A FUTURE AND A HOPE

Pilgrim Church, Duluth

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Jeremiah 29:11

> "'For I know the plans I have for you,' says the Lord,
> 'plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a
> future and a hope.'"

It is an old saying that no one knows what the future will bring. The future is always open-ended for good and for evil. We cannot control it or insure ourselves a place in it. There is nothing within our power whether gleaned from history or contrived by science that can guarantee that any of us will even have a future, much less that our future is worth hoping for. We make plans, of course. We must do that. But as Bobbie Burns reminds us, our "Best laid plans... gang aft agley."

And yet our Christian faith looks to the future with hope. That is because faith believes that God has plans too. And in the Bible faith uncovers glimpses of these plans. Jeremiah offers such glimpses. For that is what a prophet is, one who shares glimpses of God's plans. Jeremiah spoke once of doom and doom has come. But now as he watches his people led off into exile by their foreign captor, his vision moves out ahead of them.

Thus says the Lord...I will bring you back...

> "For I know the plans I have for you, plans for welfare
> and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope."

The gospel writers give us other glimpses of God's plans, glimpses that reach wider and extend longer than those of Jeremiah. These glimpses culminate in the vision of Easter. It is such a dazzling vision that it is hard to know what to make of it. The bright meanings here are many-faceted and we shall never come to the end of them. The first meaning, I think, was simply that in some way beyond explanation, Jesus was back, back at work among his friends. Despite the terrible setback dealt him by rejection, betrayal and execution, Jesus' mission in the world would go on. Despite the barrier of death, his companionship with his disciples remained unbroken.

And all of this said to those first Christians--the women with their spices, the men huddled in their upper room of mourning--that the wonderful plans God unfolded to them in Jesus were still unfolding.

I think that is where the first joy of Easter centered. It was only later that the disciples began to draw inferences from what happened to Jesus to what might happen to them. Only later did they think about the implications here for a future and a hope that transcended their own deaths. Still they did come to that. This hope too appears in the Bible as a glimpse of God's plans for our welfare and not for evil.

In any case, Easter takes us into dimensions of hope quite beyond those of Jeremiah. His glimpse of God's plans for the future was historical. It meant the restoration of his nation. But Easter takes us beyond history as we know history.

Does this mean then that by the time we get to Jesus, God's plans had given up on history? Does this mean that the ancient vision of justice and peace proclaimed by the prophets is forever laid aside? Does Easter mean that having decided to consign the world to the devil God has offered us the escape valve of immortality?

I don't believe that. I don't believe that Jesus taught that or that his resurrection means that. I do believe that the hope of Easter looks beyond the world as we know it, that this bright glimpse into God's purposes answers to that deep yearning in us for "another country". Some of us may envision that other country lying in some realm beyond human history and some may envision it as lying further down history, within history transformed, and some may be content to wait and see. However we think of it, the Easter hope takes us beyond the normal range of our experience and our knowledge.

But to say that the Easter hope presses beyond history, or "this world" as we know it, is not to say that the Easter hope has nothing to do with this world. The God who loved this world so much that God's plans led to a son being born in it and growing up in it and walking its roads and sailing its lakes and exposing its injustices and healing its ills and welcoming its forlorn and weeping over the prospect of its wars and then forgiving it as he died for it, that God, I say, is not a God whom I can conceive as abandoning plans for this world. Already in the ancient prophets we find visions of the future here, visions of world order and peace that remain unfulfilled. I don't think God is satisfied with leaving those visions as loose ends. For me Easter means at least in part that Jesus indeed is back, not just to show us the door out of here, but to lead us and empower us in realizing that future and that hope for this world that God unceasingly intends for us.

II. But there is a cloud hanging over God's plans for the world. This is not the divine cloud by day guiding our way to the promised land, much as certain of our political and military leaders would like us to believe. This cloud is quite human. It is of our own fiendish devising.

The cloud of which I speak is a cloud in the shape of a mushroom. For thirty-seven years it has been spreading over our skies, darkening our prospects, putting a question mark over the entire future of life upon this globe.

If we ask how the cloud got there, the answer is that like all things human it got there out of a combination of good intentions and evil impulses. It got there out of a desire to overcome aggression and to save lives. It also got there because the incineration of tens of thousands of somebody elses men, women and children seemed like a fair price to pay for shortening our own war effort. It got there out of the marvel of human ingenuity and the miracle of human creativity. And it got there because in the words of Herman Kahn, "It is the hall mark of the expert professional that he doesn't care where he is going so long as he proceeds competently."

