

Sermons at St. Luke's

A sermon preached by The Rev. Anne E. Hodges-Copple, III on Sunday, August 14, 2011.

(Genesis 45:1-15; Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32; Matthew 15:21-28)

Not infrequently I will hear someone make this comment, "I know God has a plan for me." Sometimes this is said with great joy and optimism, maybe as a student heads off to seminary or maybe as a young couple begins their married life together. "I know God has a plan for me" could sometimes be said with a mix of courage and resignation. "I know God has a plan and will take care of me" is often the concluding words of a conversation I've just had with someone who has called the church looking for assistance, a last little coda of hope after a long list of very real trials and tribulations.

Sometimes it comes from a person trying to make sense of a tragic situation. "I've done everything right, yet this terrible thing has happened. I know God has a plan," and then there's that unspoken "but, is God behind this terrible event, having caused it for some inscrutable purpose? Does God really think some possible good could come from this death, this loss of life, this betrayal?" And sometimes a person is just trying to make sense out of confusing alternatives, as if God has prepared the right plan, it's just that it's hidden behind door number one, door number two or door number three. If only we could know the right door.

Well, you know what I think? I think God does not have a plan for you or for me. That kind of God would be too small. "God has a plan for me" implies that I am the center of the universe. Oh, God does love you and loves me, I'm hoping, but loves us, I hope, enough to let us see that a full life is a life lived for and above and beyond our own self interested concerns. Now, your insurance sales person has a plan for you. I assure you Google has a plan for you and is watching your every Web-surfing habit to develop the search engine that will be tailored just for you. Feel better?

Well, Facebook has a plan for you as it gathers and shares more and more of your information with the rest of the world. You didn't know how much you needed to know everything about your friends and neighbors. Facebook definitely has a plan for you. Feel better? Online catalogs have elaborate plans to target their marketing to match your particular purchasing habits. My Kroger card is helping Kroger give me the coupons I need and the incentives I need for coming back. "Thank you, loyal Kroger customer." Media conglomerates have caught on to the wave to move from broadcasting to narrowcasting, tailoring the news to meet your individual tastes and needs. And that's not just limited to advertising. Fox news knows its audience; CNN knows its audience; National Public Radio knows its audience.

God save us from all the plans that are designed just for you and your particular needs and just for me and my particular predilections and prejudices. Because such plans, after all, are not really plans just for you or me. The real plan behind the plan is to make the masses addicted to consumption and self gratification to the windfall profitable benefit of the few.

God does not have a particular plan for you or me. God is far more interesting and far more creative than that. But yes, God does have a plan, a plan of salvation for the whole world. Yes, God does have a plan of reconciliation for the whole world. God has a plan for judging the nations at the end of time. God has a plan for us which is way more interesting and way more demanding than the narcissistic notion that God is rather our personal trainer and life coach with a plan just for me. In fact, the connections between all the readings in this morning's lectionary is that God has a plan for all nations

and all people, and there's nothing we can do to subvert it, though we may cause some significant detours.

In today's readings from Genesis, for instance, we come to this amazing climax of these cycle of stories that began when Abram and Sarai left for Ur at the urging, at the invitation of God. God invites Abraham and Sarah to this unfolding journey of a plan that this elderly, childless couple will have to follow with courage, with mistakes and with lots of detours. Today's reading brings us to Joseph, son of Jacob and Rachel, grandson of Isaac and Rebekah, great-grandson of Abraham of Sarah. Joseph continues this family legacy of following a circuitous path, a geographical and spiritual journey with good intentions, evil interruptions and of course, divine intervention.

Last week, if you recall, in Chapter 37 of Genesis, Joseph was sold into slavery by his ten older, resentful, jealous half brothers. Remember those chilling words when his brothers saw their young brother coming across the horizon, "Here comes the dreamer. Let us kill him." Today, eight chapters and many decades later, we read how Joseph is now a mighty ruler in Egypt. There's a terrible famine in Canaan and Egypt. His brothers arrive begging for food due to this famine, and as we might say in the vernacular of the day, after Joseph "messes" with his brothers sending them back and forth between Egypt and Canaan making them believe their lives are at stake, Joseph finally reveals himself to his astonished and terrified siblings. "Fear not, do not be distressed or angry with yourselves. God sent me before you to preserve life. It was not you who sent me here, but God."

