

WELFARE CHECK  
A Sermon by Rev. Victor H. Floyd  
November 28, 2021



Jeremiah 29: 4-14.

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 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 seventy 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. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. 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.

WELFARE CHECK

In today's scripture lesson from the prophet Jeremiah, notice how many times we see the word "welfare." Here, God is speaking through Jeremiah to the beleaguered Jerusalemites. Their leaders have been run out of town on a rail, led into Babylonian captivity (detention), held there for decades while their home, Jerusalem, falls apart.

Verse 7, "Seek the *welfare* of the city in which you are exiled, and pray on its behalf, for in its *welfare* you will find your *welfare*." In the welfare of everyone, even those who oppose everything good, the plunderers, the exploiters, all of them. In the welfare of irritating people, white nationalists, racist pundits, in the welfare of the people who left their cars idling while they raided Louis Vuitton, in everybody's welfare lies your welfare, our welfare. Have. You. Ever.

Pop quiz. The ancient Hebrew word translated here as “welfare”—what is it? Hint. It is also the word for peace, wholeness, safety, enough to eat, somewhere to rest, tranquility, prosperity, harmony, all the makings of a peaceful society. And verse 11 tells us that this “welfare” is God’s will: “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.” The word is Shalom. Shalom underpins all of scripture. If your Bible doesn’t support shalom (welfare, peace), you’re not reading it right. God’s plan is shalom.

### ADVENT: THE ARRIVAL

Today is the First Sunday of Advent, the season of preparing for the Incarnation of the Divine. The doctrine of the Incarnation sets Christians apart from every other religion. We believe that God, the Divine, became a little baby, put on flesh and blood to show us what love is. When God came, God identified with the poor. Little brown Jesus was born out back in a shed, outside of high society. He was homeless, a native speaker of Aramaic, a rabble-rousing prophet-healer-spiritualist rejected by Empire and the religious authorities. God always identifies with those who need welfare, shalom.

### Matthew 25: 31-40.

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory [*doxa*, or high esteemed for its beauty]. All the nations [the Gentiles, all generations of people] will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; [Please read with me at verse 35:] for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ [37] Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’

### HELL INSURANCE CHRISTIANS

Notice that, in verse 37, the righteous sheep even wonder when was it that they ministered to the Lord. Neither the goats nor the sheep realize the preciousness, the divine worth of every living person in the kingdom of God. In this parable, both sheep and goats are bewildered by the Final Judgment. I am not a big heaven and hell preacher. That’s because too many people approach coming to church as a form of “hell insurance.” Hell Insurance Christians tend to go line-by-line, checking off articles of faith, starting with the ancient Nicene Creed and then the Apostles Creed, making sure they know the right answers should St. Peter quiz them at the pearly gate. I assure you that the real test is already underway. The historical creeds have very little to do with what Jesus taught us. They are manmade doctrines about God’s nature, such as God is male, Mary was a virgin, etc., but also the miracle of the Incarnation and how—somehow!—Jesus will come again to judge the quick and the dead—or the sheep and the goats as in the parable of Matthew 25, which is the only New Testament description of the Final Judgment. Is it possible for us to suspend our credal anxiety long enough to balance the mountain of human needs, like the needs described in Matthew 25? Balance the cobweb-covered creed with the big flashing red light of human need. Enough with the creeds. Address the human needs. Stephen Sondheim said to make it rhyme, and they’ll remember it. Release the creeds, address the needs!

### THE CALL TO DEACONING

In verse 44, the word for “to minister” is the same as the word for “deacon.” It means to serve, to offer welfare, to take a casserole over, to cook the cornbread dressing just so before sharing it with strangers on Thanksgiving.

