

When plans change

H. Stephen Shoemaker

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What happens when plans change? We had life all planned. Then something happened, something that turned our life upside down, or at least altered it unalterably. A business failure, a bankruptcy, a lost job, a divorce, a health crisis, a death.

In this life we act, and we are acted upon. Here is the deepest meaning of what we call the “passion” of Christ: he was acted upon, as we all are acted upon. We assume, or at least hope, that God can use our *action*. Can God also use our “passion”, our being acted upon?

This sermon is about what happens, or what can happen, when plans change.

I

The main text for today comes from *Acts 16*. It is at first glance baffling. Paul had his plans: to preach the gospel throughout Asian Minor, what we call Turkey today. Especially he had in mind the region of Bythnia—a rich, fertile

bustling area with a number of prospering Greek-speaking cities. Fertile ground for the gospel too, or so he thought.

But text says that when Paul and his companions came to Asia Minor, the Holy Spirit “*forbade*” them to go there, and that where they attempted to cross over into Bythynia the Spirit of Jesus “*did not allow*” them to go there.

This seems strange. What can it mean? How, why, would the Holy Spirit forbid them to go into Asia Minor, and when they attempted to cross over into Bythynia, the Spirit of Jesus “did not allow” them to go where they’d planned to go with their well-intentioned plans?

Was it a set of circumstances which thwarted their plans and which were interpreted as interventions of the Spirit and Jesus? Passports denied, weather which made travel impossible, local leaders who refused hospitality to them? Was there a vision, a stop sign in the sky, an inner prompting too strong to deny?

We do not, cannot know. But when the door slammed shut, another door opened. They detoured to Troas, and at Troas a vision *was* given them—of a man from Macedonia saying, “Come over here and help us!” Paul was “convinced” this was the leading of God. He crossed over into Greece, and the rest, as they say, is history. This change of plans led to the spread of the gospel into Macedonia, Greece and Western Europe. The book of Acts ends with the thrilling words,

“And so we came to Rome (Acts 28:14)! And it began with closed doors to their original plans.

Harry Emerson Fosdick, the first minister of Riverside Church, N.Y. City and one of America’s greatest preachers preached a sermon entitled “Handling Life’s Second Bests.” In it he gave some biographical examples.

Whistler, the famous painter, wanted to be a career soldier, but he failed at West Point because he flunked chemistry. Whistler said, “If silicon had been a gas, I should have become a major-general.” Organic chemistry has been a change of plans for more than a few aspiring doctors. But now we have Whistler’s paintings.

Phillip Brooks, the famous American preacher, wanted to be a teacher but failed miserably in the classroom. But now we have his masterful sermons and his Christmas Carol, “O Little Town of Bethlehem.”

Sir Walter Scot wanted most to be a poet, but failed as a poet, then turned to adventure novels—which have become classics.

We could go on and on. Flannery O Connor’s lupus required a forced return to the south to live with her mother. She was sure it would be the END of her work as a writer, but in fact her greatest work was ahead. Jimmy Carter’s

Presidency ended in a bitter and decisive defeat after his first term, but look at the magnificence of his life as a former President of the United States.

The famous novelist Walker Percy trained to be a doctor. While an intern in a New York hospital, he contracted tuberculosis while working on a tuberculosis ward. He spent two years in a sanatorium where he read and read and read, his enforced convalescence becoming his path to a career as a writer, philosopher and novelist.

You in the congregation could give ample testimony of how detours have turned into destination. You had your heart set on a particular college, but the admissions office said no, and you went to your second choice, which turned out to be a great place for you. You dreamed of being a major league pitcher, but never figured out how to throw a curved ball. You wanted to be a dancer, but a weak knee became an injured knee and your plans were changed. But look how God has used your altered life!

I do not want to be glib. The alteration of plans may have been a devastating and humiliating defeat—the losses real and irrecoverable. But God can use our defeats, our losses too. God is the ultimate Improviser, who takes our altered lives and alters them toward our highest good.

The Old Testament Joseph believed in such a God. When young he had been an insufferable, pompous favored son. His brothers hated him. One day they jumped him and were intending to kill him when a caravan en route to Egypt happened to pass by. They sold him into slavery instead.

Joseph rose from slave to prince of Egypt, the Pharaoh's right hand man. Years later his brothers came to the palace in Egypt seeking food, for their country was in famine. They found themselves face to face with their brother whom they had sold into slavery. When Joseph told him who he was, they were terrified he would take revenge on them, but instead Joseph told them their act had led to his role in saving many from starvation. Then he said,

Do not be afraid

For am I in the place of God?

No, you meant it from evil

but God meant it for good.

Or as Everett Fox translates it:

Now you, you planned ill against me,

(but) God planned-it-over for good (Genesis 50:19-20)

Our God is a planning-it-over-for-good kind of God.

If you want to make God laugh, the saying goes, tell Her your plans.

“But this is what I had all planned.”, we say to Her.

“I know, Hon”, she says (who would have thought God a sassy southern waitress?).

“I understand why you’d want such plans”, She adds, “I’d want those things for you too.”

“So what happened?, we ask.

“Life happened. It has a way of changing our plans, She says.

“What are we going to do now?, we ask.

She answers, “Let me work with you on that, but first let me get your coffee. White or black?”

“Lots of cream and sugar”, we say. “To heck with the diet.” “And how about that pastry over there?”, we ask, pointing to the counter.

“Sure Hon”, she says and heads for the streusel.

Jeremiah the prophet wrote to the Hebrew people carried off into captivity in Babylon. Here is God’s word Jeremiah spoke to God’s people.

I'll bring you back home someday. It will take a while, but don't lose hope. In the meantime, this is how to live out your hope: Plant gardens, take wives and husbands, make babies, raise families. Seek the welfare of the city in which you live—yes, even Babylon—for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

Then comes the clincher

For surely I know the plans I have for you, plans for your welfare and not your harm, to give you a future and a hope. (Jeremiah 29:11).

And one day they did come home. God had planned-over their lives.

Jesus ran into a huge reversal of his plans. He preached the nearness of the kingdom of God and called people to turn and enter it. He hoped everyone would hear what he had heard, see what he saw and join with him in the coming of God's kingdom. But that is not what happened. Far from it. Fierce opposition arose, especially among the important people, the big shots, the scholars, the religious leaders in league with Rome. They were saying no. And who were saying yes? A rag-tag group of nobodies, fishermen, women, children, outcasts, the "little people".

And how did Jesus respond to this huge turn of events? With thanksgiving, no less, even amid his ruined plans.

I thank you Abba,
Lord of heaven and earth,
that you have hidden these things
from the wise and learned,
and revealed them to babes, the *nepioi*
the little ones.
yes Abba, for such was your gracious will,
your *eudokia*, your good pleasure.

In the face of mounting evil, God was planning-it-over because he trusted in the final goodness of god, in the faithfulness at the heart of things.

Can we, dare we, trust in this? Hope in this? Believe that God is at work in every circumstance, every, for our highest good? Believe that is an Unseen Hand guiding our lives and the life of the world? Even in the midst of defeat and painfully changed plans? This is faith at its deepest level.

This kind of faith involves a re-thinking of our picture of God. God is not a God who predetermines everything, but who improvises amid the contingencies of life and within our human freedom to work for the highest good. Our God is a planning-it-over kind of God.

Such faith also helps us break through the stranglehold of shame which often accompanies times of failure and loss. Shame doubles the trouble. Shame is a killer of spirit and spirituality, a killer of life.

John Bradshaw speaks of the difference between healthy guilt and toxic shame.

Healthy guilt says, I made a mistake.

Toxic shame says, I *am* a mistake.

Healthy guilt says, I was wrong.

Toxic shame says, there's something wrong with me.

Healthy guilt says, I disappointed someone important to me.

Toxic guilt says, I am a disappointment.

Shame attacks us at the level of our personhood. Southern culture is an incubator of shame. And we become virtuosos of passing on the shame handed us, both consciously and unconsciously. Church can be a *shame machine*.

We need to be released from toxic shame if we are to be partners with our planning-it-over kind of God. Shame can paralyze us. I know that's true in my own life. My guess is it's true in yours.

The psalmist in Psalm 34 testifies to God's deliverance:

I sought the Lord
and God answered me,
and delivered me from all my fears.

Then the psalmist urges us on to walk in the light and love of God:

Look to God and be radiant
so that your faces will never be ashamed.

Here is God's word to you today "Do not be ashamed."

"O taste and see that the Lord is good!" says the psalmist (Psalm 34:4-5, 8)

Here is a God who takes the worst and works with us toward the best, who takes our terribly altered plans and plans them over for good.

It was what Paul was talking about when he wrote:

We know that in everything (everything!)

God works for good with those who love God, who are called according to
God's purpose. (Romans 8:28)

The stream diverted still reaches the sea. And as Wendell Berry wrote:

The impeded stream is the one that sings.