose to follow Him. We've been called, just like Israel was, to love unconditionally the people of the cities and towns we live in. Jesus said that they would know we are His followers by our love. And so we serve and we share and speak with love to those we live among. And at the same time we conform our hearts to the image of Christ. We remain true to our First Love. We allow His Spirit, at work in our hearts, to mold us into a holy people- distinctive.

When God asks His people to change plans, He did not say it would be easy.

One of the very real aspects of the changes around here at Harbor- for me- is going to be the preparation of messages like this one. Studying and writing are going to be a large component of my workweek for the foreseeable future. Which means I have to come up with things like *titles* for these sermons. You can't imagine the amount of agonizing that goes into titling a message. Most of you will never even see the titles. We don't post them on the screens and they're not printed on the programs. Yet, somehow I work myself into knots trying to come up with the "perfect" title. It has to be just right. Not too long, but not too vague either. Clever, but not cheesy and memorable but appropriate. Can you guess the title of today's message?  
"A Change of Plans."

But with the way my mind works nothing is ever simple. I started to wonder about the grammar of the phrase. Is it: "A change of plans" or is it "a change in plans." Oh boy. So I went to the fount of all knowledge to divine an answer- the interwebs- and there I learned something that you probably already knew because you're smarter than me. Both are correct. "A change of plans" or "A change in plans" both use correct grammar. Whew! But they each mean something different. Yes.

A change *of* plans means adopting a completely alternative plan. A change *in* plans means that the ultimate objective remains the same, but parts within the plan are going to change. So, hypothetically, if your original plan was to drive with Bob and Cindy to the Cape next week and you had a change *of* plans, it means that you're not going to the Cape at all next week with Bob and Cindy- you're doing something else instead. But if you have a change *in* plans- you're still going to the cape, but maybe Cindy had to cancel and so someone else is going to join in her place. Make sense? Now we can all properly use these phrases aren't you so excited?

What does this have to do with our text? I think God is asking Israel to trust Him with a change *in* plans. This isn't how they would have scripted it, but the ultimate objective remains. They are still His people, after all and He is their God. There's been a change *in* plans but their future is secure.

God says that He knows the plans that He has for them. They're good plans meant to give hope and a future. But here's the thing, once we've made that complete change of plans and given our lives completely to God, sometimes, like Israel, we experience a change in plans. Our ultimate objective is the same- we're going to love God with all our heart soul mind and strength & we're going to love others the way He loves us- but things within the plan change, right?

Sometimes it might feel like we're walking into exile with challenges and difficulties that we did not expect. What then? What do we do when there's a change *in* plans?

1. Don't be afraid.

Fear is the natural inclination of our hearts when we face uncertainty. It is for me, anyway. I'm not going to lie, I'm fearful about what this particular change in plans at Harbor means for me. This isn't what I signed up for, you know? I feel a bit like Isaiah, "Woe is me! I am a man of unclean lips!"

It should not surprise us that the unknown might cause us to become afraid, and for doubts to begin to creep in, but here's the thing. We can't control the future, and that's always been the case. We delude ourselves into thinking that we're in charge of our steps, but when our plans change, it forces us to acknowledge that is not the case. Instead of allowing our minds to flirt with despondency or even anger, consider this to be an opportunity for us to trust God. A change in plans means there's reason to take shelter in the refuge of God's faithfulness. And make no mistake- He is faithful. His promises are true.

In the upper room with his disciples Jesus spoke some words of consolation. We find them in John's gospel in chapter 14. Consider that the disciples were facing a monumental change in plans. Their leader was about to be taken from them and executed- not exactly what they were expecting. Jesus' words for them as they faced those circumstances are every bit as potent for us when we find ourselves fearful of what comes next. He said, "Don't let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God and trust also in me." Later in the chapter He adds, *"I am leaving you with a gift— peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give. So don't be troubled or afraid. Remember what I told you: I am going away, but I will come back to you again."*

Fear might be our natural response when we face uncertainty, but we don't have to let it hold us. We can choose instead to let our hearts find rest in our God and Savior.

## 2. Pray.

Seriously. Pray! That sounds so trite. You'd expect a pastor to tell you to pray. Jesus brother James said, "you don't have because you do not ask." Are you floundering because the ground shifted under your feet and the unexpected has occurred? Pray. Go to God. Talk with Him. Get on your knees- figuratively or literally and tell Him where your heart is. He listens. He cares. I'm going to encourage us here in a moment to go to our knees- adopting a posture of humility before God- and to let Him know that we need Him. We need wisdom that only He can give us. We can let Him know that we trust Him and we can ask for faith to overcome our unbelief. We can thank Him, because He provides what we need. He's given us grace and in Christ we've found hope and forgiveness.

Our circumstances change, and when they do it's an opportunity to pray and communicate with our God.

For some of us today, I think what God wants from us third thing- a complete change of plans. He wants us to hand over the direction of our lives- every hope, dream and aspiration- so that He can lead us. He wants His plans to be our plans.

That's a pretty radical choice, no question, but if we believe that God is God and we're not- and that He's good and we're not (at least not to the degree that He is)- and if we've come to understand that He did for us in Christ something that we cannot do for ourselves (that being to exchange His perfect life for our imperfect one and to die in our place taking on the penalty that we deserved, then defeating sin and death by raising from the dead) well if that's the God we are entrusting with our lives then the decision makes a lot more sense.

Next week we're going to watch as people step into the waters of baptism and into a complete change of plans. They're going to confess their need for a Savior and their desire to let Jesus be the leader and Lord of their lives. Maybe you need to join them? Maybe sitting in here over the weeks and months you've come to understand the depth of love and grace God has provided for you and it's time for you to place your life in His hands. In our text for today God speaks these amazing words: **12** *In those days when you pray, I will listen.* **13** *If you look for me wholeheartedly, you will find me.* **14** *I will be found by you," says the Lord. "I will end your captivity and restore your fortunes. I will gather you out of the nations where I sent you and will bring you home again to your own land."* If that's you, I hope you'll come find me after service, or write down your desire on a connection card and place it in an offering box on the way out so we can connect with you this week.

