

Pastor Daryl Diddle

Sermon Series: *Good News in Strange Places*, No. 4

Changed Plans

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Proverbs 16:1-9 [NIV]

To humans belong the plans of the heart, but from the Lord comes the proper answer of the tongue.

² All a person's ways seem pure to them, but motives are weighed by the Lord.

³ Commit to the Lord whatever you do, and he will establish your plans.

⁴ The Lord works out everything to its proper end – even the wicked for a day of disaster.

⁵ The Lord detests all the proud of heart. Be sure of this: They will not go unpunished.

⁶ Through love and faithfulness sin is atoned for; through the fear of the Lord evil is avoided.

⁷ When the Lord takes pleasure in anyone's way, he causes their enemies to make peace with them.

⁸ Better a little with righteousness than much gain with injustice.

⁹ In their hearts humans plan their course, but the Lord establishes their steps.

We're in the book of Proverbs this morning, Chapter 16, if you'd care to turn back there. Proverbs 16.

I will confess to you that I probably spend too much time following news. I try to get news from a variety of sources: from the *Wall Street Journal* to *World Magazine*, from the BBC to Fox, from the *Jessamine Journal* to the *Jerusalem Post*. I open twelve news websites every morning in order to get a broad perspective of what's going on.

The problem is, most of the news reported in those places is bad news, which is why I say I probably spend too much time following it – and which is why it's so important to remember that the message of the Church of Jesus Christ is that there is also good news in our world today.

Of course, followers of Christ are not people who disengage from the world and stick their heads in the sand. We cannot be that.

But neither can our lives and perspectives be driven by the bad news of our day.

Our primary message to our world is that, because of Jesus, there *is* good news out there – and sometimes it's found in the *strangest* of places.

For example, a few weeks ago, we talked about the good news we can find in suffering. We saw how the Apostle Paul encouraged the Corinthian believers by explaining that Christian suffering is not only expected, but it indicates that we are very likely filling our roles as ambassadors in this world faithfully and appropriately.

We who are in Christ are not of this world and its kingdoms. We are, Paul said, ambassadors here from another Kingdom – a Kingdom that practices, in many ways, completely different standards and values. So, of course we should expect to encounter conflict here and at times even suffer for it.

But in that living out of our Heavenly Kingdom identity, we lift up Jesus and offer His good news to those around us.

There is good news, Paul says, in our suffering.

We also talked about the good news to be found in those events of our lives that makes no logical sense to us.

Very often in Scripture Jesus either says something or does something or tells someone else to do something that, from the human perspective, really makes no sense at all – like in Luke 5, when He told Peter to try fishing again, even though it was the wrong time of day and even though Peter had already been out all night and caught nothing.

What Jesus told Peter to do was totally illogical. Yet if Peter had gone solely with what was logical and sensible, he and all around him – and we – would have missed the miracle Jesus performed and the message of power and possibility it drives home.

The point is, when we're willing to be obedient to Jesus, there is always the potential for good news, even when circumstances make no earthly sense.

Last Sunday, we talked about the good news that comes, for the follower of Jesus – even in death, maybe the strangest of all places.

That death can carry good news is completely contrary to the way this world thinks, but it's true. The passing from this life is so good, for the Christian, that the Apostle Paul announced plainly that he'd rather die and be with Jesus than to go on living. To die is "better by far." That's how he put it.

Followers of Jesus have a tremendous, glorious, eternal future with Him – one in which anyone can share – so long as they receive and follow Christ.

To this world that is so very fearful of death, the possibility of redemption to eternal life is the Church's urgent message of good news.

Today, one other place followers of Jesus can find good news is in unexpectedly *changed plans*.

Now be honest, how many of us here just love it when we think about and prepare and plan for something, and then at the last minute, it all falls apart?

Don't you just love it when that happens?

If you do, you have a serious psychological problem.

Nobody loves it when their plans fly apart, and we all know this well because of these past 18 months or so, right? From very simple plans to very elaborate plans – all of us have had a change of plans thrust upon us.

And it's been frustrating to us because we feel we have lost in those changes, because, of course, we always plan for our good – for our enjoyment, for our advancement, don't we?

