

SAVED THROUGH FAITH OR THROUGH PLANNING?

1 Thessalonians 4: 13-18, Matthew 25: 1-13

"Let's just go and see where it takes us!" Sarah and Jim had decided to turn their holiday into a road trip. But their road trip was turning out to be anything but a holiday. The problem was that they didn't see eye to eye when it came to planning. Sarah liked to think that holiday time was a time to just let go and let be. It shouldn't involve too much planning. "Let's just head out, Jim, and figure things out as we go. Why do we have to expend all this time and effort plodding maps in detail and booking every motel or bed & breakfast from here to Tim-Buck-Too?!" But Jim loved to plan. He loved to look at various maps, consider every possible route and every possible stop along the way. "I just don't want to get burned, Sarah. I like being organized and prepared. I like to know where I'm going and how long it will take me to get there, in advance. I like to know where I'm going to stay and how much time I have available to stay there. It's just too stressful to have to leave it to chance or blind faith."

I don't know whatever happened to Sarah's and Jim's road trip, but I'm sure some of us can relate to their arguing, can't we? There is blind faith and there is planning and there is everything in between. And sometimes, depending on the situation, there is a different side of us that comes to the fore. My parents, for instance, can't believe what an organized planner I've become, especially as I was very disorganized when I was growing up, someone totally scattered about the details of life. It's like a whole other side of me has come to life, waiting for the right circumstances to bring it forth.

However, it's also true that some of us are more one type of person than another. There are some of us who need to plan. We need to be organized and prepared, otherwise we feel really anxious. Of course, this kind of thing can become excessive, even obsessive. How many people there are in our society who are being treated clinically for anxiety disorder because they cannot let go and let be in their lives sufficiently. Then there are some of us who just need to have breathing room when it comes to life's demanding schedules. There are some of us who can't absorb all the details and need to find our way more in the moment than having it all worked out in advance.

One word to define Jim in our story is that he is a planner. He likes to have the details worked out as much in advance as possible. He likes to be prepared. One word to define Sarah is spontaneity, or as some call it: blind faith. She wants to be free to let go and let be, to trust that things will fall into place at the time. But is there one way that is better than another? Or do we have to make a choice between them? What does the bible have to say, especially as it relates to more pressing life concerns?

First, the idea that faith must be blind to be real faith is wrong. Nowhere in the bible has faith ever been promoted as "blind" by definition. Second, even though planning may be a good and sensible way to live life, it may also distort life from what it can and ought to be. In so many of the most important dimensions of life, planning can be limited at best and constricting at worst. How can we be more intentional in our faith and more open to possibilities beyond any planning?

Let's delve into our scripture readings for some guidance, and let's start with our gospel reading first. In Matthew 25, Jesus tells a series of parables. He tells these parables just ahead of his arrest and crucifixion. These parables are intended to teach his disciples something about how they ought to live in uncertain and difficult times. How are they to live with faith and hope when they will be on their own, with no certainty or knowledge of when Christ will return? Will their faith hold out? Will their hope grow dim? Will they be able to endure without falling into hopelessness and despair?

In this first parable, there are ten bridesmaids. They are waiting for the bridegroom to come home. Will he come during daylight, before the sun sets? Five of the bridesmaids are sure he will return soon. They won't need the oil for their lamps in order to create light for the bridegroom's arrival. And so, they don't plan for the worst-case scenario – the bridegroom coming so late it will be totally dark. The other five don't want to take any chances. They take the time and make the effort to plan for whatever may happen. They have oil for their lamps in case the bridegroom comes super late.

And what happens? Sure enough, the bridegroom is delayed. In fact, he is so delayed that all the bridesmaids fall asleep. Then suddenly they hear him coming. They wake with a start. It's totally dark. "Quick get the lamps and light them!" Oh no, the five without oil can't light their lamps. They ask those with oil whether they can borrow some. "Well," they're told, "we have enough for ourselves, but not enough for you. Run to the market and get some for yourselves." Unfortunately, by the time they find a dealer who can sell them oil in the middle of the night, and by the time they return, it's too late. The party has come and gone, and the event is almost over. They've missed out. Why? Because they were not prepared, they had not planned, they were not equipped for the worst-case scenario.

