

Extraordinary, Improvised Plans
June 2023

Isaiah 55: 3, 8-9, CEB

Listen and come to me;
listen, and you will live.
I will make an everlasting covenant with you,

My plans aren't your plans,
nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD.
⁹Just as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways,
and my plans than your plans.

Mark 14: 3-9, CEB³ Jesus was at Bethany visiting the house of Simon, who had a skin disease. During dinner, a woman came in with a vase made of alabaster and containing very expensive perfume of pure nard. She broke open the vase and poured the perfume on his head. ⁴Some grew angry. They said to each other, "Why waste the perfume? ⁵This perfume could have been sold for almost a year's pay^[a] and the money given to the poor." And they scolded her.

⁶Jesus said, "Leave her alone. Why do you make trouble for her? She has done a good thing for me. ⁷You always have the poor with you; and whenever you want, you can do something good for them. But you won't always have me. ⁸She has done what she could. She has anointed my body ahead of time for burial. ⁹I tell you the truth that, wherever in the whole world the good news is announced, what she's done will also be told in memory of her."

We plan, God laughs. The old Yiddish proverb endures because it has a ring of truth. The truth is that our plans do not always turn out the way we expect. Plan as we might, there are only so many things we can control, so many contingencies we can imagine.

But is it true that God laughs at our plans? And is this laughter derision---'oh you foolish mortals?' Or is this laughter affection---'oh my beloved children, look at what you are planning, but my plans are so much bigger, wider, and greater for you.' Likely it is a little bit of both. The God who holds us as beloved children can laugh at our foolishness and laugh our earnest investment in our futures, all the while hoping we will see the expansiveness of the divine vision for wholeness and flourishing for the whole creation.

The prophet tells us that God's ways are not our ways, God's thoughts not our thoughts, God's plans are not our plans. Where our horizon is finite, God's is infinite. While we worry about

scarcity, God's quest is abundance. Where our timetable is immediate, God's is expansive. Or vice versa—while we can endlessly deliberate, God says “choose this day.”

Yet plan we must—we are the church! Each of us has some role in planning in our congregations, associations, and in the conference. But as the Scottish poet Robert Burns warns us, the best laid plans may go astray.

Journey with me back to March 2020. What were your plans in your local church? At that time, I was serving as Senior Pastor of a busy suburban congregation. I had plans. We had plans. Plans for a self-reflective anti-racism group during Lent, plans for a small campaign to restore stained glass windows, plans for our youth to travel on an interfaith trip with youth from our partner synagogue. And then abruptly, those plans came to a sudden halt. Who knew for how long? Suddenly we pivoted—(that word became overused during pandemic)-- and we planned for online worship, outdoor youth events, work at home procedures for staff. As technological considerations consumed my hours, I began to hear from clergy friends on the East Coast: the funerals have started. You'd better plan for how you're going to do that too.

After all we've lived through, we may be tired of planning. How do we plan when we don't know what's coming? And now, three years later, how do we plan when we don't know who is coming back? Those of us who do the work of the church can stay up late at night, worrying about all those plans, only to turn to Scripture and hear God's word: 'your plans are not my plans.'

And yet the same Scripture tells us: 'Listen and come to me. Listen, and you may live.' Christian tradition does teach us that God's ways can be discerned, and that our plans can align with God's plans of love, justice, wholeness and flourishing for all creation. Or as we often have said in our denomination, that God is still speaking, and God's still-speaking voice can be discerned. Listen, and you may live.

Let's think about this woman at the meal, and her plans. I've paired these scriptures because the Wisconsin Conference Minister Franz Rigert is working with Mark's story of the anointing in his annual meeting address. I admit it is odd to preach this text outside of Lent—the normal time we hear it—and I was a revised common lectionary preacher for twenty five years in the local church. But what happens when we shift and reshape our plans—the way we've always done things, and do things differently, including hearing this story in Pentecost season?

Mark takes us to Bethany just over the Mount of Olives from Jerusalem, to a meal in the house of Simon. John's version sets the meal in the house of Lazarus, Martha, and Mary and names the woman Mary, but here she has no name. Nevertheless, Jesus tells us what she has done will be told in her remembrance, and we're still talking about her.

A few years ago I wrote about John's version of this story in lectionary commentary for the *Christian Century*, and said that the woman's actions are an improvised ritual. That sounds like a contradiction in terms. A ritual is repeated and shapes us in its expected unfolding.

Improvisation is unexpected, new every time. But we can improvise, expand, alter, and adapt our rituals. This is what the woman does. The timing of her anointing, the setting, the act, all of it is improvised.

As we know, as the narrator tells us, this act would normally be reserved for a burial, but Mary offers her anointing balm, here, now, tonight. Not at the graveside, but at the dinner party. Her ritual is extravagant—the magnitude of the amount of nard is hyperbolic, much more than needed to anoint one man. Her ritual is scandalous to some: it is public, it is inter-gendered, it is embodied. She is criticized for her waste from other good religious folks who are concerned for the poor and for justice—or so they want us to think.

Mary's improvised ritual of healing, anointing, and care teaches us that carrying out our alignment with divine plans may mean improvising. It may mean taking risks, risking even ridicule and scandal. For her, it meant doing something customarily done in a place and space uncustomary: not the way we've always done it. Her improvised plan was called wasteful and imprudent. But Jesus praised it and asked us to remember her for it.

In this time we need to make our plans in faith but hold them loosely. We can listen for the still speaking voice of God whose plans are not our plans and yet who says "listen and you shall live." We can improvise our plans, excessively and abundantly, with courage and hope and not just the way we've always done it. We can plan and God may laugh, but only in order to ask us to make no meager plans, but to expand our imaginations toward the flourishing God intends for all of us.

Daniel Burnham, the early twentieth century architect who planned much of the Chicago lakefront from Grant Park to the museum campus famously said: "make no small plans, Make no little plans. They have no magic to stir our blood and probably will not themselves be realized." We are probably used to thinking that big plans cannot be realized. But Burnham cautions that small plans, cautious plans, anxious plans, meager plans are also unlikely to be realized, because they are not visionary enough, daring enough, risky enough. So friends, let's venture to make improvised plans, extraordinary plans, trusting in the God who calls us to listen---and to plan---and to discern divine plans—so that we may live.

Rev. Stephanie Perdew, PhD
Director, The Damascus Project

Shared theological education ministry of the Minnesota and Wisconsin Conferences, UCC