

IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE: DISCOVERING GRATITUDE AND JOY

WEEK 1 – LOOKING BACK: THE BEST LAID PLANS

OPENING ACTIVITY

Consider a scenario where you've planned the ultimate family vacation. You've worked hard all year saving money. You've read books, researched online, and created the perfect travel itinerary. With confidence, you book your non-refundable flights, reserve the ideal hotel, and get everyone packed and ready to go. Just as you're ready to leave on this dream vacation, and unexpected situation derails the entire trip, and you lose all the money and time you invested.

How would you react?

Has something like this ever happened to you?

OPENING PRAYER

O God, we remember times of blessing in our lives: when we have been released from suffering and despair, when we have been freed to reclaim life and hope; but we also remember times of hardship: when we have been cast out into deep waters, when we have been banished in exile from the world we call home. O God, it is hard to claim the hope and promise of the past in the presence of today's troubles. Transform our fears and anxiety into awe-inspired wonder as we put our hope in you. Amen.

BIBLE STUDY

Jeremiah 29:1-14

¹ The prophet Jeremiah sent a letter from Jerusalem to the few surviving elders among the exiles, to the priests and the prophets, and to all the people Nebuchadnezzar had taken to Babylon from Jerusalem.

⁴ The Lord of heavenly forces, the God of Israel, proclaims to all the exiles I have carried off from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵ Build houses and settle down; cultivate gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶ Get married and have children; then help your sons find wives and your daughters find husbands in order that they too may have children. Increase in number there so that you don't dwindle away. ⁷ Promote the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because your future depends on its welfare.

⁸ The Lord of heavenly forces, the God of Israel, proclaims: Don't let the prophets and diviners in your midst mislead you. Don't pay attention to your dreams. ⁹ They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I didn't send them, declares the Lord.

¹⁰ The Lord proclaims: When Babylon's seventy years are up, I will come and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place. ¹¹ I know the plans I have in mind for you, declares the Lord; they are plans for peace, not disaster, to give you a future filled with hope. ¹² When you call me and come and pray to me, I will listen to you. ¹³ When you search for me, yes, search for me with all your heart, you will find me. ¹⁴ I will be present for you, declares the Lord, and I will end your captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have scattered you, and I will bring you home after your long exile, declares the Lord.

Jeremiah told the exiles God had “plans for peace, not disaster, to give you a future filled with hope.” But first he said, “When Babylon’s seventy years (*referring to a long time, or lifetime*) are up.” According to theologian John Goldingay (*Jeremiah for Everyone*), “Jeremiah’s words presuppose that there’s no quick fix for the community’s situation. This doesn’t mean the situation is hopeless. It does mean people need to be prepared to take the long view.”

1. Could anything requiring “the long view” actually give you hope? What makes trusting patience essential as you walk with God?
2. How are you taking the “long view” to hold on to hope during this pandemic? During this election season?
3. Verse 13 summed up Jeremiah’s message of judgment and hope: “When you search for me, yes, search for me with all your heart, you will find me.” How do you understand the meaning of searching for God “with all your heart”? What times or events in your life have driven you to seek God with all your heart? What steps helped you do that?

MOVIE DISCUSSION

THE BEST LAID PLANS

George Bailey had big dreams and a detailed plan for his life. He knew exactly what he was going to do this year and in the years to come. He had dreams of adventures on the South Sea, of traveling the world, and of building monumental bridges and skyscrapers. But George was not just a dreamer; he was a doer. He had spent countless hours in the library researching and studying these places and saving his money to finance his adventures to vast lands.

The dominant factor surrounding George’s dreams was his escape of what he considered the narrow constraints of Bedford Falls. He wanted freedom and adventure that he believed could not be found in the family business, the Bailey Building and Loan.

- How would you describe George Bailey’s plans for his life? What plans did you have for your life as a young high school or college student? How did those plans work out for you?

It’s good to make plans and have dreams. But what happens when those dreams and plans get delayed, or, worse yet, never happen due to unforeseen circumstances? The fact is, life is full of interruptions that frustrate our plans. Health concerns, family crisis, expensive repairs, and job loss not only interrupt but often cancel our very important plans.

When Tragedies Interrupt Our Plans

The death of George’s father, just as he’s about to leave for college, have interrupted George’s plans. To keep the unscrupulous Potter from taking over his father’s business, George agrees to the board’s decision not to sell his father’s business to Potter on the condition that George stay and run the business as Executive Secretary.

- It has been said that we are either healing from a tragedy, suffering from a tragedy, or about to be broadsided by a tragedy. Share a time when a tragedy interrupted your plans.
- Read **Matthew 14:13-21**

¹³ When Jesus heard about John, he withdrew in a boat to a deserted place by himself. When the crowds learned this, they followed him on foot from the cities. ¹⁴ When Jesus arrived and saw a large crowd, he had compassion for them and healed those who were sick. ¹⁵ That evening his disciples came and said to him, “This is an isolated place and it’s getting late. Send the crowds away so they can go into the villages and buy food for themselves.”

¹⁶ But Jesus said to them, “There’s no need to send them away. You give them something to eat.”

¹⁷ They replied, “We have nothing here except five loaves of bread and two fish.”

¹⁸ He said, “Bring them here to me.” ¹⁹ He ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. He took the five loaves of bread and the two fish, looked up to heaven, blessed them and broke the loaves apart and gave them to his disciples. Then the disciples gave them to the crowds. ²⁰ Everyone ate until they were full, and they filled twelve baskets with the leftovers. ²¹ About five thousand men plus women and children had eaten.
- How does Jesus initially respond to the tragic death of John the Baptist? How do his plans for setting aside a time of mourning change? What blessing happens as a result?