Where we might have expected revenge, we find reconciliation. Where there had been death, there is life. Where there had been starvation, there is food. Joseph tells his brothers that God has planned this all out, but let's make careful nuanced reading of this. God did not tell Judah and his brothers to throw their bratty little brother in the pit and threaten to kill him. Those half brothers knew exactly what they were doing. Joseph is not saying, "Hey, your murderous intention toward me which broke our father's heart and sent me into exile for years, and including a prison stint, were all parts of God's plan, and you brothers were just unwilling puppets." Joseph is recognizing that God has brought good out of their evil.

No matter how much we might think our bad decisions or the evil actions of others will thwart God's will, God's plan for salvation will prevail. God's will for good to overcome evil will prevail. And in fact, this is exactly what Joseph tells his brothers in the very last verses of Genesis, Chapter 50. After they've all moved to Egypt and become prosperous beyond their wildest dreams, when Jacob dies, the father, the patriarch, those older brothers are once again nervous that maybe Joseph has been harboring a grudge against them all these years. An entirely reasonable fear. When parents die, old history, old stories are recalled, all kinds of emotions, for better, for worse, are stirred up when a loved one passes.

So the brothers approach Joseph with great trepidation, asking his forgiveness. They say to Joseph, "Our father, Jacob, gave this instruction before he died. 'Say to Joseph, I beg you, forgive the crimes of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you. Now, therefore, please forgive the crimes of the servants of the God, your father.'" Joseph wept when they spoke to him, then his brothers also wept, fell down before them and said, "We are here as your slaves." But Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid. Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do me harm, God intended it for good in order to preserve a numerous people as he is doing today."

God doesn't plan for us to mess up, it's just that God has every reason to expect that we will. We mess up our lives, we mess up the lives of others, but we cannot deter God's plan to continually seek us out, forgive us, and if we are willing to repent and return to the Lord, God's plan is to provide for us abundantly. If you read the entire Joseph cycle, Chapters 37 through 50, and I hope you will, you will

see this pattern over and over. A pattern of betrayals, rescues, failings and faithfulness. Human failings and the faithfulness of God.

I am struck by one particular detail from this morning's reading of the reconciliation between the brothers. Joseph does not forgive his brothers because they've asked for it. They haven't yet asked for it. Joseph takes the initiative. He begins the process of reconciliation, albeit in a manipulative way. Because he realizes at some place deep within his heart forgiving his brothers, even though they have not yet asked forgiveness, is also part of God's plan. God's plan is for love to overcome evil, and forgiveness to swallow up endless cycles of revenge.

In the Epistle, Paul argues that despite the fact that Jews rejected Jesus as the Messiah, God has not rejected the Jews. Their rejection was all part of God's plan to bring the Gospel to the Gentiles. And ultimately this plan still includes the salvation of the Jews, all part of God's plan. When we actively seek understanding and acceptance between Christians and Jews, we are accepting God's invitation to be part of God's plan.

But what of the Gospel reading? I hope that bothered you just a little bit. Is that the Jesus that you're familiar with? Who is this harsh sounding Jesus who essentially calls this desperate mother of a tormented daughter a dog? Yet harsh as it sounds, what Jesus is saying is true. His mission is to the Jews, and being the son of God, he should know. Turning away from this pesky and irritating woman, he tells his disciples, "I was sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." In other words, "I am the Jewish messiah. I am here to announce the kingdom of God to the Jews." That's God's plan, Jesus is saying. He's been sent by God to preach the kingdom to the descendents of Joseph and his eleven brothers, the twelve tribes of Israel.

