

“The Best-Laid Plans”

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Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, Matthew 24:36-44

Two Scripture texts for us this morning: the first is found in the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes, the third chapter, the first eight verses. Now while the author of Ecclesiastes is technically unknown, many scholars believe that it was written by King Solomon to the people of Israel. This is an amazing book in that when you first start to read it, it appears as though the author is saying that everything in life is completely and utterly meaningless. Once we read on, however, we discover that the author's true intention is to tell us that everything is meaningless without God. So we start with the first verse of Chapter three, with words that may be familiar to some of you.

¹ There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven:

² a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot,

³ a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to tear down and a time to build,

⁴ a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance,

⁵ a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them, a time to embrace and a time to refrain,

⁶ a time to search and a time to give up, a time to keep and a time to throw away,

⁷ a time to tear and a time to mend, a time to be silent and a time to speak,

⁸ a time to love and a time to hate, a time for war and a time for peace.¹

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Our New Testament lesson this morning comes from the 24th chapter of Matthew's gospel, verses 36-44. I'm going to talk about this in context in just a few minutes but for now, let us hear this word of God.

³⁶No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³⁷As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; ³⁹and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man.

⁴⁰Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. ⁴¹Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left.

⁴²"Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. ⁴³But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁴So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him."²

¹ Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 (NIV)

² Matthew 24:36-44 (NIV)

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Let us pray: *May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in Your sight, O God, for You are our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.*

I opened my eyes, and for a split-second I wondered why in the world I was awake this early. I knew it was early before I even looked at the clock. I could hear the rantings and ravings of the late-night infomercial salesman playing on the television, and I noticed that the sun had not even thought about rising yet. Once I finally peered over to the clock I saw that it was 4:51am. Once I saw those brightly lit red numbers, I immediately went into a panic. You see, I was supposed to be at the home of my friend and colleague David Edwards at 5:00am, to embark on what would be a 4-day fact-finding mission trip to Port-au-Prince, Haiti. I moved quickly throughout the house, collecting everything I needed, kissed each of my three kids on the cheek as they lay in their beds, told Nikki I loved her, and at 4:57am, I left my home.

After arriving only 4 minutes late (which was a miracle in-and-of-itself), David and I loaded up the car, and were on I-95 headed south in no time at all. We were headed to Fort Lauderdale, FL, where we would spend the night and fly out early the next morning. Everything was going according to the plan. When we began to approach Jacksonville, FL, we decided to confirm our flight reservations on the internet, using our cell phone's internet service. I was driving at the time, and I remember David saying to me, "There is a pilot strike." Upon further research, and a few calls to family members and the customer service department at Spirit Airlines, we learned that it was highly unlikely that our flight would depart in the morning, and that there was no guarantee that we would be able to board any other airline traveling to Haiti. So, after driving nearly 6.5 hours, we simply took the next exit, and began our journey all the way back to Lumberton.

I remember driving back and the one question on my mind was, "Why?" Why was this happening? We had spent months and months planning this trip, we had sacrificed so much, and it was all over before we even got on a plane. Honestly, I was devastated. As we continued our journey home I remember feeling as though I was incomplete – like this shouldn't be happening. I thought, I should be in a hotel in Ft Lauderdale, preparing mentally for what would come in the next few days. I shouldn't be traveling in the opposite direction. I kept hoping that the strike would lift any minute and we could just turn back around. But it didn't. And the farther we went in the opposite direction from our original destination, the more it started to sink in that I wasn't going to Haiti.

It was bittersweet when I got home that evening. I was obviously happy to be back with my family, but part of me still longed to be in Florida, within reach of that Sunday-morning flight. Months and months of planning had come to a halt, due to a circumstance that left me feeling completely out of control.

In our New Testament text for this morning, Jesus is speaking to his disciples on the Mount of Olives. In the previous verses, he is telling them about the signs of the end of the age. He ends with the words, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away."³ And then I imagine Jesus gave a little pause, and looked at his disciples. I think his disciples' jaws would have been on the ground after all the things he had just told them about famines and earthquakes and their ultimate demise for their faith, and the darkening of the sun and the moon and the stars. They would have been bewildered. Let's not forget that all the way up to his resurrection, all throughout the gospels we read Jesus' disciples never fully understood who or what he was. That fact is clear. So I think the disciples would have wanted to chime in at this point and say, "When is all of this going to happen? I need to make plans for this?" Let's put this into our everyday lives – let's take the disciples out of the story and put ourselves in the story – if we had just been told about the end of the age by Jesus Himself, we'd want to know when! We 'd want to know how much time we had! We need to get our things in order, we have relationships that we need to fix, we have financial obligations we need to pay, we have goals we want to accomplish, we have lifelong dreams we want to pursue, we have connections we need to make.

