

When God's Plans Don't Look Like We Expected | A Future With Hope (Part 1)

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Preacher: Tonetta Landis-Aina

[0 : 0 0] So Jeremiah 29, 1 through 14, we're kicking off our fundraiser, and we're going to start it off with some reflection on the scripture, and then in a few minutes we'll also have an elder panel, which I'm pretty excited about. All right, so Jeremiah 29, 1 through 14.

These are the words of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the remaining elders among the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people who Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. This was after King Jehoniah and the queen mother, the court officials, the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the artisans, and the smiths had departed from Jerusalem. The letter was sent by the hand of Eliasaph, son of Shaphan, and Gemariah, son of Hilkiah, whom King Zedekiah of Judah sent to Babylon to King Nebuchadnezzar the Lord of Babylon. It said, Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon, build houses and live in them. Plant gardens and eat what they produce.

Take wives and have sons and daughters. Take wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters. Multiply there and do not decrease, but seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, for it is a lie that you, that they are prophesying to you in my name.

I did not send them, says the Lord. For thus says the Lord, only when Babylon's 70 years are completed will I visit you and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place.

For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Man, when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you.

[2 : 2 1] When you search for me, you will find me. If you seek me with all your heart, 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.

Now, as I've said, this portion of scripture is one that you might have heard. It's a portion of scripture that's become pretty famous. Even if you don't know the rest of the passage, you might know or have heard the words of verse 11, the verse that starts, for I know the plans that I have for you.

You might have seen that on a bumper sticker or a magnet. You might have seen it on a pot holder at your grandmother's house. It's everywhere. You might have seen it on a t-shirt, a mug.

And I suspect that this platitude, because it has become so, it's just everywhere in the world, I suspect that we, you know, have ceased paying attention to it very much anymore.

That it's so ubiquitous that we have fallen asleep to it, to this fundamental truth that it carries. That God gives people who have been displaced and disempowered, pushed out and pushed aside, marginalized and traumatized, captive and confused.

[3 : 50] That God gives those people a future and a hope. So the problem is not that this passage is untrue.

It's actually glorious in its truth. The problem is that we have assimilated, the problem is the way that we have assimilated it into our culture of toxic positivity and toxic individuality.

When I was working on this sermon, I came across two phrases that were poking fun at the way we have come to use Jeremiah 29 11. The first said, When God says he has plans for you in Jeremiah 29 11, he probably means, I'm thinking about giving you a really good coupon for that new blender you've been high.

And that, I'm a woman of a certain age, so blenders sound really exciting, okay? And then the second said, If Jeremiah 29 11 is true, then my life plan must be to become a professional couch potato and master the art of instant ramen.

So while those are, you know, somewhat hilarious on the surface, the truth is that they reveal something that's not as funny. They make clear that the American church has envisioned God's dream as little more than a mirror of our own consumerist desires.

[5 : 15] That the American church has reduced God's dream down to a self-help guru's top 10 list of how to live our best life now.

Even though that best life is pretty far from the lives that we actually have. But even though this scripture is often used to support these kind of narrow fantasies that are, you know, about the individually defined good life, that shouldn't make us shy away from it.

There's this rich language in this passage. It's a challenge and it's a gift that emerges from a genuinely traumatic experience. The experience of God's people being displaced and taken captive by the Babylonian empire.

And if we don't dismiss this verse, even if we don't dismiss it because of the way that it's been used, if we don't do that, then we can see something really important, even though we recognize we're far from the experience of the Israelites.

This meme captures, and I do feel a little bit of trepidation in preaching on this passage, because of this meme. So Jeremiah 29 11 is all about you.

[6 : 33] Remind me again about your time in the Babylonian exile. Right? Like a lot of us know, like, oh, we've got to be really careful with the scripture. Yeah, the trouble is not in the way that we apply the verse.

It's not that we apply it. The trouble is that we apply it before we talk about the context of it. So I'm going to do something really dangerous. I'm going to talk about the context, and then I'm going to apply it to our world, even though we have not been in the Babylonian exile.

