

Get a Plan”
Message for “5 Resolutions You Can Keep” series
January 23, 2011

Text: Matthew 4:12-23

Proverbs 16:9 says: “The human mind plans the way, but the Lord directs the steps.” (NRSV)

Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase, *The Message*, puts it thus: “We plan the way we want to live, but only God makes us able to live it.”

My pastoral colleague from Burlingame, Rev. Dave Schlager, was often fond of quoting what I later learned was a Yiddish proverb: “We plan; God laughs!” Rabbi Sherre Hirsch put out a book by the same title in 2009 -- a book which outlines “Ten Steps to Finding Your Divine Path When Life is Not Turning Out Like You Wanted.” Apparently her ministry, as ours, and like the Bible (as she points out) is full of stories of people who plan for one outcome, and get another. It’s a recurring theme in humanity. Do you agree? (*show of hands! Can you share an example with a neighbor?*) I expect some of those examples are amusing and thrilling, and others are really painful. And let me make it clear here: I don’t believe God laughs at our suffering; quite the contrary. The point of Hirsch’s book is that foiled plans and disappointments are often a part of our shared experience, not because God is vicious or vindictive or singling us out. We just can’t see as far down the road; we are limited, and life happens, and in a world where greed and selfishness and illness and accidents are present, we make our way along by grace.

So how can Michael and I be so audacious as to suggest that “Get a Plan” is one of the “Resolutions You Can Keep?”

To quote the proverb again: “The human mind plans the way, but

the Lord directs the steps.” Why plan at all, if human plans don’t go as planned?

Well, you business minds, tell us: what happens when there is no plan? (*responses*) You don’t end up anywhere, you get stuck, inertia takes over, your energies are wasted. And you can’t keep doing the same thing and expect different results; that’s the definition of what? (*response: insanity, according to Albert Einstein*). We seem to know this.

So what does the second half of the proverb mean -- “but the Lord directs the steps,” or “only God makes us able to live it”? Let’s turn to today’s gospel reading.

Many of us are familiar with the stories of Jesus’ calling his disciples, especially the Big Four -- Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John, the fishermen to whom Jesus said, “Follow me,” and they “left their nets and followed him.” Maybe it’s because such a response seems so foreign to our own experience and inclinations; maybe it’s because we’ve heard the story so many times, so we stop paying too much attention to the details. For whatever reason, what often fails to catch our attention is the introduction to this passage -- the fact that it’s the arrest of John the Baptist that sets Jesus into action. If you read it in its context, at least as Matthew tells the story, it’s as if Jesus has been waiting for a sign from God. Jesus is baptized, he goes out into the wilderness for forty days and spars with Satan; and then, when he hears that Herod has arrested John, Jesus heads out -- not on a rescue mission, as a movie maker might like the story to unfold (remember, John and Jesus were cousins once or twice removed, so this could have made sense!). As far as the scripture tells us, John and Jesus never saw each other again. But John’s arrest is yet a signal to Jesus: it’s time to hit the road, to get started with his public ministry.

It’s a sign and it’s a foreshadowing of what was to come: like John, Jesus would make a splash, and get himself arrested -- and, like John, get himself killed.

To summarize, it looks like Jesus' plan was pretty simple:

1. Get centered in who you are as a chosen child of God -- listen and wait
2. Get a team together
3. Proclaim the good news and heal
4. Accept the consequences

John's disciples come to Jesus later asking: "Are you the one?" Jesus' response is: the lame walk, the blind see, and blessed are those who hear (Luke 7:19-23). In other words: pay attention, discern; God is at work here! I'm following God's plan!

You see, it's not that planning is ridiculous. Jesus himself says: who among you would build and not calculate the cost (Luke 14:28-30)? And again he tells a parable of the foolish man who built his house upon sand, and the wise man who built his house upon a rock (Matthew 7:24-27) (*see if anyone will sing the song from Sunday school/Family Camp!*).

The wise man built his house upon the rock

The wise man built his house upon the rock

The wise man built his house upon the rock

And the rain came tumbling down

Oh, the rain came down

And the floods came up

The rain came down

And the floods came up

The rain came down
And the floods came up
And the wise man's house stood firm.

The foolish man built his house upon the sand
The foolish man built his house upon the sand
The foolish man built his house upon the sand
And the rain came tumbling down

Oh, the rain came down
And the floods came up
The rain came down
And the floods came up
The rain came down
And the floods came up
And the foolish man's house went "splat!" [clap hands
once]

So, build your house on the Lord Jesus Christ
Build your house on the Lord Jesus Christ
Build your house on the Lord Jesus Christ

And the blessings will come down

Oh, the blessings come down

As your prayers go up

The blessings come down

As your prayers go up

The blessings come down

As your prayers go up

So build your house on the Lord Jesus Christ.

The difference is what you're basing your plan on: your own ideas, your own preferences, or what God wants, God's purposes?

This is part of what we talked about yesterday at the ChanGe Conference -- and I hope you'll join me in prayer for our congregation as we continue the process.

We are in the church season of Epiphany, the scriptures of which focus on the ways God is revealed to us: in stars, dreams, voices from heaven, as we trace events in the life of Jesus in which who he is came to light to others. We read these stories and reflect on the ways that God continues to be revealed to us, shedding light on our lives and our place in God's plan.

For eleven years now, a group of women in this congregation has gathered for a weekend at Villa Maria del Mar, a beautiful retreat center in Santa Cruz overlooking the ocean. Some women have gone every single year, and others come and go, making it a different group each magical time. They gather to rest, play, pray, touch base, build community, and listen to

God. Over the years, some have shared openly about significant events in their life's journey; others feel free to participate quietly, knowing that this a safe setting to be gregarious or to be silent, to engage in group activities or to go off by oneself. Last weekend, blessed abundantly with dazzling clear skies and unseasonably warm beach weather, the group spent a lot of time outside enjoying the providence of nature as we meditated on the creation story from the book of Genesis. Some of the more adventurous explored expressing themselves through gourd art, which resulted in an amazing variety of pieces decorating our worship space. I asked our sisters in Christ what they heard God say to them over this weekend; responses included:

(responses here)

"Beautiful weather...fabulous setting...splendid ocean...loving friends...fine program...special music...loving support."

"The retreat was an opportunity to reflect on gratitude, which was reflected in the beauty of hearts, turned toward our Lord."

"Shine!"

"The dogs and owners playing on the beach had a stress-reducing effect, and the beauty of the setting opened me more to God."

"I prayed more this weekend than I think I ever have in my life."

I also asked the participants who would be here today (*wave them up!*) to share with you the benediction song that I taught them, the words of which are these:

May your heart find grace, may your soul know peace,

May your mind be renewed.

And may your eyes see the light, may your ears hear the glory

of Jesus Christ in our midst. (*Benediction* by Jeff Johnson, ©
2002 Sola Scriptura Songs)

(Women to sing!)

Like the call Jesus answered and the call he issued to his disciples, when we line our plans up with God's larger plan, it's likely to be difficult. It's likely to cost us something. But God provides strength for the journey, and more amazing things than we thought we were capable of under our own power and our own plans, if only we will go in God's direction. And we do well to keep our ears and eyes and hearts open, so that we may remain both centered and flexible to the winds of the Spirit and of change.

May you find grace, peace, light, and renewal in the call of Jesus to follow and glorify him. Amen.