

Best Laid Plans

Exodus 3:1-15; Matthew 16:13-28

CWZepp, BWCOB, August 30, 2020

Sitting alone in the BWCOB sanctuary...

How on earth, did we get here?

These days, I am thinking about that question *all the time*.

It was only two years ago that I was sitting here in this sanctuary with Jeff Carr eating a salad, welcoming in another year with the Bridgewater Church of the Brethren. We had been partners in ministry here for eight and a half years together, and we had just made a proposal to our executive leadership that we believed would lay the foundation for another fruitful season of life and ministry at the Bridgewater Church of the Brethren.

Fast forward a year, and it was almost exactly a year ago that I was sitting in these pews with Jeff preparing for his final Sunday as our Senior Pastor.

And now here we are one year later. And I am sitting here alone. In the midst of a global pandemic, when we haven't had an in-person worship service here in our sanctuary in six months. Doing ministry in front of a camera and over the internet. Working with my fourth senior pastor in less than 14 years. In the midst of an interim season of life and ministry that seems to just keep going and going. Preparing to send my children to "back to school" from our dining room. Watching friends scramble to make ends meet, reinvent their vocations, find childcare, discover and invent meaningful ways of engaging and staying active, and maintain their sanity and equilibrium. Unable to visit my mother as she recovers from a severe stroke. Living in a cultural moment of such deep division and turmoil that it no longer feels pessimistic to ask if there is truly a good way forward. Even when I wrote "Welcome to the Neutral Zone" in the newsletter last fall, or was envisioning a Lenten season "In the Wilderness" with Christy, I never, in my wildest dreams or most cynical anxieties, could have imaged this moment – neither in my own life, nor in our life together as a congregation, as a nation, or as a human family.

Best laid plans, huh?

I guess that is why when I turned to the lectionary to read this week's scripture texts, I read this familiar story of Moses call with a much more sympathetic heart. Think about it. After a season of turmoil and trial – fleeing the country after murdering an Egyptian taskmaster he had seen beating a Hebrew – things had finally settled down for Moses in Midian. He had found a wife in Zipporah. They had a home and had started a family. We don't know exactly how long it was before the burning bush moment – the Bible just said it was "after a long time" – but I have to imagine that Moses was feeling fairly content and settled in what he imagined was his "forever house." When he set out with the flocks that day, I seriously doubt that being a revolutionary was even on his radar. I suspect that he had put his memories of his earlier days in Egypt well behind him and moved on. In all likelihood, he was completely out of touch with what was happening in Egypt by then and probably wanted it to stay that way. And I imagine Zipporah and his family felt even more so. In a phrase that echoes with poignancy for us right now, the scriptures tell us that he had led his flock that day "beyond the wilderness."

But God apparently had other plans, and so we come to the burning bush. Holy ground – Moses knew that even at the time according to the story, which is more than most of us can say when the plans we have made for ourselves and our life get disrupted. Yet even barefoot on holy ground, Moses was still dragged kicking and screaming into a new season of wilderness to bring justice to the children of Israel in Egypt. The objections he makes to God’s call go on for a full chapter, culminating in Exodus 4:13, when Moses finally says simply, “please send someone else!” That’s when we are told God got mad, and pretty much told Moses to suck it up and take Aaron along to help him if he must. And so we see Moses – I imagine wearily and hesitantly – asking leave of his father-in-law Jethro. He takes his family – his wife and sons – with him back to Egypt, and they begin the journey that would lead the Hebrews out Egypt, across the Red Sea, and into the Promised Land (albeit with a 40 year detour through the wilderness that would cost Moses his life along the way).

Turning to our gospel reading, we encounter a similar dynamic. In what is surely one of the most “Holy Ground” moments of Matthew’s gospel, Peter first declares aloud that Jesus is the Messiah for whom they had long been waiting. It is a watershed moment that in many ways sums up the journey in which the disciples had joined Jesus. And as Josh alluded to earlier in the Children’s story, it is a statement pregnant with expectation. Clearly, Peter has a preconceived idea of what his declaration will mean. His vision for the Messiah has set the wheels a-turning in his mind’s eye, and he has already started making plans.

And as we learn in the next scene, those plans don’t include Jesus suffering and dying in Jerusalem. They don’t include a martyred messiah. And so he takes Jesus aside and tries to talk some sense into him – to see things more clearly. And that’s where Jesus gets mad. To the same man whom he had just given a new name and announced that he would give him the “keys of the kingdom,” just four verses later he exclaims, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”¹

Best. Laid. Plans.

It is hard to acknowledge, and to come to grips with the implications, that our best laid plans are just that – *our* plans. We want to believe that we can shape our lives into the form we want them. We like to suppose that we hold the keys to our own destiny. But life doesn’t always work out that way. *Even the best-laid schemes of mice and men go often askew*². Sometimes life throws us a curveball. Sometimes life destroys our designs, and clouds our vision. And sometimes God calls us to ditch our plans and make new ones.

None of us like it. If we did, we would make plans for it to happen. But it is a mistake to think that God is not at work when it happens – that the disruption of our plans is evidence of God’s absence. In fact, it is often in those times of life’s disruption – when our plans are thwarted and our vision cloudy – that we find that we are, in fact, standing on Holy Ground. As noted by commentator Liddy Barlow:

As Jesus names them, divine things include the experiences of betrayal and hypocrisy, the pain of suffering and death, and submission to resurrection mystery outside our control and beyond our understanding. The hardest and lowest things, the inescapable realities of human life: by paradox, these are actually the most divine. To understand God, to set our aim true, we must grasp incarnation...we must cope with the scandalous truth that in

¹ Matthew 16:23 (NRSV)

² From “*To a Mouse*” by Robert Burns

*Christ, God enters into every mean and awful thing, so that what seems like the worst of our world might be the very places where we meet the most holy.*³

I suspect we have all been there. And many of us are there right now. But it's typically only in looking backwards that we are able to see the divine in the disruption of our plans, that we are able to recognize that the wilderness through which we journeyed was covered in Holy Ground, and was blanketed by the presence of the one who has promised to be with us always.

And so I've asked some friends to share their stories about a time in their life when their plans have been thwarted. I trust that in their sharing, you will catch glimpses of the divine, knowing that what's most divine is also often most human...

BENEDICTION

As we come to the end of our time of worship together, I offer these well-loved words of Earle Fike, Jr, as a blessing for our journey, and a reassurance for those times when our best laid plans are laid to waste:

Go now:

*Go in safety,
for you cannot go where God is not.
Go in love,
for love alone endures.
Go with purpose,
and God will honor your dedication.
Go in peace,
for it is the gift of God to those
whose hearts and minds are in Christ Jesus.*

May it be so...

³ "Reflections on the Lectionary." *Christian Century*. Aug. 12, 2020. p. 21.