

**"Changing Plans"**

**Scripture Passages:** 1) Psalm 89:1-4  
2) 2 Samuel 7:1-11  
3) Matthew 1:18-25

**A House for God:** King David looked around at all the blessings bestowed on him by God, and came up with the idea of building God a permanent house. Since the time of Moses the Israelites had been caring the Ark of the Covenant wherever they went, putting up a tent to cover it whenever they stopped. David wanted to say thank you to God by building a permanent place for the Ark of the Covenant to be held. He wanted to build God a home, a place of worship.

After sharing his plan with the prophet Nathan, Nathan had a dream that David shouldn't do that. God didn't need a permanent house. After all God is not containable. So David never built a house for God because God hoped to be at home within the people.

**Changed Plans:** David willingly listened to Nathan, and then changed his plan. David had openness to the plan of God, even though it differed from his own.

Does that describe us? Whose plan are we following? Are we following our own plan? Are we following our parent's plan? Are we following the world's plan? Or are we following God's plan? Whose plan are we following?

With those questions in mind listen to this familiar part of the Christmas story told in Matthew's Gospel. **Read Matthew 1:18-25.**

**Thrown a Loop:** No question about it, Joseph's plans were not going as he imagined. It is not too hard for us to put ourselves in Joseph's shoes. Even though the marriage customs were extremely different from ours today, when a person is considering marriage that person has a plan in his or her head and heart for what that experience is going to be like. Joseph had a plan for his life with Mary. We can only imagine what the plan might have been.

What I observe as I work with couples is that the Bride has a plan, the Groom has a plan, the Mother of the Bride has a plan, the Mother of the Groom has a plan, the Maid of Honor has a plan, the groomsmen don't have much of a plan, the photographer has a plan and at some point all those plans usually collide in some great cacophony of insanity. At that point I am usually trying to hide under the communion table.

Joseph had some kind of plan. He was considering what kind of husband he would be. He was probably worrying about how to support his new wife. He was probably thinking about a place to live. He was probably thinking about their wedding night. All those plans were floating around in Joseph's skull, when he heard that Mary was pregnant. At that moment all of Joseph's plans came crashing down around him.

We all know that experience. We all know the trauma, the grief, the pain, the anguish of having our dreams, our plans for life come crashing down around us. We can put ourselves in the shoes of Joseph in that astounding moment when he learned Mary was pregnant.

**Our Wedding:** Two days before Deb and I were to be married I got a call from Ann. Ann was the wife of our college pastor Craig who was slated to officiate at our wedding. Craig was working on his PhD at the University of Chicago at that time. We had purchased him a plane ticket to come to Colorado for the wedding. A few months prior Deb and I had driven out to Chicago and spent a week with Craig and Ann talking about marriage and our future life

together. We had a great time. On top of that Craig had been a significant person in our lives. I was heading to seminary primarily because of Craig's encouragement. I think Deb would say that Craig's teaching helped her know Christ as she had never known him before. We were excited for Craig to officiate at our wedding.

Immediately from Ann's voice I could tell that something was wrong. Then Ann said, "Craig is in the hospital he won't be able to be at the wedding." My heart fell to the floor. Then I listened as Ann told me that Craig had been attacked. He had been riding his bike along Lakeshore Drive as he often did to get back and forth from Fourth Presbyterian Church where he worked to their apartment at the University. Four guys jumped out from behind some bushes and smacked him in the head with a baseball bat while he was riding his bike. When he came to he saw their four faces laughing at him. Then they left him there to die. Somehow Craig got back on his bike and road all the way to his apartment building where he collapsed outside the locked door. Eventually someone found him and got him to the hospital. After numerous surgeries Craig would be okay, but he was not going to be officiating at our wedding. That was not how we had planned it.

The next day, the day before our wedding, we woke up to find that my great uncle who had come to Colorado from Delaware had died in his sleep at our house. That was not in our plan either, watching my grieving aunt somehow holding it together for our wedding. In our own way we all know what Joseph was feeling as he heard the news that Mary was pregnant. That had not been in the plan.

**Joseph's Character:** One of the beautiful and powerful pieces to this part of the Christmas story is how Joseph opens himself to the changing plan.

Matthew described Joseph as a righteous man. Righteous is Biblical code language for someone who takes their relationship with God seriously and seeks to live their life in response to God's grace. So what that meant in this case was that Joseph didn't strike out at Mary in revenge. He didn't try to shame Mary. He didn't turn Mary into the authorities, which could have led to her stoning. He was not concerned about his own ego or image. Instead he tried to figure out the path that was going to be in Mary's best interest. As far as Joseph could discern that path would be to quietly, meaning privately between he and Mary, give her the legal documents she needed to move ahead with her life. That was a monumental challenge in the small world of Northern Palestine. So Joseph in the midst of his personal dreams and plans being crushed; shifted gears so that Mary's best interests would be served, even though at that moment Mary was the one who had seemingly crushed his dreams.

Wow! Is that how we tend to respond to changed plans? As you know Joseph never says a word in the Biblical story, but his actions speak profoundly and loudly. Can we learn to be more like Joseph when our plans come crashing down around us?

**God's Understanding of Righteousness:** Just as Joseph had his righteous plans figured out he had a dream, a dream where an angel shared a righteous plan different from the one he had so carefully crafted. My guess, Joseph woke from that dream with a violent start.

Can you imagine? What a dream! Mary pregnant by the Holy Spirit, which of course is the only way, Jesus, is born into any of us, through the Holy Spirit. Then Joseph learns that this Holy Spirit child is to be called Jesus which means God Saves, and Emmanuel, which means God is with us. In other words this Jesus child, though human would be God, the God, the God who saves and the God who is not some distant, abstract entity, but a God who is with us. Then he learns that what this Jesus will save us from is our sins, rather than the Roman Empire or the Sadducees, the Iranians or the Chinese, the latest natural disaster or our illness. While those

kinds of things may be our plan for God, God's plan is to save us from our sins, not someone else's sin, but our own sin. If all of that wasn't enough then the angel tells Joseph to scrap his righteous plan and instead marry Mary and make sure he be the one who names the child so that the child will be legally his in the eyes of the world. Talk about a change of plans. I am not sure Joseph wanted to open his eyes after that dream.

**Conclusion:** But Matthew wrote, "When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus."

Joseph scrapped his own righteous plan for the righteous plan of God. Soon Jesus would encourage everyone he met to make the same choice. Jesus encourages us to make the same choice. Jesus encourages us to change our plans, even our righteous plans, and instead follow the righteous plan of God. That plan is to spend our lives following the God who is with us, Emmanuel, the God who saves, saves us from our sin - Jesus. That is truly a God who cares about us, a God who saves us from our sin.

What are the plans you have made for your life? What are the plans bopping around your head? This Christmas will you choose to let go of those plans, no matter how righteous they may seem and instead adopt the plan of God, the Jesus plan. Joseph decided to do just that. Will we make the same choice? Amen.