

**Stump the Preacher: Does God have a plan for my life?**  
**Jeremiah 29:10-14**  
**the Rev. Michelle Slater August 28, 2011**

As we worship together this summer, we've been exploring questions that you all have offered, in what we call "Stump the Preacher". This week's question came with a long introduction. The letter writer laid out something that was causing them pain, something in their life that wasn't going the way they really wished and longed for it to go. I won't give the details, but the person's heart-felt question, arising out of this ongoing disappointment, was simple: "Does God have a plan for my life?"

Maybe some of you have felt that way, or asked that question, at some point in your life. As a young adult, faced with all kinds of different options for the future, and having just no idea which way you should go. Does God have a plan for me, to study or learn or take up a certain job or profession? It would make things easier to know what I "should" be doing with my life.

Or maybe you are or have been single, when everyone around you seems to be coupling up. You have lots of love to give, and are longing to find the right person to give it to. But it seems to just not happen, day after day, month after month, year after year. You never meet the right person, or you meet some "possibles" but they're already taken. Does God have a plan for me? you wonder. Why am I still alone? What about me, God? Tell me you have somebody in mind for me.

Or maybe you have experienced infertility, or pregnancy loss. You have felt so certain that you were meant to be a parent, a mother or a father. It feels like a calling, a vocation, something you're supposed to do and be. Yet it keeps not happening. The long awaited pregnancy never happens, or the miscarriages keep coming. While all around you, everybody else is popping 'em out, seemingly without even trying. Does God have a plan for me? you question. What about me, God? I believe I'm trying to fulfill a calling, a purpose you have planted in me. Why aren't you helping it come true?

Or maybe it was a failed, or a career that didn't take off, or some other kind of struggle, or longing, or disappointment. Whatever it was, it led you to wonder if God really does have a plan for your life, and if you somehow missed the signs and went the wrong direction, mucking up the plan for good.

I have to admit, that the idea that God has "a plan" for my life doesn't really appeal to me. At least, not the kind of plan that doesn't leave any room for me to find my own way, assert my own choices, discover my own gifts. I don't like the idea that God has a set of strategic moves laid out for me to make, as if on a giant chessboard, and if I miss the next move, I'm sunk for good.

But if we look in Scripture, the times that God talks about God's plan seem to express something more like a *hope* or an *intention*, rather than a detailed blueprint to be followed. In the letter to the church at Ephesus, St. Paul tells them his sense of what God's will is. He says, "*With all wisdom and insight [God] has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him,*

*things in heaven and things on earth.*” God’s plan, according to Paul, is that all things would be gathered up in God, a cosmic reconciliation and order and wholeness, not just for human beings but for all of creation.

When it comes to human beings, other places in Scripture seem to have that same understanding of God’s plan being more like God’s *desires* and *hopes* for humanity, about what makes for healthy and thriving human community. When the Israelites are facing exile in Babylon, God speaks through the prophet Jeremiah, telling the people of Israel of God’s will for them: *“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. Then 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, says the LORD.”* God’s plan is not for the people to: go here, stay there, do this, don’t do that. God’s plan is rather for deepened relationship, trust and love, between God and God’s people. God’s plan is for love, love growing within us for God, and for each other, and for ourselves. And for that love to make itself felt and seen and lived in our words and our actions.

But what of us individually? Does God have not just a hope for each one of us, but even a purpose, a purpose unique to each one of us? A number of years ago, I came across the concept of “sealed orders”. It’s a military term that refers to written orders or instruction that are in a sealed envelope, not to be looked at until a specific time, to ensure secrecy in a time of war. So, sealed orders might be given to the commander of a warship, only to be opened once the ship is out of contact with the shore.

What could such a militaristic image have to do with God’s purpose for our lives? Well, it is the image used by the great Christian mystic and healer, Agnes Sanford. Sanford believed that each of us comes into the world with our own special and unique purpose. It is as if, before we are born, each of us talk over with God our special purpose in this world. Then, of course, we are born, and seem to forget all about it! So we spend our life discerning what our purpose is, our personal calling or vocation, following a nudge here, a feeling there, a door opening this way, or one closing behind us. Hold the envelope with our “sealed orders” from God up to the light, straining to see the writing on the page. Pulling back the sealed corners, bit by bit, seeing one letter, then two, then a whole word, puzzling what it might mean.