Okay? All right? So this is a portion of scripture, Jeremiah 29 11. It's basically a prophetic pastoral letter that is sent to people who have been exiled to Babylon.

Jeremiah, who is a person, a prophet who has not been taken captive, he's in Jerusalem, and he writes this letter, and he sends it by way of couriers that are already on their way to Babylon, hoping that it'll find its way to the people who need it.

Because there's more than one wave of removal. There was more than one wave of people who were captive, taken captive. The text tells us that this is the wave after the leaders are taken.

[7 : 46] For the Israelites, we always have to remember that the exile is this psychological, it's a psychological trauma, it's personal devastation, it's national disaster, it is complete theological crisis.

All the things the people had believed that God was for them in a unique and exceptional way, that God lived in their temple, but therefore it couldn't be destroyed.

Those things no longer seem to make sense in light of Babylon's victory. So when Jeremiah sends this letter to these people now living in exile in a foreign land, his advice is counterintuitive, it is controversial, and he basically tells them to settle down, to build and to plan and to create new life.

He warns them that false prophets are going to tell them to deny reality, that they can be powerful in this moment. But given the power of Babylon, the might of Babylon, he names that as a lie.

And then Jeremiah mentions that they will be in Babylon for 70 years, making clear that they would be out of their homeland for at least more than one generation.

[9 : 08] And then Jeremiah says something else, that the situation of the people is not without hope. God still has plans for the people. Restoration will one day come, a future and a hope, along with a homecoming that is beyond their wildest dreams.

They are both to embrace exile and to look beyond it. Now, as I've said, I do struggle with how the text has been hyper-individualized and made to fit into our consumer-driven culture.

And I'm aware, again, that we're not close to the exile. Yet I'm convinced that there are faithful ways to talk about this passage. And one of the best, I think, comes from a school of scholars.

Walter Brueggemann, among other people, has compared the church in the West to a church that is in exile. And then scholar Elaine Heath writes this.

The church's exile is cultural rather than geographic, but holds the same kind of disorientation, anxiety, and intensity of grief over the glory having left the temple.

[10 : 24] Now, while I don't think that Heath is right in saying it's the same kind, I do think that it is appropriate to name that many of us and many of our churches are in a place of disorientation, of anxiety, of grief.

I grew up in a situation in the South where Christian language was the norm. Some people chose to reject it, but it was the norm. I grew up in a megachurch that was well-funded, and it was highly esteemed in our city.

I was this churchy girl. I was accepted for my rural virtue and my respectability. But none of that is any longer true for me.

I'm guessing that some of you can relate to that. I regularly encounter people who assume that I am a fool to follow Christ, and they can't understand why I would associate myself with a religion that has caused so much pain to so many people.

And I now lead a church that sometimes feels like a startup. It's not a megachurch. I'm no longer that good girl, but, you know, people consider me either a false prophet leading people astray or some kind of, like, naive woman who is leading people in this faith that's irrelevant.

[11 : 48] Again, I know I'm not the only one who can relate to those kinds of transitions and feels that whiplash in their bodies. In some way that I'm still struggling to comprehend, Christianity in this country has become much more effective as a politically conservative voting bloc than as a prophetic faith that changes lives.

Yes, the church in America is in some ways in decline, but maybe more so is the complex, slowly maturing faith that Jesus modeled.

All too easy to live with this sense that the glory has left the temple, that our personal faith lives are no longer on firm ground, that the emptiness of the pews and the churches around us means that God is no longer with us.

For all of those reasons, we need this passage in Jeremiah to remind us that we have been given a future and a hope that in moments of holy darkness, the light does come.

In moments when elections turn out much differently than we may have expected, the light does come. In moments when we feel theologically adrift, the light does come.

[13 : 11] In moments when we feel like our passion for God has grown cold, the light does come. And in moments when a church like ours, a church which has given up motivating people by fear and instead relies on God's love, when a church like ours realizes that the work is slower than we expected, the light does come.

You have a future and a hope and this church has a future and a hope. I'm going to say very briefly three astonishing things about this passage or from this passage that I want you to take with you and then I'm going to invite the elders out.

