

Out of Control...in a Good Way

Isaiah 55:8-11

We had so wanted to be in the sanctuary this morning. Our Board of Trustees and facilities team and our outside contractors have been working so hard—for weeks, months—to be ready for ‘regular’ worship on November 7. We announced it, we publicized it; you may even have gotten a postcard in the mail telling you it would happen. We knew all about how you have to allow for construction projects these days. But we had a detailed daily schedule of workflow that told us we’d have just enough time to re-place the organ pipes, finish new flooring, paint, lighting, audio-visual system, and a hair’s breadth of room for rehearsal before this morning.

Today is communion Sunday, All Saints’ Sunday. A whole class of young people is ready to be confirmed at the 10:00 service this morning. Today, we thought, would be the perfect day to re-enter that space that is familiar to us, and that has held so many of this church’s holy moments.

And then...life happened. Not terrible stuff, just life. A break-through COVID case. A few of the floor tiles got broken. The organ tuning got delayed because of a family emergency. You know...stuff.

‘It’s OK,’ we said. ‘We can still do it.’ And we scrambled harder to make our plan work. We demanded a little more of ourselves, and each other. We’ve had some pretty testy conversations around here in the last week or two. I will confess to you, and to my colleagues on the church’s staff, that I have not been my best self. *We have to get this done*, I think we all thought. We’ll go back and be nice to each other later.

Finally, just a few days ago, we declared defeat. Here we are, back in Creekside for one more week. November 14 seems like not quite as perfect a day to re-enter the Sanctuary, but it will be fine. I imagine—I hope—you will not leave the church, or your faith, because of a one-week delay in completing our plans.

Our plans.

Planning is how organized, efficient, productive people live. Good business managers are good planners. Good students are good planners. Good parents and dinner hosts and social activists are good planners. *Executing the plan* is what we hold ourselves and each other accountable to. It’s how we get things done: we hold on to the plan even when stuff happens, even if we have to temporarily put aside our best selves to see get the plan done.

How’s that working for *you*?

If we imagine that God’s mind works anything like ours (and I’m not sure it does), planning seems like it’s not always successful for God either. Defeats and failures come early and often in our story of God’s life. Adam and Eve--who couldn’t follow the one rule they were given about edible foods in the Garden of Eden. Next generation: Cain and Abel, whose sibling squabbles

ramped up shockingly fast. Then comes the story of Noah, a whole humanity gone wrong. ‘I get it,’ God said. ‘I understand now who you people are, that you’re not always going to do things my way. I won’t lose my temper again, I promise. Here’s a rainbow.’

And then what’s the first story after that? The Tower of Babel, one more time when the people got it all wrong, misunderstood again what a life of faith was supposed to look like. Whatever God was thinking, whatever plan God had at creation, for a humanity that would walk in peace on an earth created for flourishing--the plan seems to have gone awry pretty quickly.

Maybe the question for God is the same as it is for us. What do we do, who shall we be, when our plans are thwarted—by circumstances, or a virus, or when someone just refuses to take their place in our plan?

There’s a story in the Book of Exodus when Moses goes up the mountain to receive what God wants to say to a people who have been led out of slavery and onto a road that was supposed to be the freeway to the promised land. Moses puts his ear right next to God’s mouth, so that he can hear; and in a beautiful, enlightened moment, the plan is revealed. Moses comes back down the mountain with Ten Commandments in hand. They’re inscribed on stones so that they will be indestructible, so they will last forever, so no one will forget. A plan for how the people will live—together, in peace with one another and with the God who has saved them. The people will be so glad to have this! Moses makes his way down the mountain carefully, careful not to drop or break those heavy stone tablets.

Do you remember what happens next? Moses arrives back in the camp and the Israelites have lost their faith—in him and in God. They’ve grown impatient. Waiting *this* long for Moses to come back was not *their* plan. So they’d taken things into their own hands, altered the plan in a way that made sense to them. Melted down their jewelry and fashioned it into a golden calf, which looked a lot like some other god who was more available. When he saw that Brand X substitute, Moses was furious. So angry, that he smashed those stone tablets onto the ground—the real ones, with actual words from God. They shattered into a thousand pieces.

I can feel the tension in this scene; can’t you? The people’s improvised plan exposed for the shallow, substance-less thing it was. The image of Moses’ leader-ly composure wrecked. God’s hope and confidence in these people he’d called and rescued, disappointed again. Shame and defeat, the stink of failure, all around.

Later (I wonder how much later) Moses trudged back up the mountain to get the commandments again.

There’s a piece of Jewish midrash that says that later, when the people of Israel built the Ark that would carry the commandments through the wilderness and into the promised land, Moses put in that big wooden box not only the second, undamaged set of stone tablets; but he also placed in the box, carefully and lovingly, the broken pieces from the first set of those commandments. To remind the people that there is great power in remembering that disappointment and failure and loss also have a place in the narrative of our lives. Our life together.

I don't think the lesson here is to not ever make plans. It's to hold our plans lightly, to let them go when the cost of holding on is too high. When accomplishing our objectives, on our time frame, starts to create collateral damage. When it starts to look like there might be a bigger picture than the one we had in our heads.

'My plans aren't your plans,' God said to Isaiah in the passage we read this morning. 'Your way of doing things might have to give way from time to time.'

But then—and I love this part—it's like God gets a little philosophical with Isaiah. Reflects on the lessons even God has learned along the way.

*Just as the rain and the snow come down from the sky
and don't return there without watering the earth,*

...

*so is my word that comes from my mouth;
it does not return to me empty.
Instead, it does what I want,
and accomplishes what I intend.*

And that is true...in time...with patience...not always according to the plan.

We can wait.