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Matthew 26:36-46  
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### Wrestling with God's Plans

How many of us had some kind of significant plan, whether to travel or to celebrate, that was impacted, canceled, or put on hold during COVID? What were they? It was not an easy to watch all those plans unravel and die. Was it? Clearly God's plans were not for us to experience what we had hoped for but instead to stay at home and embrace what was.

As a parent, I especially struggled watching the impact it had on our children. As a dad, I wanted to fix it for them. But there was no fixing I could do. There were proms that were skipped, graduations that were postponed, and special times with friends that were missed. At one point during the lockdown, we had one kid taking college courses over ZOOM from our dining room table, another doing high school from her bedroom, another starting a new job from their bedroom, my wife working from our bedroom, while I was sermon writing from our living room couch. It was pandemonium, but we made it through it all. Clearly not what any of us had planned.

And yet as Karen and I look back, there was a sweetness during that time with the blessing of having almost everyone home and being able to share life together on a day to day basis. I don't think we would trade that time for anything. So there was a silver lining after all.

We just had to be willing to let go of what we had hoped for and embrace what was instead. It's amazing how creative we had to get. When Jordan's high school graduation turned into a drive by ceremony at the high school, we rented a limousine and went in style. I bet she'll never forget getting her diploma handed to her through the window of that limo! You've heard the saying, when life gives you lemons, make lemonade? Well if there was anything that COVID taught us, it was how to make lemonade! We made a lot of lemonade over these past two years.

In our scripture story today, we see that even Jesus wrestled with the plans that God the Father had for him. It was the night on which he was to be betrayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. Though Jesus knew how he would be handed over to the Jewish authorities and be crucified, something within him still resisted simply letting it all unfold.

Please join me as I read from Matthew 26:36-46

**36** Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." **37** He took Peter and the

two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. **38** Then he said to them, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.”

**39** Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.”

**40** Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. “Couldn’t you men keep watch with me for one hour?” he asked Peter. **41** “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

**42** He went away a second time and prayed, “My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done.”

**43** When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. **44** So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing.

**45** Then he returned to the disciples and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour has come, and the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners. **46** Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!”

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

I’m sure we could each tell our own COVID lockdown disappointment stories of when our plans didn’t come to be as we hoped. It’s something that can lead us into a dark season of the soul when we question where God is or what God was doing in our lives.

Scripture is laden with stories of people who experienced God’s great changes of plans.

Adam and Eve after taking that infamous bite from the forbidden fruit were kicked out of the Garden of Eden.

Abram and Sarai were told in their old age to leave their homeland and resettle in a new country among strangers.

Elisha was called by God to replace the prophet Elijah, and he immediately killed his oxen in the field, destroyed his plow, and never looked back.

Joseph and Mary’s unexpected pregnancy with the savior of the world.

And murderous Saul’s encounter with the resurrected Jesus and his conversion to being a follower of Jesus while on the Road to Damascus.

These are just a few. Right? The Book of Hebrews lists many faithful people who were commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised or planned. Why? Because the Bible tells us that God had something

better planned for them as he was creating them to be a unique people set aside for his great purposes.<sup>1</sup>

This morning I want to talk about what do we do when God radically messes up our plans. We'll hopefully learn something about God. Something about ourselves. And we'll learn how we should move forward in faith.

So first let's talk about what does it tell us about God when he radically messes up our plans?

Let me first begin by telling you a little about myself and how I am wired. I am a planner. I love to imagine an event and then arrange all the details to make it happen. I love researching it. Getting the best deals on tickets. Finding places to stay. And then I love experiencing it all when it goes according to plan. I think it's the former naval officer in me when I used to plan military operations.

Our wedding was Karen's first exposure to this obsessive compulsive side to her future husband. We planned that thing down to the last detail, our final penny, and the last minute. Everything was to go like clock work.

Except it didn't. People we expected to show up, didn't. The wholesale flowers we bought didn't open in time for the wedding. The string quartet we hired sounded like a sick moose. Our young nephew broke the rope that rang the church bells. The food we had planned for our guests ran out far too early. And the cake we ordered to match the color of Karen's off white wedding dress was pink. Much of it we wouldn't have even noticed, but behind the scenes people were frantically trying to help us execute the plans we had set.