So how would we figure out what our own particular purpose is? Well, if God’s plan and hope for all of humanity, and for us individually, is for love, then that’s a good starting point. The authors Dennis, Sheila and Matthew Linn, who have written and taught widely on the subject of Christian healing, suggest that each person’s purpose is revealed by the ways we uniquely give and receive love.

Which is striking, isn’t it? To think that our purpose on earth, each of us and all of us, is not to accomplish certain things, or marry a certain person, or have x number of children, or do a particular thing as a career. But rather, that our unique purpose in the world is to be in a certain way, a way of giving and receiving love.

When I think of purpose in that way, as a way of being and loving, I can see the purpose of so many people I know, shining out of them. It is evident in the work they do for a living, or the ministries they offer in the church, or the volunteer activities they take part in, or even just in the

way they greet you, talk with you, see you.

For example, there are people in this church I can think of, whose purpose, whose way of giving and receiving love, is through healing. Some of them have done it for a living, as nurses and doctors and physiotherapists. Some of them have nothing to do with healing, it seems, in their work, but they live their purpose out through the ministry of healing touch. And some live their healing purpose through seemingly small and unimportant encounters that leave others feeling refreshed, renewed, cared for, healed.

There are people I know whose purpose really is to mother or father, to nurture and raise and love children. Some of them have been able to do so through their own children, and grandchildren. Others have lived their parenting purpose through teaching, or coaching, or being the aunt and great-aunt and cousin that every child knew they could turn to for love and care and acceptance and help, no matter what.

Whatever our unique purpose is, I believe that it is in discerning what it is, and finding ways to live that out, that is God's hope and intention for us. And because it is God's hope and intention for us, it will always lead us to deeper and greater life, love and joy.

So, how would we go about figuring that out, then? The Linns (the authors I mentioned earlier) suggest asking yourself some questions, and then spending time paying attention to see what answers emerge. They suggest spending time each evening, lighting a candle, and asking yourself a question, like, "When in your life have you been so absorbed in something, that time flew by?" or, "What would you do if you had time and money enough to do anything?" Questions like, "What is it that you *have* to do – that you can't *not* do?" or, "When have you felt most alive, especially in your body? What were the times of your life you would like to repeat?"

If it sounds like this might be the work of a lifetime, I think you're right. I also think that the way our particular purpose is made manifest, changes throughout our life, being shaped by our life's circumstances, the things that happen to us that are beyond our control, and by our own choices.

And, it may be, that what we feel and believe is our special purpose in life, is not coming to fruition, and it is causing us great grief and suffering. And I don't want to discount that. For many people, we don't get our heart's desire, the way we feel most called to fulfill our life's purpose. And that can leave real and long-lasting pain. Yet some of the most humbling and inspiring funerals I have been part of, have been for people who found creative and unexpected ways to live out their purpose. The woman who yearned for a big family and could never have one, who instead became an adoptions counselor, spending her life creating families for others. The woman whose calling is to create home and offer hospitality, who was widowed young and remained single afterward, but constantly hosted overseas students and foster children and made a home for those who had none. The man who always wanted to be a teacher, but had to quit school when he was young to work to support his family, who went on to found a soccer league, teaching generations of young men and women not only how to play soccer, but also how to win graciously and lose courageously, how to persevere and how to work together.

Perhaps, it is the moment of our death, when we finally become one with God again, that our sealed orders are revealed, and we are shown how all the ways we lived out our unique

purpose, perhaps without even knowing it. For it doesn't always happen the way we want it to, or yearn for it to, or need it to. But God does have a plan for us, if by that we mean a purpose, a desire, and a hope.

Whatever happens, however fully or incompletely we are able to grasp and live out God's purpose for us, we never take the "wrong steps" in God's plan. God's plans and hopes for us are for us to know the greatest meaning and the deepest love and the richest life possible. So God is always at work, responding to and shaping a new future for us, with the choices and commitments that we make in each moment. Even though our lives are full of mistakes and disappointments, strange twists and turns and even great struggle, God can and does use us for God's plan for love, anyways and always. Thanks be to God!