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Isaiah 6:1-8; Luke 5:1-11

IMPROVISATION

Do you believe God has a plan for your life? There are some people who believe that God has a specific blueprint for what will happen in their lives. Some people believe that this plan is quite specific—that there is a specific person God plans for them to meet and to marry, that God has a specific plan for what university they will attend or what job they will get. The belief that there is a set blueprint for their lives is why some people will respond to upsetting or painful situations with statements like: “it must be part of God’s plan,” or this other statement you’ve likely heard, “everything happens for a reason.” Statements such as these are ways some people reassure themselves that even when circumstances seem perplexing or tragic, it is all part of God’s plan for their lives.

But *does* God have a blueprint for our lives? Has God mapped out our lives in advance? Does God know everything that is going to happen to us and the choices we will make? It seems to me that such a belief turns us into little more than puppets. What about our capacity to respond to God’s goodness or *not* to respond to God’s goodness? What about our freedom to choose?

Both of today’s scripture readings are about people who chose to respond to God’s call. For it to be a real choice, there had to be the freedom to say yes or no. And that means—think about this—for it to be a real choice, even God couldn’t have known the outcome.

In the first reading, the prophet Isaiah has a vision of standing in the throne room of God. It is an awesome depiction of God’s holiness and majesty. The prophet is understandably intimidated. But God needs someone to go and proclaim a difficult message to the people of

God. And so seated on the throne, surrounded by all those strange heavenly creatures, God asks a question aloud, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?”

Let’s ponder that question for a second. It is possible that this was the kind of question asked when the answer is really clear. Like when your kids start wrestling in the living room and things are knocked over and the room is trashed. And when you walk in and witness the carnage you look your children in the eye and ask, “Now, who’s going to pick up this mess?” There is only one right answer and everyone knows what it is.

Maybe God asked that kind of question, looking Isaiah right in the eye, asking “whom shall I send,” when God knew all along that it was going to be Isaiah. But what if God *didn’t* know? What if God asked the question not knowing who would respond? God asks the question and then waits. And hearing this question, Isaiah felt called, compelled, moved to offer himself. That would mean there wasn’t a blueprint; there was a choice.

Let’s consider our second story today—the passage from Luke’s gospel about the calling of the disciples. Now maybe Jesus hung out on the shoreline for some days, watching and observing the fishermen until he knew exactly which ones he wanted for his disciples. But not one of the gospel accounts gives us any reason to believe Jesus knew much about the disciples before he called them. What if Jesus just picked them all at random? What if Jesus was like: “I’ll take you, and you, and yeah, you’ll do. How many does that make? Oh, we need one more. Ok, well, how about you? You all come follow me.” The idea that he just randomly picked twelve guys, with no foreordained plan for which twelve guys or whether they would even agree to follow him, pretty much dispels the notion of a blueprint. The disciples made a choice.

What if instead of a blueprint, God gives us a theme? What if instead of a detailed plan for how our lives will unfold, what if God instead gives us an over-arching theme for our lives.

A theme is a more general set of principles and values that guide our lives. That theme is rehearsed on the day of our baptism, when God's love for us is declared and when we are called to follow the way of Jesus Christ. Rather than living out a pre-ordained plan God has for us, what if we consider our lives as an unmapped journey in which every single day we are faced with all manner of choices. And then we choose whether to be guided by the theme God has given us. Will we be guided by the theme of love and compassion? Will we be guided by the theme of mercy and justice? Will we be guided by the theme of generosity and gratitude? Will we dwell in the goodness of God's love? Will we answer the call to walk the way of Jesus Christ?

We are given a starting point for our lives—it's the starting point for every day of our lives. That starting point is the way of Jesus Christ and the love of God. And the call to us is to live in and to live out this theme. How you in all your uniqueness will answer this call each and every day of your life will be different from how the person next to you answers the call. And the ways you choose to live in and live out the theme is what gives shape to your life and makes your life something beautiful.

Perhaps we might consider the life of faith a bit like Jazz improvisation. Improvisation in Jazz is when the musicians spontaneously create fresh melodies on the spot. But it's not just random sounds. Jazz musician Wynton Marsalis explains that "In Jazz, improvisation isn't a matter of just making any ol' thing up. Jazz, like any language, has its own grammar and vocabulary. There's no right or wrong, just some choices that are better than others"

Jazz improvisation depends on the contours of the original theme. The musicians hear the theme and then spontaneously create their own variations.

Imagine your life as a Jazz piece. God has created the theme with its own vocabulary and grammar. The theme is love and mercy, compassion and justice, generosity and joy. And God calls out “Who will join me? Whom shall I send? And you, like the prophet Isaiah before you, you are moved to say, “Here am I!” Like the prophet Isaiah, like Jesus’ twelve disciples, we are given the choice. And when we answer the call, we add our unique sound, improvising on the theme we’ve been given. Do we know where this is going? No! There’s no blueprint! But there’s a theme. That’s what improvising is all about! And it’s a different tune today than it will be tomorrow. We keep listening to the contours of the theme, trying to add our own creative improvisation on it by how we love and care and serve. We face choices. We face hardships. We face heartbreak. We experience successes and achievements. And all of these become--not parts of a blueprint--but occasions for improvisation on the theme God has given to us: how in these circumstances will we walk the way of Jesus Christ? How in these circumstances will we dwell in the love of God?

We do not always play beautiful music. Sometimes we hit the wrong note. Or we miss a beat. Wynton Marsalis reminds us that in the realm of improvisation, “some choices are better than others.” But the music keeps playing and the call keeps coming to us: “Follow me. Join me in this song.”

Does God have a plan for your life? Absolutely! The plan is for you to know the love of God and to follow Jesus on the way of love. And how you live that out, is your improvisation on that life-giving theme.