So then, what are we to learn from this parable? Faith is not just something you possess. You have to cultivate it. You have to nurture it. And this is especially the case when you go through the difficult times in your life. It is also the case when there are times you are upset at the way life has worked out, or, when you are going through a dry spell in your faith and the light of your hope has grown dim. You need to have fuel in your soul to hold out, to wait meaningfully and constructively, to build again, to persevere, so that

God's blessing can come to you in the end. Planning is important with faith. Cultivating and nurturing your faith and hope is essential. Through worship and meditation, through prayer, through fellowship and spiritual friendship, through spiritual guidance and direction, you need to prepare for the long haul, the worst-case scenario; otherwise, what will happen? Your faith will shrink. Your hope will evaporate. You will lose any sense of God or a higher purpose. You will become swallowed up by worries and troubles. That's the message of the parable.

On the other hand, we receive a different emphasis in our reading from Paul's letter to the Christians in Thessalonica. Here, the issue is not planning. In fact, planning can be very limited. As much as you do your part, who can fully plan for sickness and death? Who can plan for accidents and misfortunes? Sure, we can do some things, but too many things we can do little about.

In this passage, Paul must address those who anticipated Christ's return in their lifetimes. It didn't happen for some at the time of this letter. They had died. What would happen to them? How did this fit into the overall plan? What Paul tries to explain to them is that there are many things that will remain a mystery to us. And this is also why faith and hope are important for us as Christians. We entrust our lives and our destinies to God. We are only human, and therefore, all our planning can come to nothing. There is great wisdom in knowing this and living with a certain measure of freedom from the anxiety many people carry. Let go and let be in God. As a Christian you should cultivate your faith and nurture your hope enough to be free and at peace with whatever may happen. Faith is about trust, trusting in a power greater than your own. Hope is about looking into the future with trust, believing that whatever happens tomorrow, God will be there to provide a way through.

And all this is especially relevant today on this Anniversary Sunday too. We give thanks for all that has come before us to make Armour Heights the spiritual community it is today. That includes those who have connections to the very early days of the congregation in this community; those who have joined over the years having come from various congregations or an amalgamation; and those who have joined for personal reasons that have made participation in a spiritual community important to their faith journey.

What will come in the future we cannot see. We live in times very different than the early days of the congregation. In the 1950s, most everyone went to church because church was the social hub, especially on a Sunday when there was nothing else to do. Most people that mattered were in church and you made connections in church. Today, church is bypassed for most who have too many other things on their mind. If faith in God is a part of life at all, it's one of many parts, not the one part that grounds

the rest of life. We also have so many newer Canadians from other faiths. Most of them take their faith a lot more seriously than many who claim to be Christian but are only remotely connected to a faith community.

So how do we do church today? How do we draw people into making church a core foundation of their lives? How does faith grow in people? How do we plan for the worst-case scenario? How do we open ourselves to new doors and new possibilities for being a more meaningful community of faith for the very reason that the people who will come will come because they are hungry and thirsty for faith, not because they want to join a community club? We have much to learn, but we also have much blessing to experience as we vision and work together.

Planning is important, indeed, it is essential. In fact, we can even think of planning as an act of faith and hope. Who plans if they have no faith in a positive result in the planning? Who plans if there is no hope of success?

On the other hand, the wisdom of experience and the wisdom of God teaches us that no planning is full proof. No planning can provide us with absolute certainty. We are not God and we cannot control all the factors that make up our destiny, the destiny of those whom we love, and the destiny of this communion of faith we call Armour Heights.

May God convict us where we need to be convicted. May we apply ourselves in our planning. May we cultivate faith, and may we nurture hope in our hearts. For only with a faith that is robust and a hope with deep roots can we live through the challenges and uncertainties of life. And only through faith and with hope can we find the kind of peace that is able to let go and let be in God, trusting that all will be well from the point of view of eternity. Saved through faith or through planning? Planning is part of building my faith. I don't have to make a choice between them. But my faith reaches far wider than any planning can take me. As the great mystic Julian of Norwich who lived through many challenges in her life, said long ago: faith believes, despite it all, that "All shall be well in all manner of things, all shall be abundantly well." It takes a lot of faith to believe this.

Let us pray: give us greater faith, O God... give us discipline to nurture it regularly... give us hope that whatever happens, you are there to take us by the hand through to the other side... Amen.