We never invest in days or months of thought and groundwork so that we'll fail or make ourselves miserable. Nobody does that.

When we make plans, we plan toward success – which is why when our plans are changed, we are disappointed. We presume that when our plans are changed, it means that what's ahead will not be as good as that for which we'd planned.

And we can all give examples of plans we were making two years ago that were changed, right?

I'll give you some of mine:

At church here, we had a whole slate of plans: we had all the regular programming; we had new programs, speakers, trips, groups, services, outreaches – ministries. Things were going really well and we had lots on the docket for the spring of 2020.

And nearly all that changed.

In our home, we were looking forward to Ben's high school graduation and having grandparents come and visit for that.

We were planning a big 80th birthday party for my mom in Ohio.

I was planning to take David, our youngest, on an international trip, as I did with Ben to Russia and Paul to China.

I was planning to buy an old car to work on. I'm not sure Annette knows about that, but she probably presumed that, since that's just sort of a standing reality – that's always part of the plan.

We all have lists like that of personal, family, work and church plans we had made.

And nearly all of them were changed.

And as they were changed, it was, and still is, so easy to mourn and complain about those changes that came and about the plans that didn't come to fruition.

The problem is, though, we can get so stuck in our complaining and mourning that we can't see, or won't see, the good that the Lord brought in their place.

Now, I'm not saying we celebrate the pandemic and all that it brought and is still bringing. Not at all. It has brought much tragedy and suffering.

But when faced with something like this, we have to deal with the reality that God is very much in control of this world and the things that happen here.

Whether He caused or He's allowed all that has happened to happen – you can parse that according to your theological understanding, it has not been without purpose.

It's not as if God has been absent these past couple years.

In fact, He's been far more present than we typically think. But it is hard for us to see Him in all these changed plans when we're still angrily trying to force *our* plans and have *our* way.

The proverb that underlies all this is Proverbs 16:9: ***"In their hearts, people plan their courses, but the Lord determines their steps."***

That verse is actually the closing of a section of proverbs in Chapter 16, starting with the first. The first tells us the Lord directs our *words*. The last, verse 9, says

that the Lord directs our *steps*, and the verses in between them were designed to be read and interpreted according to those realities.

Which is the way people of God need to think about the unfolding of life.

We make our plans, and there's nothing at all wrong with making plans.

But Scripture says that, in the end, the Lord has the final say about how things work out.

The questions we all have to wrestle with in light of these past couple years especially are: do we believe that, and do we accept it?

"In their hearts, people plan their courses, but the Lord determines their steps."

If the Lord is the sovereign God that we believe He is – that Jewish and Christian theology teach, then will we accept His determining of our steps when His plans don't wind up falling in line with ours?

Martha Sparks had a little framed Arabic proverb that said, "The camel driver has his plans – and the camel has his."

Now, you can't carry this too far, or it makes God the camel. But the idea communicates. The question becomes, "Who's really in charge here?"

You see, the camel driver always thinks he is, but that camel is way bigger and stronger than the camel driver. And, without so much as consulting with his driver, that camel can sit down anytime he wants. The camel can change direction any time he wants. He can stop to eat anytime he wants – and there's not one thing the camel driver can do about it.

Oh, I suppose the driver can shoot the camel – but how's he going to get across the desert then?

You and I: we make our plans.

But who's to say God didn't allow this virus to happen, and even allow the governments of the world to respond as they have, in order to help our arrogant and proud world – and in many places an arrogant and proud Church – realize that we're not nearly as in charge of the camel as we think we are?

Was all that has happened an act of evil or a message of mercy – an invitation to see God for who He is?

An opportunity to bend our plans to His and to call upon Him once again?

The thing is, it often takes a bit of time and distance to see the good news that comes from changed plans.

Unfortunately, even in the Church, it's the unusual person who defaults to accepting changes to their plans as opportunities from God for something better.

And that's a shame, because if more people received change as divine opportunity, the Church would have a more powerful, more redemptive voice to our world.

And I do not mean to minimize in any way the loss that's happened in these last months – but just the same, great good has come as well.

For example, though we, as a church were not able to do some things we had planned for a time, we have been able to do other things we never dreamed of doing before. We have made some needed evaluations and some good,

healthy changes. People are worshipping with us, both near and far away, who were not or who could not do that before. We've been pushed to innovate in good ways. People have made relationships that would have never happened otherwise.