So first, you got to get in this passage that the concept of exile is reversed. And I love this. In earlier chapters, Jeremiah 24, in an earlier chapter, Jeremiah compares the people in exile not to people who are despised.

He compares them to a basket of very good figs. They are the ones who carry God's blessing and dreams. And so it is with us.

Because, this is true of a faith life, the blessing of God is very rarely where we expect it to be, where we expect to find it, but rather comes to the confused and the cast out and the cut off.

[14 : 43] As in so much else, God's work of reversal is at work in and through the experience of exile. But not only that, the blessing comes all too often in the in-between place.

Get this. See, the people receiving Jeremiah's letter were told two things. Two things. They would not be returning home anytime soon and their children or maybe their children's children would one day return home.

So the main encouragement to them is to settle down. It is to build and to plant and to eat, to be intentional in the in-between place. To plant seeds and to plant lots and lots and lots of seeds.

They are reminded that the creation command in Genesis still applies to them to be fruitful and multiply, to create new life, to make art, to cultivate a vocation, to create life in whatever way will bring joy.

And then finally, this letter very explicitly tells the people that even as they are called to work for shalom in an active way, they are also to rest in God's shalom.

[15 : 59] They are reminded that shalom is both a task and a gift. That's another phrase from Buhlman, a task and a gift. They are to seek the shalom of the city.

You remember that language. And they are to know that God plans for their welfare, their shalom, gift and grace.

They are to rest in God's dreams. And to practice shalom and to hope for shalom, it's not a small thing. Because in the biblical story, shalom is actually the opposite of chaos.

And we talked about how important chaos is last week in this idea of like what gives rise to the beasts of our world. It's the opposite of chaos. The pursuit of shalom and the gift of shalom is what defeats the chaos, which is at the root of everything that threatens God's good world.

All right. So I recognize that it might be a little strange to reflect on this passage to kick off a fundraising campaign. But when I think about where we are as a church, it seems to me that we are in a season to remember that God has a future and a hope for us.

[17 : 18] That even when it might feel like the glory has left the temple, that God's blessing remains. God's blessing remains.

That even as we feel ourselves in between and on the way, God invites us to intentional investment. That even as we work for shalom, in what can sometimes feel like a strange land, we will one day fully experience a homecoming into God's commonwealth of peace and flourishing.

So I've intentionally left this sermon without much of an end and without a lot of examples because I want the elders to come forward and to fill in some of those examples and to talk a little bit about our church.

So I want to invite them forward. We're actually going to pick the chairs up and try to put them on the stage if we can. And they're going to share just a little bit about first just who they are because I know the elders aren't always in front of you all.

And they're going to talk a little bit about the future and the hope that they envision for the table. So you all can come up. All right. So the first thing I want to just ask y'all is to tell us a little bit about yourselves, introduce yourselves, say your name, all of that.

[18 : 40] Where do you live? What do you do with your time professionally and otherwise? And then how did you find out about this church? How long have you been around? Just introduce yourselves if that seems like.

Hello. Can you hear me? Hi. I'm Skylar Scholl. I came to the table in late 2017. I live in Columbia Heights. I'm a lawyer by day.

I'm new to the elders board and excited about that. What else? Just how did you come to the church? Oh, sure. So I had lived in D.C. for a long time, but had a couple years in the burbs.

And so I was getting back to the city in 2017 and really excited. And I went to every, what I considered at the time, startup church in the area in Columbia Heights, Mount Pleasant.

And the table is the first one I went to. And I really liked it. I said, but I should check out, you know, the others. And there were three or four others. I went to the mall. And it only reaffirmed that the table was right for me.

[19 : 41] And I came back and I've been here since. Hi, everyone. Good morning. My name is Emily Parrott. I use she, her pronouns. I live in Langdon, which no one knows where that neighborhood is, but it's about just under three miles from here, straight south near Brooklyn.

I have been at the table for about four and a half years, coming on five. And I suppose I have maybe a little bit more unique of how I found the church in that. So my husband is Anthony, who's one of the co-lead pastors here.

