



The Truth About God's Plan
Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, June 23, 2024
Mark 6:14-29
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Today's sermon title is a bit of a teaser. What is the truth about God's plan? There was only one plan, which we heard Paul describe, and that was for the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Where the truth about God's plan for individual humans and their lives is concerned, *that* no one knows -- and if they say they do, beware.

There is so much bad information on the subject of God's plan for our lives that it's scary – scary because such claims can easily become sources of condemnation. A parent might admonish an adult child, "The life you are living is not what God planned for you." Or this same judgment can be turned onto one's self, leading to depression and despair. The critically important verse in John 3 is forgotten: "God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

Most of the bad assumptions about God's plan come from misreading Jeremiah 29:11, that verse that finds its way onto more keychains and coffee mugs than any other: "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord."

This verse does not tell us God has a plan for each of our lives, but rather that God desires we live as fully as possible wherever we are, in whatever circumstances. This is clear if we start reading at the beginning of Jeremiah 29. From that we realize God is addressing the exiles who remain in Babylon and encouraging them to make the best of it: "Build houses and live in them, plant gardens and eat what they produce." In other words, God's plan for their welfare is that they should live as fully as they can where they are. Eventually, God says, I will bring you home.

The reason we are on the topic of God's plan is that I was pondering the bizarre chain of events in today's Gospel that led to the gruesome death of John the Baptist. Was it God's plan, I was wondering, that John's life should end in this way? Or was it just a series of human calamities?

You can tell from how today's reading starts that the whole episode spooked Herod badly. He must already have known of Jesus, but when he hears that a prophet has been going about preaching powerfully, he is terrified: "It's John, whom I beheaded, raised from the dead!"

This reaction speaks volumes about the guilt he felt about the whole sorry affair. Mark makes it clear Herod regarded John as a righteous and holy man. It was not his intention to kill John, at least not in this way, nor was it even his idea to imprison him. Instead he was cornered, and then tricked, into doing all this by his vengeful wife.

So, WAS the beheading of John the Baptist part of God's plan? Here is why even asking the question gets us into trouble.

Someone might claim that while God does not cause bad things to happen, God uses them to bring about the purposes of the kingdom. This is dangerous thinking because it allows someone to rationalize incidents of calamity and crisis. Accidents. Illnesses. Natural disasters. Untimely deaths. God does not have a purpose in "allowing" any of these to happen. God does not desire for any sentient being to experience pain and suffering. Can these experiences then be used to bring in the purposes of the kingdom? That's up to us, whether they end up strengthening or weakening our faith.

Or, someone else might say that because God allowed humans to have free will, bad choices people make that cause harm to others must therefore be permitted by God. In this way one could conclude that John's beheading was permitted by God as a consequence of human sin and therefore is part of God's plan. (When I posed this question to ChatGPT, that's what it told me.)

But humans make bad choices not because we are inherently sinful, but because we languish in a state of separation. We lose sight of God. We forget God is there, and most importantly we forget how much God loves us. My former spiritual director used to look me in the eye and say, "Did you know that God is madly in love with you?" I always shook my head. God wants more than anything that we return to him. Mistakenly believing that we are alone or that we have been abandoned, we make desperate decisions out of fear.

It is true that God had to allow us to have free will. Why create us otherwise? Without free will we'd be an endless army of identical robots, and what kind of relationship could God have with robots? And as Paul tells us in Romans, from sin comes grace – sin is always overcome by the free gift of God's grace in Jesus Christ.

So what IS the truth of God's plan? It is that each of us, in our own way, lives into the full, life-giving relationship that God desires with us, as we move along the road map of our lives that WE determine, with the plumb line of God's righteousness that we heard about in Amos helping to keep us on track. Are we in sync with God? Are we aligned with the plumb line that demarcates the full life that God desires for us? And if not, how can we use our free will to get back on track?

Imagine your life journey as charted by Google Maps. You know where you're starting, you have some idea of where you want to go. You have set Apple Car Play in motion and now you're on the road. But wait. A course adjustment is being recommended. Google Maps does this based on traffic or on what it considers to be the best way to go. I have found it's usually a good idea to say yes.

In this same way, the road map of our lives is constantly one of adjustment and readjustment. God is calling to us in unexpected ways. You set your route, but then notice that things seem to be taking you in a different direction. However, you know that the Holy Spirit is always our guide and also that the Spirit is full of surprises. Do you change course accordingly, or doggedly keep to the original plan? How do you know which is best? How do you know which, to get back to our main point, is God's plan? What is the truth of God's plan for your life?

I recommend you use Jeremiah 29 as your litmus test. Which course has you to feel that you are building houses and living in them? Planting gardens and eating what they produce? Seeking the welfare of the city to which God has sent you?

Or you can use those marvelous verses today from Psalm 85. On which course do you feel that "steadfast love and faithfulness have met, that righteousness and peace have kissed each other"? On which are you a conduit from heaven to earth and back – in which faithfulness springs up as righteousness looks down? In the course you have chosen, are heaven and earth meeting in you? Are you able to give voice to the living Christ through the full expression of the unique person that God created you to be? If so, great. If not, keep making those course adjustments until you feel that you are in aligned with the plumb line of God's faithfulness. For then -- in you -- the truth of God's plan for your life will flourish.