

I am who I discover I am, and whom I decide to be.

But the Christian story keeps telling us that we are who we are, not only through our knowledge and choices, but also through God's plans for us. In this sense, I think that it can be a very faithful thing to believe that, though you may have no idea of the specifics, and though you may not be certain of the next step you are to take in your life journey, "*God has a plan for my life.*"

Which leads me to think that one of the problems with asking, "*What has God planned for my life?*" is that the question may not be nearly large enough.

We ought more frequently to ask:

"What might be God's plan for this nation?"

What might be God's plan for this congregation?

**What might be God's dream for the whole world?"
... and how can I contribute to that?**

**To the praise of the Name that is timeless and the Love that is boundless.
Amen.**

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A Message from Mark!

Does God have a Plan for your Life?

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Scripture: Mark 9:30-37 + (James 3:13-4:3)

Theme There are those who assert, "God has a plan for my life." Is that the way God works – devising plans for each of our lives and keeping us always following that plan? The providence of God may be considerably more supple, free, and resourceful than the statement "God has a plan for my life" allows. God is love, and in the loving purposes of God, there may be a sort of "plan" – to love us now, so that God might love us for all eternity.

Prayer *Lord, show us your way. Enable us to look beyond the challenges, difficulties, and dilemmas of the present moment and take the longer view. Lift our vision up to eternity, so that we might see your purposes being worked out among us. And then, having seen your way, give us the courage to follow your way, moving in step with your grand purposes for the world. Amen.*

From time to time I've heard people say, "***I believe that God has a plan for my life.***" Perhaps they are talking with me about some difficult decision they have to make. They want to make that decision against the background of their conviction that God has a plan that intends to work out in their lives. They would like to make their decision on the basis of that plan.

I've had prospective brides or grooms say to me, "***I knew that God had a plan for the one I ought to marry. It just took me until I was 38 years old to work out what the plan was.***" I confess that sometimes I wonder that as life in the contemporary world becomes more uncertain, even at times chaotic, as we lose our confidence that we can predict the future and know just what tomorrow will be, maybe people of faith talk more about God having a plan.

Perhaps we assert all evidence to the contrary, but despite the seeming chaos, God really does have a plan. We can't often see that plan, and can't say for sure, when looking at a given event, that God's plan is being worked out. We nevertheless believe in the "*plan*," because we really need to believe that there is a plan.

Somebody once said, "*If you want to make God laugh, just have a plan.*" This quip suggests that God is not so much the one who makes and follows plans, as the one who disrupts our plans! As today's reading from the letter of James says, we have our ways, our plans, our strategies for getting what we want in the world, but those ways, and strategies, and plans are quite different from God's.

There are sound biblical and theological reasons for questioning the widespread notion that "*God has a plan for my life.*" While I'm not so sure we ought to call it a "*plan*," I really think that scripture maintains the belief that God's purposes are being worked out among us, in our time, and our history. And the Bible frequently shows how our efforts are sometimes improved by, or resisted, or brought to fruition, because of the unseen hand of God moving behind the scenes of the story. Thus, Joseph could say to his brothers, who had tried to kill him and ruin his life, at the end of the story, "*You meant this for evil, but God meant this for good*" (Gen 45).

It is a great comfort to know that all of our mess-ups and misdeeds may not be the last word. God has a sort of "*plan*," and ultimately, "*All things work together for good for those who love the Lord*" (Rom 8:28).

God keeps working God's good plan, despite our human mistakes. And yet there are moments when God appears not only to disrupt our plans but even to disrupt God's plans. For instance, Jonah is told by God that God is going to destroy the wicked city of Nineveh. That is just fine with Jonah because he hates Nineveh. But then, after Jonah preaches a one-sentence sermon telling Nineveh what God plans to do, Nineveh repents, the whole city repents. And what does God do? God changes God's previously announced plan.

This sort of thing suggests to me that if we are going to apply the word "*plan*" to God, we must somehow leave room for God to be God. In stating that God has a plan for our lives or anything else, we have to allow for God's freedom and God's sovereignty. God appears to allow for our freedom and our sovereignty or at least for a degree of it. The people of Nineveh change.

plan for my life, that plan impresses me as always grander and greater than the plans that I have made for my life. Jesus looks at his disciples and he doesn't say to them, "*I want your little light to shine forth before the people with whom you work in your office on Monday morning.*" Of course, he certainly implies that. But what Jesus says is, "*You're the light of the world.*" That is Jesus' plan for us, that is large, cosmic, and considerably grander than most of our ideas of discipleship.

And yet, there is something that seems very faithful about the statement "*God has a plan for my life.*" For one thing, it implies that the life you are living is not your own. For another thing, it certainly suggests that life is more than simply finding personal fulfillment, a sense of satisfaction, a sense of meaning that makes sense to you. (Remember today's Gospel and epistle lessons if you think that!)