And so first heard of the table. Actually, we learned of the table quite a while before Anthony even applied for the job. We'd been aware of kind of what y'all were up to and really admired it from afar. And then really got to know a lot of you as we came for the interview process and then moved out here in March of 2020.

So fun times. I, by my, as far as what I do by day, I work in higher education. So I work at GW as an academic advisor for undergraduate students.

And I think that might be everything. So I'm going to pass it off to Beck. Hi everyone. My name is Beck Eng Wong. I've been at the table since I think fall of 2016.

[20 : 52] I found the table because I had been, I'd moved to DC I think the year prior. And I really, I had a really hard time jiving with the pastors at many other churches, mostly because I didn't like the performative way that they gave their sermons.

I felt like they just wanted me to like laugh with them at their jokes. And I really liked the founding pastors at the table, his kind of self-deprecating humor and the way that his, his, his sermons were more theologically, I don't know, enlightening.

So I really appreciated the table for what it was. And yeah, and by day I work at a large international development organization, managing our legal entity registrations globally.

And I think, is that it? Okay. Good morning, everybody. My name is Josh McComas. I, what was, I was going to start first with how I found the table.

So I started in 2015 in November of 2015 and I moved to DC and a little bit earlier that year. And similar to Skylar was sort of checking out different churches in the area and was on my way.

[22 : 04] So, so for those that don't remember, the table church started on eight street in Northeast. And that's where I moved when I first moved here. And I was on my way to a different church and walked past the table church building and saw the big sign on the wall and said, Oh, I didn't, I hadn't even heard of this church, but let me make a note to add it to my list.

And so I checked it out the next week. And I think I had said hi to somebody like on the way there and they like asked my name or whatever. They remembered me the second week. And so when I like came back and I was like, Oh, well guess I'm staying here. They know who I am.

And that was like, so that was on eight street and in Northeast back in, back in 2015. And then, yeah, just by day I'm a, I work in a K-12 education. I'm an administrator at elementary school. And I think that's it.

All right. Hi everyone. I'm Madison Quijano and I found the church very similarly. Well, honestly, I Googled progressive churches in DC having come from a very fun experience growing up in a black mega church down South.

And so, yeah, came, checked out a few churches, went to the table. Someone also remembered my name. And by the third week of them like calling my name down the street, I'm walking up sobbing for reasons that may come up today.

[23 : 15] So I, during the day, I am the director of juvenile justice for a local nonprofit, um, forum for youth investment. And I, that is amazing.

Um, I have many things to say. Y'all are very impressive. Okay. Um, all right.

I realize I do have a penchant for compound questions. So I would try to make them simpler. And that is just like, what made y'all want to be, you know, like what led y'all to accept the role of being elders?

What does that mean to you? And did you have any hesitations in accepting the role? I'm very curious. Out of the way.

Um, yes. So my, my main hesitation, um, was rooted in some of my upbringing, like that experience. So when I heard this concept of elders and a couple of times, I've been nominated and was just like funny.

[24 : 18] Like I could never do that because, uh, in my head, this is like someone who's older, wiser, like has all the answers and self restraint, like all of these characteristics that I so admire.

But my imposter syndrome was like, and girl, it ain't you. It's not you. Um, and so I finally, like the most recently were new Skylar, Josh and myself.

And so, um, was very fearful, but prayerful about the opportunity and felt that this was a time for me to step into an opportunity that I do so believe in.

I believe in the table church so much. Um, and for what I've seen happen, how I've grown and been able to be empowered to be in a space where doubt is okay.

And it's okay to question authority and to be in community with other people who don't have the answers. And so, um, being able to be in a leadership, um, space to kind of help cultivate a culture in which that is maintained is why I decided to step up.

[25 : 26] Um, for me, it's a little bit simpler. I think, um, I, uh, so like Madison mentioned, I'm a new also, we just rotated on like a month ago. Um, so I have had the opportunity to serve in a number of different roles in the table church.

And the time that I've been here, uh, for many years, I was the director of community ministry, uh, right up like to and through the early years of COVID. And I stepped back from that and was just serving on first impressions and the, and the tech team.

