“Plan B”

Church of the Palms

Sunday, September 10, 2006

The Rev. Graham Hart,
General Presbyter
Peace River Presbytery
I. As is both the custom and my role, one of the times I preach as General Presbyter in the congregations of Peace River Presbytery is during times of transition. I preached here almost exactly three years ago on the Sunday prior to Paul coming as the Co-Pastor. I did not plan to be back so soon to declare the pulpit vacant, so that means you are in Plan B, which is what I have titled the sermon today.

Simply stated, as a Church you had your A team and A plan in place, but life happened, and now you are in Plan B. Our scripture lessons are about Plan B, when life doesn’t go as planned.

There are three points I want to lift up that emerge out of our scripture readings from Nehemiah and Mark related to Plan B living:

1. It is not as bad as you think.
2. Jesus is in the boat with you.
3. It’s time for each of you to join in the rebuilding that must be done… it’s time to move on.

First, the bad news is you are in transition too soon; the good news is it is not as bad as it could be. To all who are feeling like Chicken Little, the sky is not falling, and to put this unexpected transition into perspective, I offer a list of you know your church is in trouble if........ (Some are in jest and some are serious)

1. If Jim Cantorri of the Weather Channel is broadcasting live under the oak trees in the Courtyard, then you know you church is in trouble.
2. If you drive up on a Sunday morning and there is a sign in the parking lot, Closed for Remodeling… then you know your church is in trouble.
3. If I, as General Presbyter of Peace River, have been invited to give a 24-week sermon series, than you know your church is in trouble.
4. If members, staff, and church leaders talk around or about each other rather than talk to each other or if leaders are preying on, rather than praying for each other, than you know your church is in trouble.
5. If you find out the corrected mold problem in the education building has mutated and now has become a soul problem creating a negative dark stain in the minds and hearts and attitudes of members, than you know your church is in trouble.

To say it in the positive, Church of the Palms is nowhere close to imploding or exploding or falling apart or coming apart, but there are issues to address that in this interim time are of critical importance. As a Church you are grieving the departure of a gifted pastor-teacher, you’re wondering what happened, you are asking questions and getting answers, but this is not the worst of times.

II. Turn with me to the gospel lesson from Mark.

After a long day of teaching, Jesus is tired. Instead of walking to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, the disciples take a boat. This was no cruise ship, just a fishing craft that probably could hold 7-12 folks. It had a single sail. There were no cabins underneath the deck, but there was room in the front to lie down, which is what Jesus did.

Scripture says that a windstorm came up. We know about windstorms. Here in Florida we would call it a Category 1 hurricane. The winds are getting stronger. The waves higher. They are taking on water. It wasn’t that they might sink; they were sinking. The Mayday calls had gone out. They were going down. Without life jackets, they were at the mercy of the wind and the waves. Jesus is asleep.

“Don’t you care Jesus? Why are you sleeping? Wake up! Do something!”

How many times, maybe not in a boat in the middle of a lake but nevertheless in a storm in the middle of our lives, we too have wondered:

Jesus are you sleeping?
Jesus don’t you care?
Jesus where are you when we need you?
We feel like we are going down.

But for the disciples on that day even as for you on this day it may not be as bad as it seems.
III. Why? Simply put, with all of life’s messiness and sometimes apparent dead ends, with life’s unexpected twist and turns, with storms of the human kind and storms of nature, we are not alone… we are not abandoned. It’s not as bad as you think, because Jesus is with us.

That’s what we celebrate at Christmas. That is what the incarnation is all about. The creator of the universe… the Almighty God, everlasting Father, the King of Kings, the Prince of Peace is with us even in the storms, even in a manger, even on a cross, even on the worst of days. And his name will be Emmanuel, meaning God with us.

For the disciples, their Plan A on this particular day was an uneventful trip across the sea. However, in Plan A Jesus was irrelevant, unnecessary, and superfluous.

Plan B is they are in a storm… they are sinking… they need Jesus.

For churches, often Plan A means having the right preacher… the right physical plant or building plans… the right staff… the right people on the right committees making the right decisions who all gave the right amount of money. Everything is seamless and everything grows and all is wonderful and well, and if we are not careful we don’t need Jesus – because it is our plan.

Then life happens… stuff occurs… here at Palms it took the form of a roof leak in the education building, and mold everywhere costing $2.5 million to fix.. Then there were the transitions that occur in every staff, but it felt a bit abnormal because it was not part of Plan A. Changes were being made or not made, there was new leadership, things seemed different but you weren’t sure what was different.

For the disciples, Plan B forced them to depend on and trust Jesus, who happened to be in the boat with them. As it was for the disciples, when we have to move into Plan B, that’s where we often will meet God. When things don’t go as planned, then we have to trust not our plans; we have to learn all over again to trust God.