Life is also about obeying God, working with God, having your little life caught up in some larger purpose than your life. And that seems to me very biblical and very faithful. In the larger sense, that is one reason we come to church. You are here this morning on a quest; this is part of the unending discernment process in which Christians engage, in which Christians try to figure out what it is that God wants them to do with the lives that God has given us.

While that may involve some step that you are to take tomorrow morning, I would think that more often it involves a larger framework, some more panoramic vision that somehow God is managing to use your life in good ways, and you are going to do all you can to move in step with the larger purposes of God.

A high school speaker stood at the podium and urged the new graduates to have a dream, to follow their dream, to let no one or nothing deter them from their life's dream. This sort of talk is fine – but it is not particularly Christian. Christians are people who are attempting to live out God's dream, to live their lives in such a way that God may get what God wants.

I met with a young woman this week who told me that she is in a time of turmoil in her life because in her words, "*I am just trying to find myself and discover who I really am and what I want to do.*" And that is fine. That is a rather conventional modern project.

What happens when they prayerfully consider some plan of action and take it only to wake up and find they have taken the wrong action? We do this all the time. And when we do, the important thing to think about is not that we have defeated God's alleged plan but rather to cling to our belief in God's constant ability to redeem our deeds and our lives. As Luther said on one occasion, "***God can ride a lame horse or shoot with a crooked bow.***" God is able to take our mess and constantly, creatively weave it into God's good purposes.

I am saying here that if God has a plan it will be wonderfully adaptable and flexible according to the larger purposes of God. I remember a man in his mid-sixties, who had spent his life as an accountant, tell me that he was convinced, through events of his life, that God really wanted him to be a preacher, to go to theological college and go into the ministry. I immediately felt a great sense of sadness that here was a man who, toward the end of his professional career, felt that his life decisions had been contrary to God's plan for his life.

"Still" the man said, "As I look back over my life, I am amazed at how well God has used what I have been. If I had gone to college and become a minister, as I think God might have liked for me, I would never have been able to be a lay leader of the church and to make the difference and the contribution that I have made."

I thought this was a beautiful statement of faith. It is not so important for us to love God's plan. The important thing is for us to love God. Loving this God means that we love a God who is alive, active, and infinitely resourceful ultimately in getting what God wants. God didn't give us a plan, God gave us Jesus Christ.

By the way, it seems to me that from scripture what God wants for us is something quite larger and more lasting even than a good marriage, a good job, the right house in the right neighbourhood – so many of the things that we wonder about in God's supposed plan for our lives. God's greatest desire, that plan to which God is relentlessly moving us, is simply for God to be with us, now and for all eternity. I am uncomfortable when we cut that grand eternal plan down to a moment-by-moment, mundane, earthbound plan for each and every step that we are to take in our lives. That seems to me an incredible trivialization of the notion of God having a plan.

In my experience, when I have encountered or come to an awareness of God's

And God shows in this case that God is free to change. Furthermore, by the end of the book of Jonah, we find out that Jonah changes, though it takes a bit longer for him to change than for the people of Nineveh to change.

God has somehow created the world, not just to follow a pre-set plan but with great love, lovingly leaving some room for us to grow and develop and for us to learn from our mistakes, enabling us to change and actually do better than maybe we, or even God, thought we could do. If God has a plan that plan plans to give us some degree of freedom in responding to God in our own lives.

This is what makes me troubled by some talk about God's plan. Sometimes it is put forward as a sort of deterministic scheme in which God has already predetermined (or as we sometimes say predestined) what people will do, so people are like robots who are hardwired to respond to God in certain ways.

First Timothy says, not that God has a plan to save all of us but rather that God has a "***desire***" that all of us should turn and fall into the arms of the loving God. (2:4). The word "***desire***" applied to the future that God wants for us is a bit more dynamic than the word "***plan.***" God has this grand desire for us, not a point-by-point, step-by-step plan for us. God has created us so that we can from time to time thwart the desires of God. Whether we can forever, no matter what God does, thwart the desire of God is a question for another sermon! But for now let's just say that God is not known for being sternly and irrevocably committed to a plan, because God is known to be a living God who is fully active, seeking love. And "***desire***" seems so much more appropriate to speak of God, and God's great love for the world, than the word "***plan.***"

"God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life" (Jn 3:16). Note that John does not say that God has a plan that some may love him and some may not love him. John says that God gave – in a reckless act of love – his only begotten son, so that God's desire for the whole world might be accomplished.

I am also troubled by some people who think that "***God has a plan for my life***" in that sometimes it can make them terribly troubled and fearful. So people seem to imply that, believing that God has a plan for their lives, they must therefore be very, very careful every step of their lives to be sure that they don't take a step forward until they are 100 percent sure they are taking the exact step that God has put into God's plan for their life.