And a couple of months ago was thinking like, okay, I need to pray about what do I need to be more involved in? What are some of the opportunities? Should we lead a small group? Should I like go help with one of the different ministries that I haven't been helping with for a while, perhaps?

Um, and I guess just in a classic story, like I, that was the prayer on like one week. And then the next week I got an email from Katrina that was like, you've been nominated to be an elder. And I was like, Oh, I hadn't thought of serving in that capacity, but I guess, I guess there it is.

So I will pray about this and we'll go through with the process and, and, uh, things worked out. And so that's, uh, that's where I am. And, and I didn't, I think the only hesitations I had, um, I, uh, I don't think I really had any, I think it was just a very like, this was something I was, seeing to how I could serve the church.

[26 : 41] What was the next step I could serve in? And this opportunity opened up. So. I'd say for me, um, I think my main motivation for joining was, um, more or less like representation reasons.

I think, um, you know, when I first came to the table, there were very few Asians. Um, it's a huge reason why my wife and I decided to start an Asian affinity group. And culturally it's a very like, you know, they're here.

Yay. They show up. Yeah. Good job. Um, but it's really isolating as a, as an Asian coming to a city. I actually came to the city being not only not knowing I was queer, but also not affirming.

So for me to come into a church where I was like, Oh, it's okay to be queer and, um, to be like Christ led and centered, um, it, for a church to have such an impact for me to feel like, Oh, I can actually come out, but I didn't even know that I like needed to come out.

I think it was definitely by like God's grace that he brought me here. And so, um, I'd say like, you know, looking at the church and it's demographic, I was like, I wanted to see more Asian representation, especially like Asian and queer, because there are not too many spaces.

[27 : 53] If you know, like in the DMV that I think Asian people can feel like they could be their queer selves. And without having this cultural burden of like basically obliging to the culture and just being like, yeah, I will just be closeted in this whole time and just be a good little, um, Asian girl.

Like I'm told to and raised to be. So I think that was my main motivation and reason. Thank you for sharing that. Yeah. Yeah. Um, I relate, um, pretty strongly to Josh's story in that, um, I, when I find community and I find a place where I feel belonging, where I want others to feel belonging, I find ways to get involved.

That's just kind of my natural default. And so I've been serving in a variety of ways at the table for a while. And, um, hearing that I was nominated was definitely, um, it felt very honoring and it felt very humbling.

Um, but I, you know, in praying through it very much felt like I needed to honor that and move forward. Especially I felt strongly like as a woman, having that opportunity felt important to me, having not always grown up and been in spaces where that was something that was visible.

Um, so it was very much me saying yes and stepping into a calling that I felt was like being put in front of me. Um, in terms of hesitations, I would say my, my largest hesitation was just being the spouse of a pastor.

[29 : 10] I think that was the thing that held me back. And that was something I remember saying in my interview process of like, if there are others who are qualified and that are easier to take on than me, then like do it.

Um, and, and it just, it feels tricky because I know that it might project certain images and I know that it might, um, cause concern for some folks. And so I didn't want that to be any hindrance of me serving in a leadership role.

Um, in case all of you don't know, there are certain ways that I do not participate in the elder board, um, knowing that I am a spouse of a pastor. So, um, there are ways that my role is limited, but I also really appreciate that just because, um, my spouse is who he is, it doesn't prevent me from being able to, um, share my gifts or share my leadership.

So, um, that's a little about my story. Great. And I, and I would just say to that, Emily, that you are so aware of it, care so much, have explained it so well that, not that we thought we had anything to be concerned about, but if we did, we, you've removed any doubt that there's any, any issues.

Um, so this is a great and humbling role. I have at least tried, if not been on for a while in most other roles in the church. So it sounded like a reasonable and natural progression.

[30 : 24] And I think having served in almost every one of the ministries in the seven or eight years I've been here certainly contributes hopefully to being a good elder that I've seen or been in the trenches to most of the ministries.

So that's good. Um, something that's important to know, to understand how I look at this, is that I come from Southern Ohio, Cincinnati in particular. I came here long ago for school and stayed.

