

GOD'S PLAN FOR US

Do you believe God has a plan for your life? In my years as a pastor I've heard a lot of people say that. They may have been facing some difficult decision. Or maybe they were at a significant crossroad in their life. And they wanted to make their decision, or choose the direction in which they should go, in accord with their conviction that God has a specific plan for their life. They wanted to work with, and not against, that divinely ordained plan.

There are men and women who have said, "I'm trying to figure out who God has planned for me to marry, and then I'll marry. There are people who choose their careers and places of employment based on what they believe God's plan for them is. I even read about one couple who opened up a Christian bookstore, and they prayed fervently for God's guidance and what God's plan was for where exactly they should put some of the bookshelves.

I think that the more uncertainty and chaos there is in life, the more people of faith think that God has to have a plan. Some plan. Any plan, as long as it comes from God. When the craziness and insecurity become so stressful and overwhelming that we can barely handle it, that's when we want to believe—and we try our best to believe—that God is still in charge of things; that God isn't asleep at the wheel as we race toward a cliff and are in danger of plummeting over it. God has a plan. God has to have a plan. Yes please.

Of course, if God does have a plan, we don't usually see it. In the words of Paul Simon, "God only knows; and God makes His plans. The information's unavailable to the mortal man." No, when looking at any given event in the world, or something that happens in our lives, we can't say with absolute certainty that God's plan is being worked out. That's a matter of faith. We choose to believe God has a plan and that God's plan is somehow, in some mysterious way, being worked out. And there are times when we really, truly, desperately need to believe that because if it's not true, we can become overwhelmed with hopelessness and despair.

I think one of the errors we make when we think about what plans God has for the world and for our life is that we tend to limit God to one, single plan.

We believe God has one thing, and only one thing, in mind for us, or one lone, solitary plan for our church. And, of course, it's our job to discover what that one, absolute divine plan is—sort of like trying to find a needle in a haystack—and follow it, because if we don't, we will be going against God's will. And going against God's will is a sin.

I happen to subscribe to another way of thinking in that regard. I believe that God doesn't have one single, solitary plan for my life or your life or the life of the First Congregational Church of Scarborough. No, God is a lot more flexible than that. I believe—and the Bible would back me up on this—I believe that as we strive to discern God's plan for our life and do our best to follow that plan, our efforts, whatever they may be, are improved by, or resisted, or in some way altered, or brought to fruition by the unseen hand of God moving behind the scenes. If I'm right and that is the case; if the Lord has multiple paths that can be taken to accomplish His greater, ultimate plan for creation, unexpected surprises can ensue.

Do you remember the Bible story of Joseph—you know, the boy who had the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat, the coat of many colors? His older brothers were jealous of him, and at one point tried to ruin his life and kill him. Joseph ended up in Egypt and was made a slave; but after a time, because of his prophetic dreams that allowed Egypt to avoid a terrible famine, he found favor with the Pharaoh and became his right hand man.

When Joseph's brothers discovered that Joseph was still alive and now very powerful, they feared for their lives because of the terrible thing they had done to him. But Joseph told them, "Don't be afraid. You meant this for evil, but God meant this for good." Joseph's brothers weren't aware of God's ultimate plan for Joseph, and how God would use their terrible treatment of him to accomplish that plan. But it didn't matter that they didn't know what God was doing behind the scenes, because ultimately, God's plan was accomplished anyway.

It's very comforting and reassuring to know that all of our mess ups, mistakes and misdeeds don't have the last word. Why? Because God is in ultimate control and has a plan, and in the end, when the dust settles and all is said and done, that divine plan is going to be accomplished, no matter what. As the Apostle Paul wrote, "All things work together for good for those who love the Lord." So, whenever we talk about "God's plan," we must somehow leave room for God to be God. In declaring that God has a plan for our lives, for our church or for anything else, we need to allow for God's freedom and authority and what God has in mind, just as God allows for our freedom and sovereignty so that we have room to grow and learn and change.

At this point in what is my annual “Stewardship sermon,” which I preach once a year whether it’s needed or not, I want to get to the theme this year’s campaign: *God’s Plan for Us*. Let me say right now that if you’re expecting or hoping that I’m going to give you a definitive answer as to what God’s plan is for the First Congregational Church of Scarborough, I’m sorry, but you’re going to be sorely disappointed. Because no human being knows the mind of God.

Look at the Israelites who had been exiled from Jerusalem to Babylon. These were God’s own chosen, beloved people, and yet they had no idea—until the prophet Jeremiah revealed it to them—of what God’s plan was for them. They didn’t know at first that God’s blueprint called for seventy years of exile in Babylon, and then God would return them to Jerusalem. In the beginning they were completely ignorant about God’s promise to them and plans for them; but God knew them: “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”

If God has a plan for our church and the future existence of this faith community—and I believe God does have a plan for us—we will never be totally sure of the details of that plan, at least not right away. All we can do is walk in faith and in hope, trusting that God has good things in mind for us and lovingly holds us in the palm of His hand as God’s divine plan unfolds.

The playwright Thornton Wilder once imagined that life in God’s care is like a beautiful tapestry. When viewed from above, from the pattern side, from God’s side, the tapestry has an intricate and magnificent design. The thing is, in our everyday mortal lives, we can’t see the pattern. We live on the reverse side of the tapestry, so what we see is only broken threads and knots. And only here and there, in worship, prayer and other occasional moments of spiritual insight, do we catch a glimpse of the beauty that we will ultimately see fully in the light of heaven, on the other side of eternity. When we receive the gift of Eternal Life, we will finally observe the entire, great design of God’s tapestry, and the full plot of God’s story will be revealed to us.

But we still need to seek out and support the part of God’s plan for us and for our church that we can see and comprehend. We need to, as best we can, work in synch with the part of God’s plan that has been revealed to us in a limited way. And that’s what the First Congregational Church of Scarborough is striving to do through the long-range planning group. We’re trying to envision the future we believe God has in mind for us, and work to help make that vision a reality.

In faith, we believe God’s plan is for our church to exist for years to come and carry on the ministry of Jesus Christ, as each of us use our unique gifts and

talents to help proclaim the Gospel and share God's love in the world. And so we're called to support this faith community with our prayers, our money, our time, our energy, and our participation in the life of our church.

In our gospel reading this morning, Jesus asked, "Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won't you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it? For if you lay the foundation and are not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule you, saying, 'This person began to build and wasn't able to finish.'" (Luke 14:28-30)

Right now we're in the "sit down and estimate the cost" phase of planning, which includes trying to figure out if our plans for this church are in accord with God's plans. We need to figure out where we fit into God's divine plan, and estimate what it's going to cost us so that we will, in Jesus words, "have enough money to complete it." That means taking some time to prayerfully ask ourselves, what am I planning to give financially this year? And is the amount I have in mind in line with what God's plan is for me to give?

Those are the two questions I'm asking you to prayerfully consider this morning and respond to next week on Stewardship Sunday: What am I planning to give financially this year? And is the amount in accordance with what God's plan is for me to give?

My friends, although we may not know the particulars of God's strategy for our church, we do know that a building project is underway here right now. And God is the foreman. Or, at least we should allow God to be the foreman. Because God knows a thing or two, and God has a plan in mind, even if the specific details about it are unavailable to us.

Our part in that divine plan is to estimate the cost and contribute to it's completion with our time, talent and treasure, so that once God is ready to lay down the foundation and start rebuilding our faith community, we can help Him finish the job. And with God's help, we will be up to the task. Amen.