Here's the thing - there's more to God's plan and Jesus knows it. As jarring as this scene is, Jesus knows exactly what he is doing. In calling this woman a dog, he is saying out loud what his disciples are thinking. They think this woman is unworthy and unclean. Instead of hearing disdain and condescension, I believe Jesus is being wry and sardonic for the sake of his disciples, with a wink to the wise and discerning Canaanite woman. It's the Canaanite woman who addresses Jesus as Lord, son of David. She knows and accepts who Jesus is even though the disciples are still trying to figure it out and the Sadducees and the Pharisees who should have recognized him have rejected him.

This is all according to God's plan that it will be the outsiders who see what the insiders are blind to. In a symbolic and metaphorical way by kneeling at his feet, the woman agrees with Jesus, acquiesces to this second-class status, "That's right. I'm an outsider. I'm a stranger. My very being is offensive and unclean to your culture, your rules and your upbringing. Even so, I believe the abundant mercy of God has the capacity to extend even to me." It is Jesus' response to this woman that is shocking and offensive to the disciples. They could not have anticipated. "Woman, great is your faith. Go, your daughter is healed." Jesus, who had just so recently chided his beloved disciple Peter for his lack of faith, now praises and rewards the faith of a social and religious outcast. This is God's plan.

Did Jesus have a change of heart? I think not. Because at the very end of the Gospel according to Matthew, Jesus gives his disciple the great commission commanding his disciples to go out to the ends of the earth baptizing and making disciples of all nations of the earth, all peoples of the earth. Those who previously have been considered outside are now invited into the healing embrace of Jesus and to the wide, open communion table of God. In what looks like a change of heart, Jesus is showing his disciples, then and now, the plan of salvation to welcome all people into the household of God will necessitate a change of heart in all of us, and probably more than once. Our hearts will be changed over and over and over whenever we ask the not so simple question, "Who is my neighbor?"

Is it the undocumented salutorian from Riverside High School? Is it the gay couple who seeks God's blessing upon their marriage? Is it the Somalian mother forced to abandon her starving child by the side of the road as she flees famine and persecution in her homeland?

It is God's plan. It is the dream of God to bring all peoples of the earth back into one reconciled family as it was intended from the beginning of creation. It is God's plan in Jesus to make the ethnic ancestors of the people of Israel our spiritual ancestors, and that all who accept the invitation of baptism move beyond questions like "What is God doing for me" into a call that can only be answered by "What can I do today for God and for God's people?" The question is not so much what has God in mind for me as how can I grow more and more into serving the will of God? We are all unworthy to eat the crumbs under the Lord's table. We are all outsiders, we are all aliens who are welcomed into God's promises of forgiveness and new life.

God has a plan for salvation and from freedom from the tyranny of fear that wants to dominate and control our lives. And it seems to me that once again our country and the world is in a battle between the voices who pander to our fears for our own narrow self interests and voices that call us to our best and grandest visions for the welfare of all people. God has an invitation for each of us, and I guarantee you it is a completely personalized God-handwritten invitation with your name on it. But the grand, beautiful though sometimes inscrutable plan is to bring each one of us into one family and one kingdom of love, the reign of justice and mercy. That's the invitation, it's up to you to RSVP. Note, people have tended not to RSVP very much lately. It's falling out of favor. Decline the RSVP at your own risk.

How you RSVP is between you and God, but I will make note that every ministry of this parish, of our diocese, of our international communion will make you some excellent opportunities to RSVP. Start with the members of your own household. But while you're at it, Episcopal Relief and Development would be happy to help you RSVP to the needs of our brothers and sisters crowding the refugee camps along the border of Somalia. Urban Ministry of Durham and Housing for New Hope would be happy to take your RSVP in the form of time and talent as well as treasure. You are eagerly invited to help form the nucleus of a new ministry within this parish to reach out to people who are re-entering our community after a time of incarceration. Be reconciled with your brothers and your sisters wherever they are, whatever they've done. That is God's plan for all of us. Amen.