

Old Testament lesson – Isaiah 65:17-25; 12:1-6
New Testament lesson – Luke 21:5-19

What's the Plan?

Have you ever wondered what your life would be like if you had made some different decisions about certain things in your life? Perhaps you could have gone into a different occupation. Many of you were born into farm families, and maybe you always figured that was what you would do.

I've always thought farming would be an awful occupation because of all the uncertainty. When I was young, I realized that a successful year of farming depended on the weather. It wasn't until I lived in a farming community that I began to realize how many factors were beyond a farmer's control: not only the weather, but the price of fuel, chemicals such as fertilizer, pesticides, herbicides, and fungicides, and the price paid for the crop. I'm sure you're aware of these things and more, so I think this is what might be called "preaching to the choir."

And I know most farmers choose to farm because it is not just an occupation, it is a way of life. But what if you had chosen to do something else? I have heard many times about how many young men and women leave family farming and go into occupations that seem less precarious, less dependent on so many unreliable factors. And many farmers or their wives take on additional jobs to gain some financial security.

And speaking of farmers' wives, what if you had married someone who was not a farmer? How different would life be?

I sometimes wonder about these kinds of things. I never changed my major in college, but I changed my career direction twice. Then after being in full-time ministry for ten years, I changed careers and became a teacher. My life could have been totally different if I had made different career choices at several points in my life.

Or what if I had married someone else? I dodged a few bullets and ended up with an excellent wife. But what if there had been someone who was not a bullet, someone of

quality who would have made a good wife? My life would be so different.

Then we can wonder: would that life have been better? Worse? About the same? A complete disaster, or a fairy book story of happily ever after?

Finally, as a person wonders about their path in life, they might wonder, "Did I take the path God wanted me to take? Am I in God's perfect will for me?"

Now, that brings us to more theological questions about life and God's will. It seems to me there are two sort of extremes of thought regarding God's will as it pertains to one's life.

On the one hand, there are people who think everything is planned out. All of our choices that we make, are actually made by God, according to his will. Our lives are filled with predestined, predetermined choices, because God is in complete control of the world, directing it to his grand finale. That touches on our Scripture lessons for today, and we'll come back to it.

On the other hand, there are people, some of whom believe in God, who say that free will is supreme. Some of them think of God as a great watchmaker, who made creation and wound it up like a clock and left it to run on its own. We are pieces in the clockwork of the world, and we freely choose our path in life without divine interference.

There are problems with both extremes, I think. If God controls us completely, then he predetermines which people believe in him and which ones don't. That is a problem; Why would God create people in such a way that they do not even acknowledge his existence?

And as for those who do believe in him, if he determines 100% of our path, then he is responsible for the times we sin. That is also a significant problem.

If someone believes in a watchmaker God, detached from the everyday operation of his

creation, it would have to be a God who does not love or care about the world he created or the creatures in it – including us. That is a careless and uncaring God, an unloving and unlovable God. I consider that to be a problem as well.

So I think the truth lies somewhere in between. God has made a world in which he is involved. He is involved in the lives of people. The question is, how much? Just how involved is God with the world?

I hope you are not sitting there waiting for me to tell you the answer to this question. I don't know, and I would not trust someone who thinks they can pin it down to 50% or 20% or 73%. But in spite of this uncertainty, I am nevertheless convinced that God is in control of things. I remain convinced of that because of the promise we have in Romans 8:28: *We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose.*

Even if or when we make a decision that takes us along a path God did not really intend for us to take, whatever we encounter along that path, God will work some good from it.

Now, apart from the personal plans that God has for individuals, there is a greater plan he has for the world. In this case, Scripture gives us some idea of what the end result will be, but we do not have a clear itinerary for the entire trip.

Annette and I have signed up for a river cruise in Germany next year, and every stop is listed in the itinerary. The itinerary does not give every detail, and every passenger's experience will be different, but at least the route is given.

God's road map lacks even that amount of detail. Scripture might list some of the stops along the way, but mostly we are given only the destination, or the end results.

Consider the first part of our OT lesson, from Isaiah 65. We can find this description in other passages, with several variations. The descriptions of details will differ somewhat, but the overall scenario is the same: everything will

be perfect. People will be filled with joy. They will have abundance in everything – food, drink, peace, security, years of life.

Part of this passage can be seen in Isaiah 11: the peaceable kingdom in which even the most ferocious predators will be eating straw like herbivores, and no one will hurt or destroy anything.

I find this passage especially hopeful and reassuring at this time, as this past week was the anniversary of *Kristallnacht* in 1938, the night when Nazis and other Germans destroyed Jewish businesses and burned hundreds of synagogues across Germany and killed dozens of Jews. I've been reading a book about Nazi Germany and the Jews during the years 1933-1939. For much of that time, even up through *Kristallnacht*, the goal of the Nazis was to bully the Jews into emigrating somewhere else.

But no one else wanted them either, not even the United States. Oh, many countries took some; but no one was prepared to take the numbers who wanted – and needed – to leave. But they would have left with no means of support, since the Nazis had confiscated virtually everything they had. And of course, since no one would take them, eventually the Nazis decided simply to murder them all – every last one of them.