Proverbs says, "The heart of a man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps."<sup>2</sup>

God must have had quite a laugh that day when we had to let go of our plans and instead embrace the steps that God had set in motion for us. You see one thing that we learn about God and ourselves when our plans don't work out as we hoped is that we are not God, nor do we think or act like God. The Prophet Isaiah tells us that God's ways are not our ways, and God's thoughts are not our thoughts. In fact they are so much higher!<sup>3</sup>

What we learn is that God is sovereign. He really is in control of everything in our lives, on earth and within the cosmos even though at times we may not think so.

We learn that God is eternal. He is not constrained to time like we are. So God knows the past, the present, and the future simultaneously. God also knows the outcome of each plan that he sets in motion, its purpose and the character he

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<sup>1</sup> Hebrews 11:39-40

<sup>2</sup> Proverbs 16:9

<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 55:8-9

aims to produce in us. The psalmist writes, “God’s plans endure forever; his purposes last eternally.”<sup>4</sup> Even Job in the midst of his questioning and despair proclaimed “God is sovereign. He is awesome and everything in the cosmos fits and works in his plan.”<sup>5</sup>

The prophet Isaiah declared, “When the Lord All-Powerful makes a plan, no one can stop it.”<sup>6</sup>

We also learn that God is good. In Genesis we are told that when God created the first humans as a reflection of himself that he said that we were very good. Not just good, but very good. If we are made in God’s image, and if God sees us as very good, then it reasons to say that God himself must be very good as well.

Not only is God good, but we learn that God is for our good and his plans for us are good. Even when we cannot fully understand why something is happening or when some plans change, we can hold on to the truth that “in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son.”<sup>7</sup>

Saul who I mentioned earlier who became the Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “No one has ever seen or heard or imagined the wonderful things that God has ready for those who love him.”<sup>8</sup>

Even when the Israelites were stuck in Babylonian exile for 70 some years, God still had plans for their good. He said to them, “For I know the plans that I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future.”<sup>9</sup>

So if we know that God is sovereign, that God is eternal, that God is omnipotent (in other words knows all things), that God is good, and that God is for our good, the what do we learn about God’s plans for us?

God’s plans are more rewarding than what we could ever plan for ourselves. This is because what God is often doing is forming his character within us to be conformed to the likeness of his son. Again let’s consider the work that God did in us as we had to wait on so many things through COVID. Even as we suffered, God developed perseverance, patience, creativity, and resilience. And these traits will pay off greatly down the road should we experience even greater hardships.

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<sup>4</sup> Psalm 33:11

<sup>5</sup> Job 25:2

<sup>6</sup> Isaiah 14:27

<sup>7</sup> Romans 8:28-29

<sup>8</sup> 1 Corinthians 2:9

<sup>9</sup> Jeremiah 29:11

One of the things that I appreciated through our change of sabbatical plans was the ability to split our travels over two consecutive summers. I found that these two separate trips to the United Kingdom and Greece, worked out much better than if we had traveled both of them back to back. Now its true we didn't get a chance to go to Italy and explore our ancestral homelands yet. But we have still to look forward. God knew that this was much better than if we had done it all at once.

But God's changes of plans aren't always easier. In fact most times, it's much harder. Sometimes these new plans come in conflict with our flesh and we don't want to do what God has set before us. Sometimes it involves a great deal of loss such as a loved one, a job, a relationship, or something else that is dear to us. And understandably we wrestle with those plans and with God over them.

In the scripture that I read at the beginning, we see Jesus's humanity burst through as he faced a grueling death on the cross. He wrestled with the plans that God had set in motion for him. So he cried out, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me."

