

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“New Beginnings: Pre-Season Plans”
Rev. Dr. John Judson
January 31, 2016

Jeremiah 4:1-10

Luke 4:14-21

This is the year. We have the players. We have the coaches. We have the plan. We have the determination. We have worked hard in the off-season and we know that this year, we will go all the way. We will win...and you fill in the blank...the Super Bowl, the NCAA football, baseball, basketball, hockey, soccer championship, the NBA title, the World Series...the Little League World Series...the bowling title...ok, so you get the point. So how many of you have either heard or said these words? How many of you have believed them at the beginning of a season? How many of you have ever been disappointed? What is amazing is that we believe these words. We look at last season when our favorite team was in last place and we want to believe that this season is the one in which we will finally get the brass ring...then once again we are crushed. We wear bags over our heads. We yell at the television...or at least I do. But we want to believe, because otherwise, why bother?

I offer that image because it appears to be what Jesus is doing in this opening story of the Gospel of Luke. Jesus has been baptized by John, resisted temptation in the wilderness, done a little preaching in the minor leagues and gained a reputation as an up and coming prophet. He then returns to his hometown of Nazareth in order to lay out his game plan for his coming ministry. And his plans are pretty ambitious. He has come to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, set the oppressed free and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Then he declares that “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” He is claiming victory before the season has even begun. And the people believe him. In the face of all odds, the people believe him. They believe him even though for most of the past five-hundred years none of those things had happened. If you want to think of it in sports terms, they had been waiting longer for this liberation than have Cubs fans for a World Series.

The question for us this morning then is, how well did Jesus and then the church carry out his game plan? At first our answer would be, pretty well. As Luke tells the story in his Gospel, we see Jesus carrying out his game plan. He sets people free from fear, pain, disease and death. He gives sight to the blind. He feeds the hungry. And people respond. A grass roots movement grows up around him and the crowds become so large that he cannot enter any town without creating major congestion. Granted, all of this will lead to his arrest, trial and crucifixion, yet when God raises him from the dead it appears as if the ministry he began would continue. The Book of Acts tells stories of the disciples creating a community in which everyone had enough to eat and a place to live; where there was love, grace and acceptance; where people were healed and lives renewed; where all persons, Jew, Greek, slave, free, male and female were welcomed and included. If the story had ended there, it would have appeared that Jesus game plan worked. Yet we know that the story of the church and the world did not end at the end of Acts.

Over the next several months my articles in First Things will take us through the history of the church. What we will discover along the way is that the church quickly moved from this loving Acts community to an organization with a hierarchy and a desire for power. Once it was legalized under

Constantine it used all of its resources to gain both religious power, meaning the destruction of old pagan worship, and political power, meaning attempting to control the secular authorities. Along the way it excommunicated people, executed people, tortured people, authorized Crusades that killed tens of thousands, conducted pogroms against Jews, diminished the role of women, and actually conducted war in the name of the Pope. Even after the Reformation, the Lutheran and Reformed, including Presbyterian, engaged in wars lasting more than one-hundred years, virtually destroying Europe. Here in America the Puritans and Anglicans persecuted Baptists, Mennonites and Quakers. And the Southern Presbyterian Church defended slavery and segregation. It was as if the game plan that Jesus laid out at the beginning of his ministry had been completely lost and replaced with a game plan of power and prejudice. And these game plans have two serious consequences.

First the world is worse shape because of it. When the church, the body of Christ forgets its mission, its game plan, the world suffers. People go hungry and uneducated. People live in substandard housing. People of color are incarcerated at levels far beyond other populations. Payday lenders are allowed to prey on the most vulnerable by charging almost unlimited interest rates. Refugees are looked upon with scorn rather than compassion. The world is a poorer place.

Second, people don't like the church; don't want to be part of the church. Millennials, those in the 25 to 35 age range, believe the church to be racist, anti-gay, anti-woman, self-centered and unconcerned about the poor. The church is only about money and political power. Half of all millennials, and a third of boomers and builders, those over 50, sees the church in a negative light.

If we are willing to look and listen, these realities should tell us something about what happens when the church forgets its game-plan; the game plan of Jesus that inspired a movement that began to change the world. But there is hope, there are bright spots in the church world. There is Pope Francis calling on the church to shed its ostentatious ways, return to serving the poor and to become more welcoming. It is the Presbyterian Church becoming a welcoming and affirming church for all people. It is our presbytery finally beginning the conversation on race in Detroit. And there is this church, First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham, which has chosen to pick up Jesus' game plan and run with it.

Last week was our annual meeting, and (for those of you who weren't there you can pick up a paper copy of our annual report, view it on line and watch the video) we looked back at all that we had accomplished in 2015 in the context of mission, inclusion and community. But this morning I want us to see ourselves, both individually and collectively, through the lens of Jesus' game plan. We bring good news to the poor by feeding hungry children and families, by welcoming into our church through SOS, by building a school in Mexico and soon two more in Kenya. We proclaim release to the captives and set the prisoner free by working to educate students at Alcott Elementary, because a lack of education means a higher likelihood of people living their entire lives in poverty and often entering the pipeline to prison. We offer recovery of sight to the blind by supporting medical missions in Mexico and others of us in organizations that work to prevent blindness around the world. We proclaim the year of the Lord's favor by being a welcoming and affirming place for all people regardless of race, religion, sexual orientation, gender or income, as well as assisting people in immediate need through the deacon's fund. In other words, I believe that we are a bright spot for the church and the world.

Now, before we become sore patting ourselves on the back, we need to realize that Jesus' game plan calls us to do more, to be more. And let me be clear at this point, all that we do in and through this church is because we are followers of Jesus Christ, and not simply because we are a do-good, organization. We do it

because Jesus Christ, in his first great sermon in Nazareth, called upon his followers to follow his lead, to take up his call and to live into the reality that in Jesus Christ it is possible to change the world because the power to do so comes from him; he has accomplished it.

My challenge to you and to us, this morning then is this, to ask ourselves, how am I living out the game plan that Jesus offers? How am I part of the team, here in this church and other teams in the world that preach good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, let the oppressed go free and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor?