

DOES GOD HAVE A PLAN FOR YOU?

Exodus 34: 29-35; Luke 9: 28-36

Does God have a plan for you? For me? Some people believe in fate. Many movies and books in the last few decades seem to be captivated by the idea that everything happens for a reason, that things have come to be in our lives as they were meant to be. Whether it's the career path we have been on, the people we meet who become pivotal for the fulfillment of our lives, the circumstances that direct things in a certain way... it seems that many people, people like us, would love to believe that this is all part of some larger plan.

Why? Well, one reason for sure is that we are all looking for certainty. We are all looking for assurance that we have chosen right and that things have fallen in the right places for us. We even want to believe that the bad things that have happened in our lives have a positive purpose in store for us. We want to believe deep inside us that life's goodness will achieve its intended outcome in our lives in some way, at some point, and we will live to tell the story.

However... there are enough things that happen in our lives and in our world to shake us up, especially if we are committed to the truth more than to wishful thinking. If we have the courage to really see, then we cannot be so sure that things happen the way they should. In fact, there is so much that happens that we cannot rationalize or explain in positive terms. Think about what is happening now in places like the Middle East, Ukraine, Africa, Iran... Think about all those running from war, terror, hunger or natural disaster... Think about what has happened to indigenous peoples on this land over the last several hundred years... We cannot be so smug in spouting cheap certainties that things happen for some larger reason, according to some plan. And I know many of you here have suffered some terrible losses, and so the last thing I would want to promote is this simplistic, superficial and insensitive idea that everything that has happened is part of some larger plan.

But does this mean that there is no plan or no larger purpose we can tap into? Does this mean we are just accidents of nature totally dependent on the randomness and chance of an indifferent universe? Does it mean that it's all up to us and our choices even though we make mistakes and even though so much happens beyond our control? No. It's not all up to us.

The God revealed in the biblical story is a God with a vision, a purpose and a plan for everything, for everyone, for us. But how that plan lives itself out has room for infinite diversity. The key, according to this story, is to discern how the plan works in our lives and how it does not. The bible rejects fate. All things don't happen for some larger reason that fulfills some larger purpose or plan, even though there are many parts of the bible that seem to suggest this to be the case. There are terrible things that happen that God does not will. And yet, under the right conditions, God can work with the randomness and chance of life, God can work with the uncontrollable and the terrible, God can work with the mistakes and the

failures, God can work to create something beautiful in our lives and through our lives. How is that? Let's ponder our scripture readings for guidance.

Our Old Testament reading captures a key moment in the life of Moses as he descends Mount Sinai with the 10 commandments. His face is radiant, so radiant, in fact, that he has to cover his face so that people treat him like a person rather than a god. Given the proclivity of the people to fabricate idols, Moses wants to remind them that it is the one God who gave them these commandments, and they worship this God alone, not Moses.

But how did Moses get to be so pivotal as the leader, teacher, priest and prophet of Israel? Was it all part of some plan? Was it fate? Well, God had a dream for the people of Israel, a dream that captured the imagination of Abraham, Sarah and many generations after them. Moses comes on to the scene centuries later and was also captivated by this dream. But this only happened later in his life. Many things contributed to him being the right leader at the right time to lead the people out of slavery. But these things were not all planned out in advance. It wasn't God's will that all the first-born Israelites were slaughtered by Pharaoh, which led to Moses parents hiding him in a basket in a pond, which then led to Pharaoh's daughter being out in the pond for a bath at the right time, and spotting the little baby, loving him instantly and adopting him as her own.

And it wasn't God who worked it all out that Moses' sister saw all this and offered her mother's services as a wet nurse for Moses, which then opened the door for Moses' mother to teach him all about his roots as a Hebrew even as he grew up learning Egyptian and royal politics in the court of the Pharaoh. And it wasn't God's will that Moses murder an Egyptian in defence of a Hebrew and then having to flee into the wilderness where he eventually meets his new family and gains his new career as a shepherd; which then leads him many years later to be on a mountain herding sheep when he witnesses the burning bush and God speaking to him this dream of liberation for his people. And it wasn't all predetermined that Moses would embrace this dream and his role in it all after serious self-questioning of his abilities.

But... given the way things worked out and the choices Moses made, for good and for ill, we can trace back all the little and big events of his life and the life of the Hebrews to witness the incredible and miraculous purpose of God fulfilled. God's plan and dream was for the liberation of the people from slavery. How that would unfold and if it would unfold depended on the inspiration and choosing of particular human beings and their response to numerous chance occurrences and circumstances. It is because Moses was inspired and empowered that he had the courage to choose the way he did and see God working the way he did.

If Moses gave in to his fear and despair, things would never have worked out the way they did. The possibilities in him and for his people would have not worked out the way they did. So, there is a randomness and freedom to the way things work out. But it doesn't mean God doesn't have a plan and it doesn't mean that God cannot inspire us to serve that plan if we have

the inner discernment, vision, courage, the faith, hope and love, all of which we need so that we discern God's will and choose it at every key moment of our lives.

And this brings me to Peter in the gospels. Jesus chooses Peter to be the leader among the disciples. Yet for all the possibility in Peter, there is incredible immaturity and lack of self-awareness which leads to cowardice and failure. Peter makes great claims for himself and his devotion to Jesus. But he resists Jesus' path to Jerusalem, and then, in spite of great promises to stick with Jesus even unto death, abandons him because of fear.

And yet... and yet... God uses Peter's tragic failure to fulfill a wonderful purpose. And Peter becomes the leader he becomes by growing through his failure. God didn't cause Peter's failure nor was it God's will that Peter fail. Jesus didn't call Peter with the view that this is the way Peter's possibilities would work themselves out. But God's plan was fulfilled in this way. Human choices and the random circumstances of life, the good and the bad, they can become the way God's plan works itself out in particular human lives... in our lives.

And finally, there is Jesus himself. God didn't send Jesus into the world to die. God sent Jesus into the world to fulfill the purpose of turning the world back to God, especially human creatures who are the biggest problem. Jesus came to understand himself as the Messiah. But how would that role and mission work itself out? On the mountain he is transfigured and declared the beloved of God, the one everyone should listen to.

But for all Jesus' creative efforts to woo his people to turn back to God's way of love rather than militant hatred for their enemies, Jesus' failed... Israel's leadership was stubbornly bent against the way of forgiving love. Salvation would only come by annihilating their enemies and becoming a glorious nation on top of the world. And by the end of holy week they had managed to turn the people against Jesus and engineer his death.

But here's the remarkable thing. Jesus begins to see in his suffering and death another way, as a more profound way for love to win. Jesus sees in his way through death a more powerful way of communicating God's eternal love which can convert the hardest of hearts to salvation. To save the world nothing less than a conversion of hearts to forgiving love is required. The biggest enemy is the power of hate and bitterness which polarizes, demonizes and divides human beings from one another.

By communicating forgiving love in the face of cruel rejection and death, Jesus proclaims the final and greatest parable of God's kingdom. God is the one crucified by us humans because we are afraid of what God's purpose is for us. We reject it and prefer to create our own purpose. But God's purpose is for us to bless the world the way we are blessed. If we are loved infinitely and forgiven, then we must learn how to love and forgive others the way God loves and forgives us. The cross embodies this in the most powerful way possible.

So what about you and me? Through all the distinctive ways we are each unique human beings, through each of our own personalities, gifts, talents, interests and concerns, through each of

the ways that the experiences, cultures and personal, random circumstances of our lives have formed us, God is calling us to work out the divine plan and purpose for our lives to bless the world somehow, to love the world and all who live in it, to find our own way according to the options before us and opportunities that come our way.

God knows each of us... God has a plan for each of us... What is the same for all of us is that this plan is about the power of love through faith and hope to bless the world in some way. That's God's plan for each of us. But what is unique and distinctive for each of us is how the randomness and chance circumstances of our lives, the failures and mistakes, the gifts and talents, the regrets and the blessings, the suffering and injustice too... how all this will become part of the way we will find in ourselves to bless the world through the love God is working out in our hearts.

Some of us can articulate the purpose of our lives very clearly. Some of us can trace God's presence and movement in our lives as we look back, as we see our lives now, and as we look to the future. For others of us, there is much too much self-questioning, doubt, regrets, shame, anger and frustration at the way life has worked out for us, the way things have happened to us beyond our choosing or joy. Our hearts have been wounded if not broken by losses that are irreplaceable. To find God's purpose of love for us through ever new faith and hope is the biggest of challenges.

And yet... and yet... As we discover God in the particular crosses of our lives... as we find that God in Christ crucified has always been there with us... as we find God promising to make out of the shattered and broken pieces of our lives something infinitely precious and beautiful... perhaps we can find new purpose... perhaps we can find our way to God's plan for us... even if we have to live with severe limitations in our lives.

May God find us and may we find God. And may we find new life in God's purpose and plan for our lives wherever we have come, however we have got here, and however long we have left in life as we know it now.

Amen.