So proceeding competently the experts have made the cloud grow until it threatens to destroy us all and the hammer of the doomsday clock lifts to strike its midnight toll. And if we ask why that is so, one might answer in the words of Robert McNamara: There is "a kind of mad momentum intrinsic to the development of all nuclear weaponry."

This momentum has several aspects. One aspect has to do with the tendency of technology always to come up with something more efficient so long as the opportunity for that something appears. Writing of the Trident II submarine, Representative Thomas J. Downey of New York, member of the House Budget Committee Task Force of Defense, argues that by reducing the reaction time to five minutes, this latest wrinkle in our proposed nuclear arsenal could incite the Soviets to strike us first. He goes on to say:

> Trident II is nurtured not by a Strangelovian desire to annihilate humanity but from the coincidence of two technological opportunities. For the first time, it is becoming possible to build a highly accurate submarine launched ballistic missile, and for the first time, we have a submarine capable of launching a very heavy missile accurately. To the weapons developer, those unfulfilled opportunities create a vacuum that cannot be allowed to exist. It is our inability to control such mindless, amoral technological momentum that can spawn humanity's terminal blunder.

Another aspect of the momentum is competitive. As George Kennan writes:

> It is primarily the inner momentum, the independent momentum, of the weapons race itself--the compulsions that arise and take charge of great powers when they enter upon a competition with each other in the building up of major armaments of any sort.

So the cloud grows, always justified by one side or another by the claim that there is a need to catch up.

Momentum keeps the cloud going up there. It is kept going too by certain lines of reasoning by which we constantly reassure ourselves as to its beneficial effects.

Here are some samples of the reassuring logic that has kept us feeling secure over the last thirty-seven years.

Nuclear war is unthinkable, therefore we must be fully prepared to wage one.

For us to initiate a nuclear war would be morally reprehensible. However, as our Secretary of State reminded us only last week, out of a concern to preserve Western values we refuse to pledge ourselves never to strike first.

In order for our economy to be healthy it is necessary to commit our best brains, vast quantities of skilled labor, and huge amounts of declining energy and mineral resources to producing trillions of dollars worth of goods that nobody can eat, wear, amuse themselves with or otherwise consume.

Our mutual security depends on both sides having the ability to deliver fatal retaliatory blows, therefore, we must improve our weaponry so as to afford ourselves a monopoly in that regard.

No matter how mant times over we can destroy every Russian city we must always be in a position to destroy them more times over than they can destroy ours.

These are but a few of the exercises in logic by which we keep that growing cloud up in the sky. Perhaps Admiral Rickover is right in suggesting

that God has other things to think about than the survival of such an irrational species as ours.

III. But I don't want to dwell today on such dark thoughts. I want to say that God has plans for us, plans for welfare and not for evil. I want to testify that we have a future and a hope.

I think there is reason to hope today. I think there is reason to hope because for the first time in all these thirty-seven years a truly mass movement is emerging around the world, a movement calling for an end to the nuclear madness. This movement embraces people of all ages, and circumstances in life. It includes students and retired people, business executives and manual laborers. It is a movement that stretches across contrasting political philosophies. There are capitalists in it and socialists, conservatives and liberals. It is a mass movement and it is growing.

I think there is hope today. I think there is hope because the people of Europe are saying to us that they do not care to be cannon fodder in a so-called limited nuclear war launched by us or the Soviet Union. And they are saying it by the millions.

I think there is hope today because the American people are beginning to say, "STOP! Let's halt the momentum by freezing all production and deployment of new weapons by either side, and then having done that. Let's start rolling the weapons back." A recent poll found sixty percent of the American people in favor of such a bilateral freeze and only 20% directly opposed.

I think there is hope today. I think there is hope because in that nearest thing to pure democracy, the New England Town Meeting, people have voted in favor of a nuclear freeze in 238 different townships within the last few weeks. There is hope because the Massachusetts Legislature has endorsed the idea and likewise the Minnesota State Senate in a resolution introduced by Jim Ulland of Duluth.

I think there is hope today because just a few days ago four men who helped shape our foreign and military policy in the recent past came out in favor of a no first use pledge by the United States. They are George Kennan, Ambassador to the Soviet Union at the height of the Cold War, Robert McNamara, Vietnam era Secretary of Defense, and McGeorge Bundy and Gerald C. Smith, defense advisors in the Kennedy and Nixon administrations. About the same time former minority leader, John Rhodes of Arizona, a man noted for his consistent support of a strong defense budget, called into question the policy of mutual assured destruction and the continued enlargement of our nuclear arsenal.

"It is an astonishing development in our public affairs, this awakening from deep sleep." wrote conservative columnist James J. Kilpatrick in yesterday's column. And then, will you believe it, he came out for the freeze--not Senator Jackson's freeze-- but an "immediate stop...to the further buildup of nuclear weapons by either side."

