

SOUNDS LIKE A PLAN

A Sermon for the Second Sunday after Christmas, January 3, 2010

Text: Ephesians 1:3-14

This is how it is, Paul writes. This is how it was supposed to be. Now it has happened, just as it was ordained. It's all working according to plan.

"God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, has blessed us *in Christ* with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he *chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world* to be holy and blameless before him in love."

Chose us before the foundation of the world. And made it happen through Jesus Christ.

Because "in him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses," etc. "With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time," etc.

After a few decades of preaching about Jesus Christ, Paul was still amazed at how perfectly everything was playing out, according to God's will. Jesus had to come, he had to die, he had to rise, we had to hear and believe, we had to receive an inheritance that was settled on us already by God before the world began.

Sounded like a plan. A plan that spanned thousands of years.

The evangelist, St. John, says the same thing. The incarnation of Jesus Christ was in the works long before he was born. It started in the beginning, when the "Word"—that's Jesus—was with God. In fact, he says, "everything came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people."

Sounds like a plan. Especially the part about how God sent a man to testify to the light, and get everyone ready for Jesus—a man named John. "He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. According to plan.

Then the word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.

Sounds like a plan.

Except, I'm not so sure I agree. It seems very generous of St. Paul and St. John to call that a plan.

We've read the Bible. The impression we get is that at nearly every step of the way, this "plan," if you can call it that, does not sound like a plan at all.

Mostly, it sounds like a muddle.

From the garden of Eden, where things did not according to plan for more than a few days; to the days of Noah, when God went back to the drawing board; to Abraham and Sarah, who

almost didn't even have a child, and then almost killed him; to Moses, who got so many things wrong, even had to be given the ten commandments twice; to David, whose scandalous marriage to Bathsheba produced a descendant named Jesus; things mostly went wrong, and then God made the best of a bad situation. The prophet Jeremiah refers to Israel as "the chief of nations," but he had to be joking—they had no prospects at all, really, much less dominion.

And then, this Jesus Christ who impresses Paul and John so? Well, very little about him seemed to be well planned. Where was he from? Bethlehem or Nazareth? Make up your mind. Judah or Galilee? What was he, anyway? Carpenter, teacher? Why didn't he do graduate studies, if he was supposed to be a top rabbi? And why waste him already at the age of 33, just because some others were jealous?

And if you were going to raise him from the dead, couldn't this have waited until photography had been invented?

Sounds like a plan? I don't think so.

But this is Paul's witness. This is John's story line. Jesus is what God has had in mind, all along. For the sake of the unity of the world. For the forgiveness of our sins. So we could all get on with love and stop being enemies. God wanted this to happen.

And the reason it doesn't sound like a plan to us is because, as Isaiah quotes the Lord, "My thoughts are not your thoughts; nor are my ways your ways." We could paraphrase: "My plans are not your plans."

The salvation which God accomplishes does not sound like a plan to us, because it does not sound like our sort of plan.

People make plans like, "If only I could control everyone," or "If everyone would just listen to me and do I say," etc. We would like to get ahold of certain people and give them a good shake and talk some sense into them and make them straighten out and fly right. We plan in order to control the outcomes.

But God's plan . . . is for our freedom. God's plan is for us to have joy and gladness. God's plan for us is light and life and peace.

So all along, since the beginning, since people set themselves against one another, cheated each other, killed each other, and so on . . . God worked against the grain to bring people liberty through the forgiveness of sins.

If you haven't seen the movie "Invictus," you should. Listen to Nelson Mandela explaining to people who want justice and deserve justice, that they *must forgive*. That's against the grain of human thinking, but it is the way God has been from the beginning, from before time. That is the unifying characteristic of the God who revealed himself in Jesus Christ—that he alone forgives sins. So when, in Jesus Christ, the forgiveness of sins is preached for all humanity, both Jew and Greek, Paul and John noticed, and said: "Sounds like a plan." Sounds like God's plan.

Not that nothing should ever go wrong. But that we should know that, in this world in which things go wrong, the power of God is at work to redeem us from everything that is wrong. For we are all his children.

There is a conventional simile that is sometimes used to talk about God's plan is at work in our lives. People sometimes say that, when life *looks* like a muddle, when everything is every which way and nothing makes sense, it is as if we are seeing the back of a piece of needlework, where there are all sorts of ends of thread in different colors, in a jumble. If we turn it over, we will see that everything has been working together just the way God wants it to, for our good. Everything fits into a pattern determined by God.

I think Paul and John would not have used such an image, because it gives the impression that God wants each thing that happens to happen, including, for example, having my mother die 45 years ago.

God's plan for us, Paul and John say, is not that we should go to seminary because it is God's will, or turn right at the second light because it is God's will. God's plan for us is to free us from everything that binds us, beginning with our sin. That is the plan that is revealed in the cross—and it is not on the other side of the stitching, it is right here in the middle of our suffering and pain and confusion. Right in our midst, God's only Son died for our sins and the sins of all, so that we might all be drawn to God and love one another freely. So that we might dance, or whatever, and be merry. And that all should be satisfied with God's bounty.

From the beginning, God has wanted it to be so. Amen.