How hopeful must a passage like Isaiah 65 sound to people who have been persecuted for thousands of years, back to a thousand years before Christ? As a Christian, I simply can not imagine *not* supporting Israel and the Jewish people. But all you have to do is watch some news and you will hear of people who are willing to kill all the Jews, just as the Nazis tried to do.

That is the meaning and the plan behind the chant, "from the river to the sea, Palestine must be free." Between that and the so-called worldwide call to intifada, it means there are people who, once again, exactly like the Nazis, want every Jew to die.

But God's plan for his people is described in Isaiah 65. And once God has brought to pass this idyllic scene, the people will respond as in the

other reading from Isaiah, chapter 12: thanksgiving, joy, celebration, singing, comfort, and a fierce pride in their God, who has saved them.

We have this plan of God in the word of God for the people of God, and now that plan is also for us, for we are now included in the people of God. We don't have a road map for the route to this final destination. At best, we have some clues, some hints. We have some of those in our NT lesson.

Jesus and his apostles are in Jerusalem, apparently near the Temple. Some people are admiring the Temple, its stones and offerings. It might have been the apostles, or it might have been someone else; that makes no difference.

Jesus reminds them that this building is transitory. Certainly they all would have been aware that this was the *second* Temple, built after the first one was destroyed more than 500 years before. Jesus says, this one isn't going to last, either.

Well, that naturally caught their attention. They wanted the details. "When will that be, Rabbi? How will we know it's about to happen?" These seem like logical questions that we would have asked, too.

So Jesus tells them some signs: false teachers, people saying the end is near, wars, tumults, nations rising against each other, earthquakes, famines, pestilences, terrors, and great signs from heaven. Well, it doesn't take a lot of imagination to find these things in our world today. The problems is, it has been like that for most of the time since Jesus said it. We hear about more of it because we have better communication.

Ah, but there are other signs, such as the destruction of Jerusalem. That may be coming in the not too distant future; but it has already happened while some of those apostles were still living, in 70 A.D.

So, Jesus, what's the plan? Can we have some details so we really know when this is going to be? No. That sums up his answer, especially as

described by Matthew. In the parallel part of that gospel, in chapter 24, Jesus confessed that even he did not know the day and hour it would happen; only the Father in heaven knows the whole plan.

So – what's the plan? What is our plan for facing the time we live in? Are we living in the end times? Does the current persecution of the Jewish people in so many places give us a clue that the end is near?

As I have said before on this subject, I have no idea. But it seems to keep popping up in the lectionary readings, so I address it. Did God plan for me to preach on this, or am I using my free will to make this decision? Hard to say, isn't it? Is it in God's plan for people to tire of hearing about it, or are you using your free will?

But we still need to have a plan for living,

God has sent his Son to die for us, and we have responded to his claim upon our lives. And so, for some things. Jesus tells us *specifically* not to plan: *Settle it therefore in your minds, not to meditate beforehand how to answer; for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, and not a hair of your head will perish.* In other words, don't worry about the persecution that may come upon my followers. I wonder what the Nigerian Christians have been telling the Muslim savages who have been murdering them. And Nigeria is not the only place that has happened.

What about the promise that not a hair of their heads would perish? Ten of the remaining eleven apostles after Judas died met their deaths as martyrs for the gospel. But we believe that while their physical lives were taken from them, they did not lose their souls, much more important than the hairs on one's head.

In a very real sense, we who believe in Jesus Christ already find ourselves in the world of Isaiah 12. God has become our salvation. He was angry with us, yes; we had all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. But he sent his Son anyway, to die for us and to be raised from the dead.

Now we have trusted God, and we need fear nothing; our lives are in God's hands. He is our strength, our song, our joy, our salvation. We can give him thanks, and call upon his name, and make his deeds known to all people. We can tell them that the name of the LORD is to be exalted.

Most people, I think, prefer to have some sort of plan to follow. Sometimes it's fun to do something spontaneous, just to see what happens. When I taught chemistry, I tried to discourage that sort of thing unless a student checked with me first. I probably would have had some idea of how things would work out, especially if it was something unsafe.

I think that before going off in a random direction in life, just to see what might happen, it would be a good idea to ask God for guidance. Random directions might be fun in a corn maze or an amusement park, but things like careers or major financial decisions are something else entirely. God certainly has an idea about how something will turn out. If we seek God's guidance, we are much more likely to be on the

path he wants us on, and more likely to have the result that he prefers us to have. Just as it is with the end of all things Jesus talked about in our NT lesson, we won't know the details ahead of time, but we can trust God to take care of them.

That's really the bottom line for us, isn't it? Trust God. It would be fascinating to know ahead of time what God is going to do in the world over the next year or two, or ten or twenty. It would be good just to know what he's going to do in our lives. It would save money. I'm buying all the cancellation insurance for our trip just in case I end up in the hospital again at the wrong time.

But even though we might want to ask God, "What's the plan," his answer is really going to be that simple one, "Trust me." For example, there is no need to plan what we would say to persecutors, because Jesus will be with us to give us a mouth and wisdom. We don't need to know the plan, because we know the planner. And even more important, the planner knows us, and he loves us. Amen.