But Jesus anticipates their questions. Because the next words are again from Jesus, and he tells them that no one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Jesus himself didn't even know. So what the disciples were left knowing was this – at some point, their best-laid plans would be interrupted.

Plans are not bad. In fact, setting goals and planning ahead is often considered a virtue, especially with things like education, finances, etc. But one of the problems in our culture today is that people often times become enslaved to our plans. Think about a time when your plans fell through. I'm not talking about small plans that didn't affect you at all. I'm not talking about the time that you planned to go to dinner at one place but it was closed so you had to change your dinner location. No, I'm talking about the best-laid plans that you've had in all arenas of your life, those plans that got broken unexpectedly and you just didn't know what to do. Those plans that you'd had for years. Maybe you were planning a family vacation and you'd been saving all year and then suddenly an unexpected expense comes up and you're forced to stay home this year. Maybe you'd been planning your every move at work, calculating precisely what to do to get that promotion, and then when everything seems to be going your way and you're on the brink of career advancement, someone else gets the job over you, and you feel like you've wasted your time.

Or maybe the plans run a bit deeper. Maybe you were planning for a better family life. Maybe you thought you were taking all the steps you needed to take in order to make sure that your family life is perfect, like something right out of a fairy tale, only to have your plans abruptly changed by an unexpected circumstance. Maybe your plans were

³ Matthew 24:35 (NIV)

in the form of relationships. Maybe you told yourself that you were going to be married by a certain age, and as the time approached you tried harder and harder to put yourself in a position to meet that special person, but it wasn't to be. Maybe your plans were for your children. Perhaps you thought you had laid the perfect framework for your children to grow up to be successful at everything they did, maybe even to follow in your footsteps, only to have your plans changed.

In all of these situations, God intervenes. We don't attribute it to God working in our best interest, though – we consider it God getting back at us for something we've done. We blame God when our plans are interrupted, or put on hold. We become so focused on our plans that we forget to realize that ultimately we are not in control.

But what I want you to know today is that God steps right into our plans and intercedes because we think we've got it all figured out. We think that we're home free. We believe we have the power to control our own futures. But as hard as it is to stomach the idea, we are not in control. And I think we all know it. Because just when we think we have the best-laid plans, just when we think we've covered every possible base and everything that could possibly go wrong, God jumps right into our lives and shakes the very foundation of our planning, and that's when we begin to ask questions.

As far as my trip to Haiti goes, I know that it will happen in the right season. I don't mean the Fall, Winter, Spring or Summer, I mean there will be a season of circumstances that will allow me to take that trip. I know for many of us, we've prayed time and time again for the right circumstances to come and put us in a place where we can live out our plans. But we must remember to everything there is a season. There is a specific time for everything. But it's not our time. God's time is drastically different from ours.

So we ask the question: "God, why don't you just show me the plan right now? Just let me know your plan for my life so I can be sure I'm taking the right steps to live it out." Well I think the answer here is very simple. If God showed us His plan for our lives, we wouldn't believe it. Ten years ago, I had big plans for my life. But these plans didn't include marrying a girl from Pennsylvania. These plans didn't include having three children. These plans certainly didn't include God, Jesus, or the church. But God stepped right into my plans just when I thought I had it figured out and said, "No." And now, ten years later, I stand before you today.

A friend once told me if you ever want to make God laugh, show him your 5-year-plan. And I believe the theory behind that is absolutely correct. Because just when we think we've got it all figured out, God will show up and turn it all upside down. And that's one of the reasons our God is so great. He uses these situations to keep us humble. Because if you are completely sold-out and submitted to God, you will know that if it is God's will, it will be done, and there's no amount of planning that we can do to change

that. We cannot afford to be slaves to our planning, because the best-laid plan for us is God's plan. And God's plan will succeed, no matter what.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, we submit to your will this morning. Remove the thoughts on our hearts that are vain, and bring us to your throne, that in all that we say and do, we seek your will for our lives, not our own. Ultimately, Thy will be done. Amen.