So I've been here since like 2000, but my family back home is rather relatively depending on which member conservative and Christian. And in my family, there has been a family tradition of being an elder or a deacon, my grandfather, my cousin.

And I absolutely love those family members. However, you might guess that our view on the gospel, social justice, politics, et cetera, are, are not aligned.

And so on one hand, I wanted to continue that family tradition and I'm honored to do it, but with a huge pivot. And I think one of my, at least mild, minor temporary hesitations was, how will this relate in my family?

[31 : 32] How do I reconcile this? Not that I thought I was on the wrong path, but how do I have them understand this, embrace this, appreciate this, which, you know, is, is still being played out.

It's a book to be written and I'm okay with that. But I think those were my thoughts coming in. I love reviewing panels. Cause I feel like I, I love things.

I have no idea what you're trying to say. And I love, I love, these responses are so rich. Okay. So each of you give lots of your time and money to this community. And I just want to know, like, why is that important to you?

What is your future and your, your like future? And what do you see as the future and hope for this church community? Just in a few words, like, what do you think about that?

And some of y'all have been here for a long time. So how do you think about our future and our hope? Okay.

[32 : 32] Now elders, y'all can't hesitate on this question. Okay. Do you want to go? Okay. So for me, yeah, like I think all of us have shared, we've all been involved in different ways in the table, serving on different teams, ministries.

And I think many of us have run many different teams, right? Like over the course of our time here, we've had those opportunities. For me, it's always been important to do that because of the, of the recognition that like this community is what it is because of the people that are here.

Right. When we show up on a Sunday, for example, like DCB is great, but like they didn't set up all this stuff for us, right? Like that's part of our community that we're doing that. The worship team is all the people that are sitting here, like the, the first impressions team, table kids, everybody's like everything that we offer to each other is because of each other.

Right. So like, if we want this community to succeed and to flourish, like we need to be invested. We need to give of our time in that way. Um, and, and again, like for me, that's similar to Emily said, you just like look for a thing to get involved with.

It's, it's been where, what team can I help on? What things can I do? Where is there a need? I see, I think a reason I joined like tech team was like, Oh, there was no slides one week.

[33 : 43] And I was like, Oh, that's, I can do that. I can do slides. So let me, you know, like, let me hop in and get involved with that. Um, and I think recognizing yet that this, you know, this community is, uh, serves each other because of each other, because of us coming together has been a really valuable thing.

And I think the same thing, your, your two part question was also about finances too. Right. But it's the same thing for finances, right? Like churches don't get funded from anywhere, but us. Right. So like, if we want this to succeed, we have to contribute to it.

That's, that's just how it goes. Yeah. Uh, to piggyback off of what Josh was sharing, I think, and hearing Pastor Toneta's, um, sermon this morning, even, um, we're not a mega church.

We don't have some of the funding and some of the resources that some churches and some denominations have. Um, we are here in a pretty unique and special circumstance for the things that we choose to stand on and the things that we choose to lift up and the people that we choose, um, to embrace and serve and bring into this community.

Um, and because of that, there's just, there's not funding for those things. There's not, um, there's not a lot of people cheering us on. Um, maybe there's more than we'd like to think, but it can feel like a hard, lonely experience sometimes, which, um, in some ways is community building for those of us here doing the work, but it also means that it can't happen without us, um, financially or us giving our time.

[35 : 07] So that's what that made me think of. Well, as the incoming treasurer, obviously finances are on my mind, uh, as they should be.

Um, I think one way as we've been talking about it, that I think about it is, you know, so much good goes on and, and so many of you see the good things that are going on, don't always see behind the scenes, but you know, I know, and it's no secret that our pastors, if they had more administrative help and if, uh, we had even more financial stability, that it would free them to do even more great things that you all, uh, benefit from very directly and sometimes indirectly.

And so it's neat to see a vision of the church being even more financially stable, where we can do even more exciting things, perhaps in more places. And I'm not talking about any, any particular vision of a mega church, just an even more awesome church.

Um, you know, um, and so that's really exciting to think about all the good things we're doing, but what more could we do that would be a blessing to our community, to our world, exciting, fun, that we could do if we had even more stability?

