“Who is in the Business of Restoration?”
Dr. Robert Bardeen
Ward Parkway Presbyterian Church
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Jeremiah 29:10-14; Psalm 23

Today we complete our journey through Jeremiah 29:10-14.

Did God have a plan for the exiles long ago? Yes.
   Does God have a plan for the world? Yes.
      Does God have a plan for our church? Yes.
         Does God have a plan for you? Yes.
            Does God have a plan for me? Yes.

The exiles did not know the details of God’s plan for them at the time, and I am sure they were shocked when the plan was revealed.

The plan for the exiles was restoration, and restoration for them included being released from exile, returning to Jerusalem, and rebuilding the temple.

I don’t know the details of God’s plan for us - as a church and as individuals - but I do know this: it includes restoration.

Here’s our theme verse today from Jeremiah 29.

Jeremiah 29:14 NRSV
I will let you find me, says the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

Notice the theme of restoration. God will restore their fortunes, gather the people, and bring them back home.

Who is in the business of restoration?

The simple answer is this: God is in the business of restoration.

Let’s read the second scripture reading - one that you know my heart - that is to say, Psalm 23 using the King James Version. This is NRSV, and it’s a little different. So, let’s read it together.

Psalm 23 NRSV
1 The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; 3 he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name’s sake. 4 Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff— they comfort me. 5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.

I like the pattern of responsibility.

How are we responsible? Verse 1 says it all: “The Lord is my shepherd.”

How is God responsible? God makes me, leads me, restores me, leads me, is always with me, prepares a table, anoints my head, and follows me all the days of my life.

We just need to make sure the Lord is our shepherd.

Do you see the use of the word “restores?” He restores my soul. Some say that restoration is the central theme of Psalm 23.

In this Psalm, David wrote that the Lord restores his soul, not his fortunes, not his homeland, and not the temple.

God restores my soul. It is part of God’s plan for me.

I have three observations.

First, God needs to restore our soul because our soul can get hurt.

There’s an old hymn that we sing. It’s called There Is a Balm in Gilead. It’s usually sung during Lent, maybe as a solo.

There is a balm in Gilead  
To make the wounded whole;  
There is a balm in Gilead  
To heal the sin-sick soul.

The word “balm” refers to an ointment that reduces pain and works on healing the wound. This African-American hymn speaks about the prophecy in Jeremiah 8:22 - “Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?”
The hymn admits discouragement that leads to a sin-sick soul, but also proclaims the true physician, the true source for healing, and the true source for health of our soul.

**What is the soul and why does it get hurt?**

There are so many definitions of the soul. Some think the soul is the combination of the mind, body, spirit, and heart. Some think the soul is the true essence of a person’s being. Others think the soul is what survives after death.

Here’s my definition. Try to think about what truly makes you a person: the way you smile, your personality, your views about life, your memories, your hopes, and your sadness. I think your soul is who you are when you take everything else away. The soul is your person.

For example, the last stanza of *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross* is one of my favorite moments in the history of hymns. It was written by Isaac Watts in 1707.

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Were the whole realm of nature mine  
That were a present far too small;  
Love so amazing, so divine  
Demands my soul, my life, my all
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In his massive work, *The Gospel in Hymns*, Albert Bailey wrote that Watts reaches the heights of devotional poetry in this stanza. “God therefore needs nothing from me in the way of further payment. Yet personal gratitude to Christ makes its irresistible demand. Insignificant though I am, I can at least give myself, ‘my soul’ – the essence of me that makes me an individual, ‘my life’ – all the activities of my days, and ‘my all’ – whatever I possess of wealth and inward power” (page 50).

Demands my soul, my life, my all!

**How does our soul get hurt?**

**Our soul gets hurt by sin.**

Do you remember the greatest commandment? Jesus makes it clear (Matthew 22:37): “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” How can you love God with all your soul if your soul is sick with sin.

It’s interesting that when Jesus healed the paralyzed man who was lowered from the ceiling, he first told the man: “Your sins are forgiven.” Forgiveness is the only cure for a sin-sick soul.

**Our soul gets hurt by abuse from others.**
We can get wounded. And sometimes it comes from people the closest to us. It hurts to be rejected by your brother or daughter or next door neighbor or father.

Injury on the inside hurts, and it’s hard to let go. It’s hard to forget, and when we never forget, our soul is hurt.

Our soul gets hurt from disasters.

Some of our friends in Wilmington, NC, might never get over the effects from Hurricane Andrew. Losing a home and your home church harms your very being. I am sure many of you have family members or friends in Houston or Florida or Georgia, or maybe the fires in California.

When we lose our home, our soul gets hurt.

Our soul gets hurt from our own mistakes.

I think darkness wants us to remember the problems we have had instead of remembering the great success or good moments.

I can still recall the moment I rejected the apology of a fifth grade friend who offended me. He was sorry and I would not speak to him. In the end, our friendship was lost – all because of my foolishness. And my soul is still heavy because of my rejection. I regret that moment.

Lastly, our soul gets hurt from the words of others.

Words hurt.

That’s why James wrote: “You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness” (James 1:19-20).

We are quick to speak and often speak without thinking first.

Here’s an old staying that I think is false: “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names can never hurt me.”

Words can hurt and last for a long time.

Second, God has a large definition for restoration, and is willing to work in your life to bring about what is needed for your restoration.
God can accomplish restoration in so many ways.