This was not Paul’s Church…. This was not Bruce’s Church… this is not Ruth’s church or John and the choir’s church or Debbie’s Church or Dale’s
church... This is Jesus’ Church. Today... moving into this unscheduled and unplanned interim time is acknowledging we are into Plan B, and that is OK.

In life and in death we trust God, and that is always where Plan B forces us to go.

IV. So if this is Jesus’ Church, I suggest it is time to get on with the work to which we are called. The story of Nehemiah is a parable and an example of what can happen when someone gets beyond blame, rumor, apathy and despair, and, in healthy, helpful, courageous and healing ways, partners with God in the redemptive work God is doing in our midst. God is not finished with us yet. Why? We are the Body of Christ – we are the way God makes God’s self visible to the world.

The world needs us... so I invite you to help rebuild the walls... rebuild lives for the sake of the world.

Nehemiah saw what had happened to his hometown. Not just any hometown, it was Jerusalem which centuries before had been destroyed.

But for years, people were unable and unwilling to do anything to rebuild the city.
Some were into blame... and they blamed their leaders.
Some were into apathy... the problems were so overwhelming and so they did nothing.
Some were into sarcasm... and they made a sick joke of their situation.
Most had just given up.

What did Nehemiah do? Made a plan; Plan B it was called. He went to the king and said, “I am sad because what I love is in ruins.” “I am sad because what to me is sacred and special is devastated.” The king answered, “Go and do what you must.”

When Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem,
· He was greeted with skeptics. Who do you think you are?
· He was greeted with complainers who told him it was too much of a task.
· He was laughed at and scorned, but that did not stop him.
His challenge was simple: rebuild the walls, as the prelude to rebuilding the community.

- He surveyed the damage
- He drew up a plan
- He did an audit
- And he asked who going to help

The rest of the story is that the walls and the city were rebuilt.

In this interim time, the word of the Lord from Nehemiah to us is that you are invited and needed to help build and rebuild the ministry… to get involved and make a difference.

There is incredible strength here at Church of the Palms. What you have accomplished over the years is amazing:

- The difference you have made through your Tutoring Ministry.
- Mission Trips both your and adults have gone on.
- Mission work around the world and right here at home through things like Resurrection House.
- Your Stephen ministry and youth ministry and educational ministries.
- And with First and the Presbytery, helping birth a congregation in Lakewood Ranch

But that is not the end of the story:

- Week after week, 2000 folks go out from here empowered and motivated to make a difference
- Your daughter congregation, Peace Presbyterian, has the opportunity to purchase 20 acres of land in Lakewood Ranch for $1.2 million. And I believe there are those here, or someone here, who can make it happen
- And there are so many other ministries that need you.

The story is told of Jesus return to heaven. He was greeted by the entire heavenly host who were eager to hear what happened during his earthly sojourn. They thought now was their turn to pick up the baton and carry on his work, so they gathered around to hear his story and get their instructions, or so they thought.
They heard of his amazing birth… being raised as a carpenter’s son… they listened with awe about his ministry of healing, teaching, and proclaiming the kingdom of God. When he told them of his last week, they couldn’t believe how those he loved turned against him… and with sadness they cringed when he showed them his hands and told of the cross. But the joy came back in the room when he shared the story of the resurrection. With one voice they said, “And now is it our turn to carry on your work.”

Jesus said, “No.”

“Well, who is going to do it? Who’d you leave in charge?”

Jesus responded, “Some fishermen and tax collectors… just ordinary men and women.” They were incredulous. They asked, “What if they fail? Can we get involved then?”

“No.”

“Surely you have another plan.”

Jesus said, “I have no other plan.”

The angels were advocating the A team and the A Plan. A, for angelic. Jesus said: I have no other plan… it’s Plan B… it is us depending on Jesus who is depending on us.

This interim time is a gift… a gift to help you remember:

· The strength of this church is not who is in the pulpit, but rather who is in the pew.
· The future of this church is not in waiting for silver-tongued orators to wow or inspire, but it is in what you do and say today as a member, minister, and servant of Jesus Christ.
· The power of this church is not who is working for the church, but who is doing the work of the church.
· The hope of Palms rests not in who the minister is, but who is doing the ministry of Christ each and every day.
· During an interim time, the ministry you are called to do is not on hold, for there is a world out there in need.
In summary my friends:
  - It’s not as bad as you think
  - Jesus is with you
  - It’s time to rebuild the walls, get off the sidelines into the game and do the work of ministry whatever form that takes for you.

What an exciting time to be a member of a church, for in Plan B you have to trust God, and as you do you will discover all over again who God has called you and this church to be.