How could we, uh, have our pastors, um, taking on fewer gray hairs and it will spend a little more time with their children and their family. Uh, you know, the less, less burden they are, the more support they have, the more they can be on for us and we can be on for each other.

[36 : 40] I can, I just wanted to add really, I realized I didn't answer the question about a hope or for the future of the church and, um, adding onto what Skylar said as an elder team, we've been talking a lot about rootedness, um, and rootedness for our church and rootedness for this community.

And I think financial stability is a big part of that because, you know, if you've been around here for any amount of time, you know that that financial stability really has some peaks and valleys, and that can be really stressful for a church.

It can be stressful for the leaders, um, and to, to have some stability to have, be able to plant some rootedness and really, um, invest that way is what I see as an exciting future. So anyway, um, so I'm, I immediately think about retention when you bring that.

Right. And I think about the fact, well, two things, one community. Uh, when I first joined the table and maybe still true today, even like when you look around, this isn't all of our church, you know, we have so many, Hey, everybody online.

Um, but also we have great community groups, right? Like back talked about, uh, the group that her and her wife are leading, which is robust and fun and awesome. The black affinity group.

[37 : 45] Okay. Men's affinity group having a whiskey night. But like, when I think about that, I just think about how beautiful of an opportunity the table presents. That is unique where walking through these doors can be traumatic for folks.

A lot of people who found the table are trying to heal from church hurt and being able, like, even when I get chills, when I just think about like the name of a table and how like people come and create community around sharing food.

And how just like taking a sip or having a piece of bread to bite can really like break the ice. And I've seen this happen in community groups. And I also know that it's hard to retain community group folks, right?

And we want, like some of you are traveling from like, uh, out in Maryland and past Alexandria, but we also want you to have like table church homes there too.

Um, I, Oh, I forgot. That's what the first question was. I live right down the street and, um, I'm in a community group, but there are like just a few of us, right? Like less, fewer than five of us. But what happens in that space every other Wednesday is, has been life changing for me.

[38 : 54] Um, and I just so want to see the church have stronger and many more community group opportunities where folks can say, this is intimidating to me. Or I grew up in a mega church space, like for me personally, where no one knew my name.

Um, but if I can come in here and this is kind of reminiscent of that, what does it look like to create a space where I'm healing in community and kind of taking baby steps so that when I come through those doors, I see faces that I recognize.

Um, and to me that like sense of home that the table can create is what I want to see us continue to invest in, right? Like what could it look like to have a stipend for each community group leader so that they aren't just, you know, piecing together the meal every week or every two weeks because that's what we do, right?

Like we say, can anyone bring a side today? I'm going to bring some pasta. Um, and that can also be a barrier, right? We know DC isn't the cheapest place to live. Um, so I think about retention and community, but also, and I'll name this for myself, ever since I started serving back in 2018, every time I saw a black person come into church, I was like, oh my gosh, please stay.

Um, I'm like, who's on worship? We throw in a gospel song. And we think about this and we talk about this also in the black affinity group.

[40 : 19] Um, and to that end, I also want to continue to shout out, uh, the work that Beck and your group are doing because also, as someone who has Asian heritage, just like knowing that like, we are such a crawl, like everyone's accepted in every space.

Um, and I just want so much that like when people walk through those doors, they know that not only like, are we saying that we have your back and we want to see you at our table, but we do have the financial strength to like sustain that.

Right. Cause, um, thoughts and prayers can only go so far. Yeah. Okay. Okay. Amen to that. Um, to be honest, I started giving to the table because I had not ties like my whole life, like even at other churches I'd been to, cause I never felt compelled to.

Um, so really me tithing was literally an act of obedience to God because, um, if you have noticed, if you've been going here for any length of time, we never pass the plate. We don't make a big stink out of pressuring people to give.

And from the time that I came to the table, one thing that really stood out to me was their ask of giving because they never ask for any specific amount. They say, have a serious conversation with God, ruminate over it, like pray over it.