God used King Cyrus to accomplish the restoration of the exiles. I am amazed by how God spoke to such a powerful leader and caused his heart to change.

God helps and heals in so many different ways. I don’t think you can box God into specific expectations about how you think restoration should occur.

Let’s look at one scripture lesson about restoration and then consider one historical moment.

**John 21:15-17**

15 When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my lambs.” 16 A second time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Tend my sheep.” 17 He said to him the third time, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” And he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep.”

Peter needed the forgiving heart of the Risen Jesus to continue as an apostle. It think he was seriously considering going back to fishing full time.

That’s the scripture and now let’s consider a moment in American history.

In a month, we will celebrate the 155th anniversary of Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg address, delivered on November 19, 1863. As Lincoln arrived at the starting point of the parade, a horse was ready for his short journey to the dedication site. The man who prepared the horses did not know Lincoln was 6’4” tall, because he had saddled a small horse for the President. Lincoln’s boots dragged along the ground.

In a letter to a friend, he wrote that as he rode in the parade he saw bullet holes in the buildings, and children on the side selling lemonade, bullets, cannon balls, and cookies.

His mind must have been still on his address during the ride. He gave fresh changes the night before and in the early morning. After all, during the three days of battle in July, about 51,000 lives were lost, out of the 165,000 in total, with just about all the rest being wounded one way or another.

But, of course, he had plenty of time to reconsider everything as he waited his turn to speak. Edward Everett’s speech was over two hours long.
We have no official picture of Lincoln speaking. The hired photographer was adjusting his camera as Lincoln started. Everett was about a foot shorter than Lincoln. By the time he was ready to take a picture, Lincoln was finished.

Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battle-field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate—we can not consecrate—we can not hallow—this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here.

It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

How did Lincoln arrive at these unforgettable words? 252 words!

Everett sent him a note the next day. “Everyone will forget what I said, but no one will forget your three minute address.”

How did Lincoln think through this message of restoration?

Later, when Lincoln was elected for a second term as President, he said on March 4, 1865:

With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.

In both speeches, Lincoln used the name of God. Before he went to Washington, he was not an active Christian. Although a member of First Presbyterian, Springfield, Illinois, he rarely
attended. Maybe God changed his mind on the train ride to the White House. Lincoln knew about the other President who was riding a train to Montgomery, Alabama, the capital of the Confederate States of America, namely, Jefferson Davis.

When Lincoln and his family reached Baltimore, he secretly left the train and rode by horseback the rest of the way with a guard. Too many threats had been made on his life.

On the first Sunday, he attended First Presbyterian in Washington, the proud church where many Presidents had attended over the years. Afterwards, they told him he did not have to pay for his pew.

On the next Sunday, he attended New York Avenue Presbyterian church. Two days later, an elder visited him in the White House and said they were glad to welcome him at their church, but it would cost him $50 per year for pew rental. Lincoln gave the elder $50 immediately and called New York Avenue his church during his Presidency.

He like Dr. Gurley’s sermons. “Straight forward,” Lincoln told a friend, “and not political at all. I get plenty of politics at work.”

Dr. Gurley’s sermons were filled with the providence of God, and how God works out purpose in history. “God has a plan for us,” Dr. Gurley often said.

After Lincoln died, the two secretaries of Lincoln were allowed to have his coats, his jackets, and Lincoln’s desk. Upon investigation, they found hundreds of little pieces of paper in the pockets of his clothes and the cubby holes of his roll top desk. Hundreds!

Before Lincoln spoke, he wrote out his thoughts. And then he wrote his speeches based on his little notes.

The two secretaries took the notes, compiled them, and wrote their own biography of Lincoln that was published many decades later. The book was ignored, dismissed, and lost in the Library of Congress.

Twenty years ago, Dr. Ron White found their book. He also searched for Dr. Gurley’s sermons in the archives of the Presbyterian Historical Society, and found about 100 of them. He placed Lincoln’s speeches on one table and all of his notes on a second table and then Dr. Gurley’s sermons on a third table. He compared and considered. He read every other biography about Lincoln, and concluded all of them ignored Lincoln’s basic belief that God works in history.

Ron White found a match between what Dr. Gurley preached and what notes Lincoln wrote and what speeches Lincoln gave.
Lincoln used Presbyterian theology in his speeches. Lincoln believed God was using him in the history of America.

Lincoln believed God was using him for the restoration of America during a time of crisis and conflict.

I think that is remarkable.

Third, your responsibility for restoration is simple: Make sure the Lord is your shepherd.

I probably should not have said the word “simple.” What I mean is this: it is not complicated.

For me, simple means easily understood or presenting no difficulty. One person defined simple as straightforward, the opposite of complex.

So, who is in the business of restoration?

It’s simple.

Only God is in the business of restoration.

God makes us lie down in green pastures.
   God leads us beside still waters.
      God restores our soul.
         God leads us in right paths.
            God is with us during the darkest moments.
               God protects us with a rod and a staff.
                  God prepares a table for us in the presence of evil.
                     God anoints us.
                        God fills our cup so that it overflows.
                           God follows us.
                              God gives us a dwelling.
                                 Forever!

And who is responsible to make sure the Lord is our shepherd? I am. You are.

When David wrote, “The Lord is my shepherd...” it was true because David made sure the Lord was his shepherd.