These men are not flower children in blue jeans!

I think there is hope today. I think there is hope because those who still are caught up in the old momentum of nuclear weapons competition are

now on the defensive. They have even co-opted the word "Freeze," and turned it to their uses. And while that obfuscation is dangerous, it is also a sign that those with the power feel the pressure.

I think there is hope today. I think there is hope because people in Duluth are stirred up about the urgency of turning back the nuclear arms race. The course on nuclear war offered to the public by UMD overflows in attendance. Rallies and vigils attract crowds at the Civic Center. A hundred and fifty establishment stuffed shirts like myself put their names to a full page newspaper ad, and hoards of others like them want to know why their names aren't there too. To those others, I say, get out your own ad; the more the merrier. In the meantime, Don Wirtanen, chair of the group who sponsored the ad, tells me that letters are pouring in by the hundreds from people who want to help keep the freeze campaign alive.

A representative from Rockwell International talking to a Duluth delegation about the Airbase wanted to know if there was "defense paranoia" here. I wouldn't call it paranoia. I'd call it hope.

Of course, I am quite aware that we have a long way to go. I takes two sides to make peace, and we haven't even persuaded our side, much less the Soviet side. It is going to be a long, hard struggle and we may have to face continual discouragement for years to come.

I know too that the particular proposal put forward by the National Freeze Coalition, (that proposal for which petitions are now in circulation around the country), probably will not be adopted in its present form. In the eyes of some, it seeks far too little, They would call for an immediate across the board reduction of nuclear weapons by both sides. Many on Christian grounds advocate unilateral nuclear disarmament. Others, denying that there is rough parity between the two superpowers, want to bargain for some adjustment in weapon levels before we agree to a freeze. And anyway, politicians being what they are, they will never just adopt an idea that comes from the people.

But the bilateral freeze is a start. It offers to stop the momentum. It would prevent further acceleration of the arms race to the point where surveillance and detection become more difficult and where the temptation to try a first strike becomes irresistible.

It is true that as Stephen Van Evera reminded us here last December, even if we got rid of all nuclear weapons, we would still possess the knowledge of how to make them. We have eaten the forbidden fruit and so the danger remains with us indefinitely. So long as human history continues that mushroom cloud may appear in the sky again.

But such considerations do not remove the living hope that with God's help we can reduce the danger. Nor do they excuse our not trying.

For the nub of the matter is this: Though God has plans for us we must make those plans our own. Some of you know that I wrote to all our ministers in Minnesota suggesting that they mention the hope of a nuclear freeze today. One sent me a copy of his Easter sermon. He does speak of the dangers of a nuclear holocaust and of our responsibility to try and avert that. But he rebukes me for suggesting that on Easter preachers should try to have an impact. It is not what we do, but what God does that matters on Easter, he says. "What only God can do, God will do," that is the message of Easter.

Well, that cuts because it is the kind of thing I might say. But I think we are in one of those moments of kairos--those appointed times of which the Bible speaks. There is an opportunity before us in this moment of history and we can either grasp that opportunity or let it pass, perhaps for ever. Pious phrases about looking only to God's action will not get us off the hook. God has plans for our welfare and not for evil and if we blow the world up, we shall do it ourselves. On the other hand, if we wish to be faithful to the one whose love for the world outstrips the power of evil, we shall care for that world with all the passion and all the means at our command.

And we shall care for those who come after us. "A future and a hope" is the way the Revised Standard Version of the Bible renders the second part of Jeremiah 29:11. The New English Bible states the same phrase this way,

"And a long line of children after you."

I wondered how I could work that alternate translation into this sermon. Then at the Maundy Thursday supper, I sat across the table from a boy named Gabriel. You remember him, the boy who three Christmases ago held up that silver star so nobly. Gabe has played a Christmas angel twice since then and he thinks that now that he's in the third grade, he ought to be growing out of that role. Perhaps he will learn some day that an angel is something you grow into. In any case, last Thursday I asked Gabe how he was that day.

He answered "Horrible."

And as I sat there open mouthed, the word "Why?" trying to shape itself on my lips, Gabe went on.

"If we get into a third world war, we'll blow everything up and there won't be anyone left."

He knows.

Why don't the rest of us know?

He knows and that's a good thing. For a lot of us grew up trying not to know and so contributing to the possibility.

So long as Gabe knows and faces that knowledge, perhaps there will be a long line of children after us, children who don't feel horrible.

I think that's God's plan, a plan that we must make our own.

And because Christ is with us to the end of the age, we do not lose hope.