

Sermon Text for September 6, 2015

by

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Luke 12:13-21, Genesis 16:1-6

“The Best Laid Plans”

We went and visited Princeton University yesterday and I was so disappointed that in the three hours that we received a tour and attended an information session not a single person mentioned that the University had started as a college to train and equip Presbyterian ministers. Even as we walked by the statue of Witherspoon, the only statue of that size and magnitude on campus, no one said a word. In many ways it was a reminder to me that we live in a brand new world, a world that is unfamiliar to me and a world that absolutely demands that we rely solely and completely upon the Lord, because our plans and our understanding will ultimately fall incredibly short.

In Luke 9:3 Jesus sends out his disciples with, listen to this: a staff, sandals, and a change of clothes. The message here is plain. Take what you need, but rely upon me wholly and completely. Because the more we try to plan for God, the more things can go wrong. We’ve seen Abraham go through a lot of different episodes in his life. We saw him step out of his comfort zone. We saw him allow God to be God in his life, we saw Abraham as a moral leader in the community just as we are called to be and we saw him as a man of tremendous faith who had no problems standing on the promises of God and letting these promises guide his life.

But today we see Abraham move out of the spotlight and his wife, Sarah, takes the main role. This is the first we hear from Sarah and it seems that she finally finds her voice and it turns out to be a voice of disobedience that contrasts with Abraham’s stark faith in God. Sarah, we find, has her own plans but they are not in keeping with God’s plans. I do hesitate to use Sarah as a negative foil, as an example of what not to do, but I can’t find another way in which Scripture leads us today. There is mention and the presence of abuse of a slave, there is the presence of a slave, there is patriarchal approaches in this Scripture that we are not going to address, but that are present.

What we will be focusing on is how we are called to trust that God will guide our paths and your plans, and don't try to create your own, by thinking and hoping that somehow the ends will justify the means. Let's hear about God's plans.

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Robert Burns the late 18th century Scottish poet wrote a poem called a poem to a Mouse. I will never forget my freshman English class because we had to memorize it. It went something like this: "But Mousie, thou art no thy lane in proving foresight may be vain: the best laid schemes o mice an men Gang aft agley, and lead us nought but grief and pain for promised joy." I didn't understand a word of the poem back then and it has taken me almost 20 years to understand what this poem is driving at. Today through the eyes Sarah we will all have a deeper understanding of this poem, but even more importantly, and this is why we are here, we will look at how God works in our lives when we try to plan and look to the future without his input.

The best laid plans or schemes of mice and men, all of our carefully stored secrets and plots, gang aft agley, will inevitably go awry and will just bring us grief and pain where we expected and wanted promised joy. In a nut shell what this tells us is that the best thought out, put together, and organized plans will nevertheless go awry. But the poem doesn't tell you why this will happen. The story of Sarah does tell us why: because God is not involved in the planning. I'm sure you have all made plans and have had great ideas that you have pursued only to discover as time went on that things ended up falling apart, or not working out the way you wanted. The chances are that if you look back on the process you probably can't remember God being a part of that decision making process. The message that I do not want you to take from this is don't plan, just wing everything. No, what I am telling you is make sure you plan but that you bathe all of those plans with prayer and petitions for the Lord to be the one who guides and directs those plans.

Our Scripture today tells us that our plans need to be God's plans. Let's see how we can be sure that this happens. We left Abraham last week rededicating his life to God and sealing his faith and commitment to God by looking up at the myriad of stars above in the sky. The promise has been made, Abraham is back on board and we are looking forward to God carrying out this promise.

But then today we begin chapter 16 with these words: Now Sarah, Abraham's wife, bore him no children. Did we really need to be reminded that the promises of God from last week: your descendants shall be as many as the stars, and from the beginning of Abraham's journey: I will make you the father of a great nation, did we need to be reminded that these promises have not been fulfilled? We went over that a few weeks ago.