Martin Luther once wrote, "When God wants to build up people, He first tears them down. When God wants to heal, He first breaks in pieces. Whom God wants to bring to life, He first kills."<sup>10</sup>

Ronald Rolheiser in *Wrestling with God* writes that this "darkness can be confusing, it can also be maturing: it can help us move from being arrogant, judgmental, religious neophytes to being humble, empathic men and women, living inside a cloud of unknowing, understanding more by not understanding than by understanding, helpfully lost in a darkness we cannot manipulate or control, so as to finally be pushed into genuine faith, hope, and charity."<sup>11</sup>

In other words, though experiencing God's sudden shift in plans can troublesome, it can also be a refining or purifying process, like when you heat up silver and all the impurities rise to the surface to be scraped off. What is left is more pure silver than before.

My friends, the same is true in our lives.

When we focus on our own plans instead of God's, we can become fearful, or frustrated, and fall back into the bad patterns of the flesh. The Apostle Paul warned the Galatians of sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery, idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions, and envy, drunkenness, orgies, and the like. Lions and tigers and bears! Oh my!

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<sup>10</sup> Bruce Demarest, *Seasons of the Soul, Stages of Spiritual Development* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2009), 76.

<sup>11</sup> Ronald Rolheiser, *Wrestling with God, Finding Hope and Meaning in our Daily Struggles to be Human* (New York: Image Publishers, 2018), 112.

But when we trust in the Lord and his plans for our lives, we develop more of Christ's character and the fruit of the spirit which is love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, faithfulness, and self control.<sup>12</sup>

Author Gerald May comments regarding this dark night of the soul, "Maybe sometimes, in the midst of things going terribly wrong, something is going terribly right."<sup>13</sup> There is a line in a song by Casting Crowns which says "Your life isn't falling apart, it is falling into place."

Bruce Demarest in his book, *Seasons of the Soul, Stages of Spiritual Development*, remarks, "In his timing God will make the bitter waters of suffering sweet and we will one day exchange the cross we bear for a crown. Since God always works for our eternal welfare, we shouldn't give into discouragement or despondency in difficult times. Rather, we must cling firmly to the faithful and merciful Lord, even while pouring our hearts to him with sighs and tears. May our response to life's distressing circumstances be that of Job, who suffered unimaginable loss: Blessed are those whom God corrects... For he wounds, but he also binds up; he injures, but his hands also heal. (Job 5:17-18)"<sup>14</sup>

So how should we move forward in faith if God changes our plans?

We need to understand that God's change of plans in our lives may involve sacrifice and a release of what we had hoped would be. After all Jesus said that if we want to find true life, then we must deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow him.<sup>15</sup>

Even Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane had to come to that point of sacrificing his desires for God the Father's desires. So he prayed, "Yet not as I will but as you will." Learning to embrace God's will over our own is one of life's greatest lessons.

James, the brother of Jesus, provided this word of advice, "Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." Why you don't even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Galatians 5:29

<sup>13</sup> Demarest, *Seasons of the Soul*, 96-97.

<sup>14</sup> Demarest, *Seasons of the Soul*, 77.

<sup>15</sup> Matthew 16:24-26

<sup>16</sup> James 4:13-15

Proverbs instructs us to trust God. To rely on God's wisdom over and above our own ability to make sense of things.<sup>17</sup> We just need to be obedient and let God steer the ship for a change. "In his book, *A Grief Observed*, C.S. Lewis showed that even stalwart believers can lose all sense of meaning in the universe and gradually learn to trust God again."<sup>18</sup>

Now I don't think the point that I'm trying to make is do not plan. As I mentioned, I am a planner and love to see things executed according to plan. But what I've come to learn more and more is that I need to hold those plans with an open hand. Because they may not play out just as I hoped or imagined. Just because it doesn't, doesn't mean that those new plans can't be good.

So as I close, I think what I'd like for us to take away when God changes plans for our lives, is to remember that God is for us, not against us. That God is good, even when it's hard to see or believe. To keep trusting God who never changes though our feelings may change as often as the wind. And to remember that God will be faithful to finish what he started in us.<sup>19</sup>

And finally, let us read this word together out loud from Psalm 138:8 and let it sink deep into our hearts today.

"The Lord will work out his plan for my life - because His faithful love endures forever."

Amen.

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<sup>17</sup> Proverbs 3:5-6

<sup>18</sup> Demarest, *Seasons of the Soul*, 85.

<sup>19</sup> Philippians 1:6