When People Interrupt Our Plans

George grows older waiting for his younger brother Harry to come back from college to take over the Building and Loan, when we received news that once again interrupts his plans to leave Bedford Falls. Harry has returned married, and his new father-in-law has offered him a job with a good future in the research business with his glass company.

- Have you ever made great sacrifices for a family member or close friend only to be let down? How did you feel afterward? Did the relationship survive? If so, how? Why is this situation often much harder to handle than a business associate or an acquaintance letting you down?
- Read **Matthew 26:26-46**

²⁶ While they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, “Take and eat. This is my body.” ²⁷ He took a cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, “Drink from this, all of you. ²⁸ This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many so that their sins may be forgiven. ²⁹ I tell you, I won’t drink wine again until that day when I drink it in a new way with you in my Father’s kingdom.” ³⁰ Then, after singing songs of praise, they went to the Mount of Olives. ³¹ Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Tonight you will all fall away because of me. This is because it is written, *I will hit the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will go off in all directions.*³¹ ³² But after I’m raised up, I’ll go before you to Galilee.”

³³ Peter replied, “If everyone else stumbles because of you, I’ll never stumble.”

³⁴ Jesus said to him, “I assure you that, before the rooster crows tonight, you will deny me three times.”

³⁵ Peter said, “Even if I must die alongside you, I won’t deny you.” All the disciples said the same thing.

³⁶ Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane. He said to the disciples, “Stay here while I go and pray over there.” ³⁷ When he took Peter and Zebedee’s two sons, he began to feel sad and anxious. ³⁸ Then he said to them, “I’m very sad. It’s as if I’m dying. Stay here and keep alert with me.” ³⁹ Then he went a short distance farther and fell on his face and prayed, “My Father, if it’s possible, take this cup of suffering away from me. However—not what I want but what you want.”

⁴⁰ He came back to the disciples and found them sleeping. He said to Peter, “Couldn’t you stay alert one hour with me? ⁴¹ Stay alert and pray so that you won’t give in to temptation. The spirit is eager, but the flesh is weak.” ⁴² A second time he went away and prayed, “My Father, if it’s not possible that this cup be taken away unless I drink it, then let it be what you want.”

⁴³ Again he came and found them sleeping. Their eyes were heavy with sleep. ⁴⁴ But he left them and again went and prayed the same words for the third time. ⁴⁵ Then he came to his disciples and said to them, “Will you sleep and rest all night? Look, the time has come for the Human One to be betrayed into the hands of sinners. ⁴⁶ Get up. Let’s go. Look, here comes my betrayer.”

- When Jesus was overwhelmed with sorrow, he took Peter, James and John with him into the Garden of Gethsemane. What did Jesus request of his friends? Was it a difficult request? How did they let him down?
- Perhaps you have been betrayed in a friendship, or maybe you have even been the perpetrator and it cost you that relationship. What’s so fascinating about Jesus’ response to his friends when the mob came to arrest him? Do you think he was angry, upset, or disappointed?

When the Unexpected Interrupts Our Plans

George and his new bride Mary are leaving for their honeymoon when a financial crisis strikes their little town of Bedford Falls. As people panic, they make a run on the bank to clean out their accounts. Witnessing all of this from inside the cab, Mary urges George to leave town right away and to not look back.

- How do you know when an interruption deserves your attention or when it’s best to disregard it? How do we know when an interruption is from God?
- Read Luke 1:26-38

When Elizabeth was six months pregnant, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a city in Galilee, ²⁷ to a virgin who was engaged to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David’s house. The virgin’s name was Mary. ²⁸ When the angel came to her, he said, “Rejoice, favored one! The Lord is with you!” ²⁹ She was confused by these words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. ³⁰ The angel said, “Don’t be afraid, Mary. God is honoring you. ³¹ Look! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³² He will be great and he will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of David his father. ³³ He will rule over Jacob’s house forever, and there will be no end to his kingdom.”

³⁴ Then Mary said to the angel, “How will this happen since I haven’t had sexual relations with a man?”

³⁵ The angel replied, “The Holy Spirit will come over you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, the one who is to be born will be holy. He will be called God’s Son. ³⁶ Look, even in her old age, your relative Elizabeth has conceived a son. This woman who was labeled ‘unable to conceive’ is now six months pregnant. ³⁷ Nothing is impossible for God.”

³⁸ Then Mary said, “I am the Lord’s servant. Let it be with me just as you have said.” Then the angel left her.

- How might Joseph and Mary have felt when their lives were dramatically interrupted by an angelic announcement? What plans were interrupted? How might this interruption also have impacted those around them?
- What did Mary and Joseph have to do in order to accept this interruption in their lives and move on? What did they gain from this interruption?

WRAPPING UP

Popular culture tells us that the point of life is to be happy and that you must do everything you can to achieve this happiness, or you will be bitter, frustrated, and full of regrets.

Based on what we've discussed from the scriptures, and from the movie, "It's a Wonderful Life," would you say that's true? If not, what would you say IS the point of life?

CLOSING PRAYER

Gracious God, looking back, we see the generosity of those who came before us, acknowledging their hardships and struggles, their joys and gains that bring us to the place we are now. In looking back, help us to build a foundation for those who will look back at *our* lives, those who will be affected by what we do, what we offer, what we give. In the name of the one who calls us to the loyalty of justice, Jesus the Christ. Amen.