There's a pew-full of deacons and volunteers and Calvary staff, servants all, who can walk taller today, after serving a Thanksgiving Feast to over 80 people this year. Marcia, a senior from Sherith Israel, told me that the way Calvary treats seniors is one of the "last bastions of compassion in San Francisco." (Her words.) After we stuffed ourselves, volunteers packed boxes of leftovers. Thank you, Calvary, to everyone who helped make it so! A chaplain from the Menlo Park VA comes up every year. He just likes what we do. Families and total strangers were seated together in Calvin Hall and our volunteers and staff had the honor of serving at God's table. I suspect that every deacon, volunteer and staff member, leaving the building, if they had enough energy left to notice how they were feeling, noticed a sense of satisfaction, added meaning, a feeling of wholeness for having served God's people. Shalom begets shalom. That's just how it works. It's grows exponentially. It won't take long to get there if we all help create the shalom.

### HELP SOMEBODY

A famous psychiatrist presented at a conference. During the Q & A that followed, someone asked her, "What is your advice for someone whose life is falling apart?" Without skipping a beat, she said, "If your life is falling apart, I suggest that you go out and find someone who needs and will accept your help, and then help them."

It's not intuitive for anyone, but it works. Believe me. Find someone who needs help and wants help and help them. Help them all you can. More often than not, they just need some attention, to be seen and heard, to be reminded that even they are worthy of love. You must experience this transformative power of serving, deaconing, ministry—if you want to follow Jesus.

Oh sure, there are grifters out there looking to take you for a ride, but that's the beauty of doing ministry with Calvary Presbyterian Church. Our Matthew 25 ministry partners are accountable. They come vetted. Helping them, along with our Sanctuary ministry, you could go from bitter old goat to Sheep Status in no time.

If "hell insurance" is all that makes sense to you, fine. Use that fear to avoid being placed goats on Matthew 25's eternal goat-roasting program. I grew up with that kind of religious fear, especially the fear of being left behind. (Many progressives grew up with fear-based religion.) The all-sufficient grace of God could never convince me that salvation through grace was possible let alone enough. If you respond best to fear, here it is, Matthew 25. Let that fear motivate you to deeper discipleship, and then the love of Christ will cast out all fear. It will be replaced with gospel hope. Titanium-Level Sheep Status! Like the righteous in the parable, we don't know how much ministry is enough to move us from goat to sheep. Our faith teaches that God's grace will fill in every gap, but let's not put God to the test.

### FOR I WAS IN A DISASTER AND YOU ASSISTED ME.

How many of you remember Cynthia Grubb? Cynthia joined Calvary in 1985. I loved visiting Cynthia, such a loving person. Cynthia died in December of last year. She left a sizable gift to Calvary. It is our practice to put gifts like Cynthia's into the reserve fund and then to tithe from it to ministries that harmonize with Matthew 25. Thanks to Cynthia Grubb, this week, our development director, Robin Morjikian, will send \$25,000 from this congregation to the Presbyterian Disaster Assistance program. One-third will go to Haitian disaster relief, one-third to wildfire disaster relief, one-third to help refugees in international settings and within the U.S. And there's more to come from Cynthia Grubb's generous bequest.

For I was a stranger, and you offered me welcome. Pestilence overtook my island, and you sent medicine. My house burned down, and you sent help to my family. I was lonely and hungry, and you fed me on Thanksgiving.

### MAKING ROOM FOR THE HOLY

I dreamed the other night that a migrant couple was on their way to Calvary, say, in a few weeks, the husband much older than his teenage wife. That's disturbing. And what's more, the young woman is pregnant. He claims that he's not the father, but I

don't much believe him. Should we call the police? Should we talk to them? It might be too hard since they don't speak English. In my dream, as her contractions begin, we learn that all the hotels are full for the holidays, and the hospitals are overflowing with the new Omicron variant patients. They point to our banner out there, welcoming immigrants and refugees. That banner seemed like a good idea at the time. Do we really have room for them? What will the neighbors say, the ones who are still upset over the Black guy that lived in a tent by the church during lockdown? And what could *we* possibly do for a baby anyway?