

Haydenville Congregational Church
The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian
September 20, 2009
Mark 9:30-37
Mark 10:35-40

“God’s Plan for Your Life”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

Over the years, I have—to my great joy—performed many, many weddings. All kinds of weddings! And more than once, over the years, I have heard one of my brides or one of my grooms say, “I knew that God had a plan for me, a plan for the one I ought to marry. I just had to figure out what the plan was.”

I have heard something along those lines said a few times and each time I have wondered: does God have a plan for each our lives that includes details like the one we are intended to marry?

This raises an important theological question, one we should be asking: does God have a plan for my life? If yes, how detailed is that plan?

These may be important theological questions but, unfortunately, they make me think of a bumper sticker I saw this spring.

It said “God has a plan for your life, and it is very, very difficult.”

(And aren’t there days when we think that bumper sticker is the Gospel truth?)

Let’s explore the questions: does God have a plan for my life?

If yes, how do I discover it? And, is it a detailed plan?

Our readings today from the Book of Mark offer some hints about how Jesus may have regarded PLANS—our plans for our lives and God’s plans for our lives.

In Mark Chapter 9, we hear how Jesus explains—yet again—to his disciples that he “is to be betrayed into human hands,” be killed and rise again.

But Jesus’ description of the future is not what the disciples had in mind, it is not what they planned. The disciples are preoccupied, they are arguing about who among them is the greatest. Their plan is to use Jesus as a means to an end, a means to help them achieve greatness.

In the story in Mark Chapter 10, just a little while later, James and John—who still do not understand who Jesus is and still plan on using him to achieve their own greatness—ask Jesus to promise them that once “in his glory” (once in heaven) he will make sure that they, James and John, are seated one on his right and one on his left. Like the other disciples, James and John are ambitious and their plans include eternal recognition and glory of their own.

Maybe these stories in the Gospel of Mark are meant to teach us some lessons about plans—our own plans for our life and God’s plan for our life.

Notice in Mark Chapter 9, right after the disciples argue about who is the greatest, Jesus takes a little child and places it among them. Then he takes the child in his arms and says, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.” Is Jesus hinting at something there?

Think about children. ...they do not usually make plans. They are innocent and spontaneous. Life is new each day—the world is big, strange and exciting. Jesus may be telling us something subtle and important when he places a little child among, takes the child in his arms and suggests that they must become as a little child.

Keeping the messages embedded in today’s Scripture readings in mind, let’s return to our central question: does God have a plan for your life?

The idea that God has a specific, detailed plan for each of our lives troubles me somewhat. I think there are biblical and theological reasons for questioning the widespread notion that “God has a plan for my life.” One reason is that “God’s plan for my life” is sometimes put forward as a sort of deterministic scheme in which God has already predetermined what people will do—then, I fear, we are reduced to robots hardwired to respond to God in certain ways. My understanding of God is that a Divine Spirit made us in God’s image and likeness. We were made with the spark of God in each one of us—but we were made independent, whole and free. Our decisions are our decisions, our achievements are our achievements, our failings and errors and goofs are our own. God somehow created the world, but not just for us to follow some lockstep plan that was predetermined—God gave us independence, and lovingly left room for us to grow and develop, for us to learn from our mistakes, enabling us to change over time, to unfold, deepen, live into our individual fullness.

I don't experience a God who made a plan for each one of us that would in any way restrict our freedom, our autonomy, our ability to develop into our own unique and remarkable selves.

Another concern that arises for me around the question of God having a plan for our lives is that that perspective is often expressed when things are going well....brides or grooms will say....I knew God had a plan for my life and who I would marry and I just had to discover that plan.

References to God's divine plan for our lives emerge most often around good news, or big accomplishments, when things look bright.

But when we suffer, the idea that God has a detailed plan for our lives grows murky and it should. I hope we do not think that God had a hand in planning our pain or causing our sorrow.

It is in those times we recognize that God "is the first to weep," as Rev. William Sloane Coffin used to say, when we suffer.

God did not plan, cause or create our suffering.

Rather God has promised to be there in and around the pain to provide comfort, solace, love and hope.

This week I spent a few hours with a friend of mine in Springfield who is a former Catholic Priest. He grew up in a very devout Catholic family. As a young boy, my friend was abused by a Priest—repeatedly. As an adult, he repressed those memories and actually became Priest himself. In mid-life, he had a transforming experience, began speaking out about clergy sexual abuse, and left the Priesthood.