[41 : 30] And I did that. I did that over the course of, you know, a year or two. And I was like, wow, God's really like changing my heart to make me feel like I want to give out of like the abundance that he's given to me.

And I feel like that was like such a, a life changing moment too, because you know, like as we see in the Bible, like, you know, once you open your heart to like, um, just being so great, like giving and, um, generous, like so many other things like have come because of it.

Like not to preach a prosperity gospel by any means, but like, it's true. Like it was a very pivotal moment for me and my own personal walk with Christ. And so, um, but I do resonate a lot with what, um, Madison has said.

And I, I do feel like, you know, if you want to care for something or invest in it, like money goes a long way, you know? And so I think, um, in our stewardship, I just, I really implore people not to feel pressure to give, but to have, you know, one conversation with God or several, whatever it takes for you to say yes or no.

And it's okay if it's now at this season of life, you know, or for like however many years, but just know that like we see you and we care about you. And, you know, these are the reasons behind why we give. Yep. I think we are going to end it there.

[42 : 43] These, this was quite rich. So please give them a round of applause. Yes.

Yes. Yes. Uh, you can take your chair and just sit it here. And I'm just going to pose us. So, I recognize that last question I asked about a future and a hope could be answered by any number of people in this community.

You could talk about why you're committed here, what compels you to be here. And while our church is not perfect, it is a place where God is profoundly at work.

We are a community for which God has a hope and a future. And for that reason, I want to invite you to contribute to our end of year campaign. And as Beck said, ruminate on it.

Okay. Think about it. All right. Our goal is to raise \$20,000 by the end of giving Tuesday, December 3rd. It's about two weeks.

[43 : 56] And because I deeply believe in the labor and the joy of this place, I'm going to do so. I'm going to just be really bold and ask for what I really want and ask for what I think we can really do.

Which is to make, make the gift, our first gift and not our last gift of the holidays. I know all kinds of things are going to come in terms of things you want to spend money on, but I encourage you to consider making this your first gift and not your last gift.

And I consider you, I'm asking you to consider giving, ruminating what you might give above your recurring gift so that we can end this year well.

So there are a couple of reasons for the contributions we're asking for. We first want to make sure that we end 2024 well with our income and our expenses matching by December 31st.

We want to make sure that we're moving toward making, or making more headway in our operating reserves, moving from maybe one month to about three months.

[45 : 01] So that we can make sure when there are moments where folks have challenges and they can't give, that we are prepared for that. Third, we want to make sure that our benevolence fund is ready to go on January 1st, right at the start of the year.

So that folks in need can have what they need, can ask for what they need from us. And then finally, we want to support our friends at the Transmission Ministry Collective, which is an online community dedicated to the spiritual care and faith formation and leadership potential of transgender and gender expansive Christians.

We're very, very, very aware that in this season, that community will need particular support to remain holy. So because of those four priorities, the first \$4,000 that we raise is going to go to our benevolence fund immediately.

The next \$16,000 will go into our general fund to shore up our finances in the ways that I described. And then half of every dollar that we raise above \$20,000 will go to the Transmission Ministry Collective.

Now, if you're saying to yourself, I don't, I don't give a recurring gift. So how can I give above it? We have not forgotten about you. Praise God. We are asking for 10 new recurring donors before the end of the year.

[46 : 24] Between now and Giving Tuesday, you're going to hear a lot more about this. We're going to send out updates. We're working on an annual report that we're going to send out. We're going to send out some prompts so that you could hear each other talk about why this church matters to you.

The bottom line is that God has plans for us. God has yet, as yet unfulfilled dreams for us, a future and a hope. So please prayerfully consider how you might be involved.

If you would just pray with me. God, it is hard to talk about our dreams because so often we are afraid of being disappointed when we ask for what we truly desire.

It is so hard to talk about money in churches because of the ways that we have been asked in manipulative ways. And yet, God, we know that the mission that you call us to requires practical and intentional effort and work.

It requires seeds that are sown in faith and hope. And so, God, I just ask in this moment that you would move our hearts in whatever way you desire to hear that next faithful step that we are called to make.

[47 : 42] In the name of Jesus, we pray these things. Amen.