I might say too that there has also been an obvious spiritual sifting in the Church, universal. Someone wrote, and I think it's true, that COVID did not really change the trajectory of the Church; however, it did push the timeline ahead by 10 or 15 years.

It's caused people to do some heavy evaluation of their own spiritual lives in ways that the status quo would not have accomplished—and that's not over yet.

But that's in God's hands, you see?

Personally, though Ben and his class did not have a normal graduation, the fact is, I think we all preferred the drive-by ceremony to the traditional one—and I'd vote for that to return.

We did not have a big party for my mom's 80th birthday, but the whole family was able to go to a state park in Ohio and wound up having a really good family time—likely much better than we would have had otherwise.

David and I are still able to take an international trip, which may be more meaningful now that David is a little older. And the time we've had together with all our boys at home was a great gift that, chances are, will never be possible again.

And, although I was not able to buy an old car to work on, Annette did relent and let me buy a motorcycle—which would not have happened, I don't think, apart from the pandemic. She realized the bike was cheaper than counseling.

And I've had a better time working with the boys on their vehicles than I would have had working by myself on my own.

Now, again, I know there have been steep losses—we all have suffered some.

And some of you might think that I'm just trying to look on the bright side—grasping at straws to find something good.

But that's really not what I'm saying.

I'm saying, do you believe that God really is in control of our world?

Do you believe that God orders your steps and mine, and that in doing so, changes our plans from time to time?

Do you believe that even in times of loss?

Do you believe that God must have something better for us, even if we can't see it at the moment?

And if so—if you do believe all these things, will you then stop dwelling on your loss and begin to deliver that good news to the discouraged and frustrated world around us?

God is still ordering our steps—and God wants to order theirs too—for good!

You know, as I think about all this, the disciples at the Last Supper come to mind.

Even there, they believed that Jesus had come to Jerusalem to be inaugurated King, and that they, then, would be His court, if you will. They had grand, grand plans for the future.

And in a matter of just a couple days, all their plans—three years in the making—based on their understanding of prophecy and scripture, no less: all their plans came crashing down.

How frustrated they were—and sad and confused and disillusioned.

But then God's real plan—the greater plan—was made known to them, in part with Jesus' resurrection, and then more fully in the coming of the Holy Spirit. And those disciples wound up changing the world in ways they couldn't even imagine as they sat with Jesus that night in the upper room.

And it all came about through changed plans, and through time and perspective, and their willingness to hear from God and allow Him to order their lives.

It's interesting too that the one disciple who could not handle all the change was Judas—and look what happened to him.

So, to me, from a disciple's point of view, this whole Communion sacrament is a symbol of changed plans.

They all planned for Jesus to be King of Jerusalem.

But Jesus' Kingdom would be far bigger, far better, far greater than that.

But that Kingdom would come only through His body offered in sacrifice.

On that night around the table in the upper room, the disciples were all planning to reign with Him—and to transform Israel for God's sake.

But you see, the transformation they would help bring about would be far greater than just that of their little nation.

And it would come, not through some hostile takeover, but through the shedding of Jesus' blood.

What a dramatic change of plans those disciples endured—and yet it was all part of God's way of redeeming His world.

The disciples came to see that, in time and under the influence of God's Spirit.

And hopefully so will we.

Because the good news is God is still redeeming the world. And very often, He does it by changing our plans.

In the spirit of a disciple, will you let Him change yours?

Prayer

Service of Holy Communion

Closing Song: *He Leadeth Me*

Benediction:

General Dwight Eisenhower once said, "In preparing for battle I have always found that, while planning is indispensable, plans are often useless."

The act of planning is our engagement with God about our future, so to receive God's ordering of our steps is not to neglect to plan.

To allow God to order our steps is our admitting that God has the right to change our plans for whatever purpose He chooses. And embracing that fact with joy really puts an exclamation point on our trust in Him. It witnesses to the world that, no matter what, we trust that

God's will and timing are perfect – and that His purposes, whether we understand them or not, are truly good.

So may all our plans, and may our responses to changed plans, bring honor and glory to Christ.