We would be just as happy to skip over these chapters and get to the part where Isaac is born to Sarah and Abraham and let the story move on. But Sarah could not forget that the promises had not been fulfilled. Her role in this story is that of the one who is holding the fulfillment back. She is the one who is barren. She probably, out of desperation, blames herself for this predicament. In this chapter we find that she cannot accept God's promises and she decides to take the matters into her own hands.

The law that governed in that day was called the Hammurabi code. It stated that it was not only legal but it was expected that if a wife could not have children then she would choose one of her slaves to have children on her behalf. Sarah's statement in these verses: and I will obtain children by her, is a result of their understanding that this was the normal protocol of the day. Sarah came up with her own, legal and carefully thought out plan. What's wrong with that? So why not equate legality, the Hammurabi code with morality, or God's plan?

She was certainly following the law of the land but not following the law of the Lord. God had promised Abraham that He was going to act, but it wasn't fast enough or good enough for Sarah. So Sarah enacts her plan and guess what? It worked. It actually worked. This slave who to her was nothing more than a body to contain her child actually was bearing her child. The plan she had come up with was quicker than God's plan and more practical besides. But there was one little catch. This slave girl began to think now all of a sudden that she was somebody. She began to get an identity and we even know her name was Hagar, which means escape, and we will see later why, as opposed to Sara that means princess. But just because she was carrying the baby of the patriarch we hear that Hagar looked down with contempt on her mistress.

This was unacceptable, Sarah's idea had Abraham and Hagar getting together and then it was supposed to stop there. But her plan had somehow managed to completely

change the family dynamics of their lives. One day Abraham was quietly peacefully taking a nap and up comes Sarah, hits him upside the head and yells, May the wrong done to me be on you. Now wait a minute, this was your idea, it was her plan after all. But Sarah was livid and she blames Abraham for the current situation.

Isn't it amazing how easy it is when things don't go as planned, when we try our hardest to make things work and they just don't to then look around and try to blame everybody and anybody except ourselves. She ends her tirade by stating May the Lord judge between you and me. Now them be fighting words. Those are words that you know as a spouse, you better just shake your head and say yes dear. Abraham is probably a little put off himself and he says to her finally, she is your girl, do to her as you would want. And Sarah does exactly that. She vents her frustration on not being able to have children, her anger with God because he did not act sooner, her insult of being looked at with contempt by her very own servant. She was mad that her plans did not turn out the way that they were supposed to and she takes it out on Hagar by physically, violently beating her until Hagar, escape, is forced to flee by herself and the life in her womb for both of their lives into the desert.

When our best laid plans gang aft agley, when they go awry we aren't the only ones to suffer but most the time those around us suffer even more and to a greater extent. When decisions are made in the family without the input of a spouse, and more importantly without the input of God, then it can't help but go awry and hurt the family and hurt the relationships within that family.

This is what we see here in this story of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar, one that Calvin calls a passage of defective faith. How can we not think on our own historically defective faith and the times that we have made great plans, plans that would increase our stature, our importance and yet decrease God's role and position in our lives. Just think of the stories from Genesis that we have heard up to now: the plans of Adam and Eve to become like God so they disobeyed God, the plan of Cain to rid himself of his pesky little brother, the plan of the inhabitants of the earth to make a name of themselves by building a tower up to God. The list goes on and on and we become keenly aware of our own plans in our own life that so often block out God and God becomes an after thought whom maybe we thank once things start to go well again.

Jesus Christ came and died for us because our best laid plans, all of our efforts were not enough to save the earth or ourselves from the sin and hopelessness into which we were spiraling. Jesus Christ was the infallible, perfect plan of God that will never go gang aft agley or awry. Like Sarah whose plans were well intentioned and very passionate, they were also passionately wrong, we need to allow our most urgent urges to be tempered by the all-knowing God.

We have a lot of plans as a church this year. We are beginning a children's ministry, we have a community revival coming up, Sunday School is off and running, this is the year that we are seeing continued growth in our youth group and in our Sunday attendance. We have big plans, but they have to reflect God's desires.

Please pray that God will be the planner and we will be the ones who carry out the plans so that His will can be done. Amen.