When I told my friend what I was preaching on this week, he said, God did not make a plan for my life that I would be hurt, violated and abused. God did not have a plan for my life that included years of quiet suffering, fears of intimacy, decades of isolation and an inability to be close to friends and colleagues. God did not have a plan that I should live through so many years of pain before I left the Priesthood, faced my past, spoke out, and began to heal my own heart and soul. The God I know and love did not create that plan for my life.

I agree with him.

The God I know and experience is all loving but not all powerful.

The God I know and experience does not have a detailed plan for our lives—too many lives include too much pain and God would not plan for that.

And so to answer the question: does God have a plan for your life?

I would say no, God does not have a detailed plan for your life.

But I would quickly add YES God does have a plan for your life.

God's plan is, to use corporate language for a moment, on the macro not the micro level.

God has an amazing plan and it includes your life and my life—God has a vision of a world filled with justice and compassion, generosity and love. God has a plan.

God's plan includes all children being well fed, well housed and well loved.

God's plan includes all people delighting in one another and living in peace.

God's plan includes a world where kindness is valued, safety is honored, loving is supreme.

God's plan includes a fair sharing of the resources on this good green earth.

God's plan includes the loving care of this good green earth.

God's plan includes embracing community and lifting up connection.

God's plan includes the inbreaking of the kingdom of God here on the earth.

God has a plan...it is Eden and heaven and paradise here on earth created through our acts of love and tenderness, our expressions of joy and peace, our commitment to inclusion and justice, fairness and equity.

God has a plan.

And God has a plan for our lives...that we will use our God given gifts, talents and strengths to make God's vision a reality, to create the inbreaking of the kingdom of God on earth.

God's plan is that we use the gifts inside us at birth and developed over our lifetimes to create the inbreaking of the kingdom of God right here, on this planet, through what we do and say, in how we live and the choices we make.

God has a plan, a macro plan, a big plan, a megaplan, a vision.

And we have the tools, the gifts, inside us to live out God's vision, to realize God's dream.

We have independence and choice, so our task spiritually, emotionally, physically and intellectually is to identify and develop the gifts we have been given and to use those in the service of God.

God has a plan.

God's plan for your life is that you will discover, discern, and then develop the unique gifts that make you YOU and you will use those in the service of God to make this world align with God's vision of the kingdom.

Our work is to understand deeply that God has a vision of a just, fair, peaceful, loving world where every person is safe, honored and cherished. And then our task is to find and express the gifts inside us that will help to make God's plan, God's vision, a reality in the time we have on earth.

Do I think God has a plan for my life that includes who I will marry and where I will live? No.

Do I think God has a plan....?

Yes, a huge enormous, inspiring, encompassing plan.

A plan that says dig deep inside, get to know who you are, what you bring to this world and what part of creating an inbreaking of the kingdom of God YOU are meant to play.

God has a plan and it is big and it involves every one of us.

But not on the level of minutiae.... God did not place me in Northampton, Massachusetts in the summer of 1980. I chose this Valley with my own free will. I decided to move here. But God has a plan that says: wherever you choose to live, build community, work for justice, speak out for peace, nurture children, share resources, love your neighbor...wherever it is that you live.

Does God have a plan for your life?

Well no...Well yes...

God's plan is for YOU to make a plan that creates, promotes and inspires the inbreaking of the kingdom.

So use your gifts and talents, your ability to teach or to speak, or to heal or to farm or to listen or to march or to counsel or to vigil or to create art or to sing songs or to play with children or to cook meals or whatever it is you can do...do THAT in the service of God to create more peace, more love, more compassion, more safety, more fairness, more generosity, more justice, more wellness, more wholeness and more connection.

Does God have a plan for your life?

God has a plan, a vision, a dream. And you are involved. You have a role, you play a part.

All that you are, and all that you do, and all that you are meant to be is needed and valued and will be used.

And so, celebrate all the gifts, talents and strengths that make you YOU.
Identify them!
Name them!
Call them out!
Celebrate them!
Lift them to God and use them for God.

My dear brothers and sisters, we have our work cut out for us.
We are in the business of creating an inbreaking of the kingdom....because God has a plan...a big, inspiring, life-giving, love-increasing, hope-building, justice-seeking plan.
God has a plan, and we are called and equipped to do our part.
Amen.

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