

That's Not in the Bible Sermon Series  
God Has a Plan for You  
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Rev. Kory Wilcoxson

You remember the game show “Let’s Make a Deal”? I believe they have revived it, but I’ll always remember the version with Monte Hall as the host. Monte would present a contestant with three doors and they’d have to choose one. Behind one door was a brand new Chevy Nova, behind the second was a dinette set, and behind the third was a rubber chicken. And the contestant would have to choose. And no one wanted to get the rubber chicken. Do you ever feel like trying to figure out God’s plan for you is like trying to pick the right door? What if I choose the wrong one? That’s scary.

During our current sermon series, we’re looking at some of the most often said Christian clichés, like “Everything happens for a reason” and “God doesn’t give you more than you can handle” to see if these statements are actually helpful or if they do more harm than good. Today’s statement digs into issues about God’s control versus our free will and the level to which God participates in our lives. I recognize that by exploring this cliché more deeply, it might call into question long-held beliefs about God’s role in how we live, and some of us may not be ready to pull back that curtain just yet. And that’s OK. We’re not supposed to have all this faith stuff figured out. But I wonder if we’re afraid to ask, “Does God have a plan for us?” because what if the answer is “no”? Or what if God does have a plan, but we chose the rubber chicken instead?

I want to tell you two stories that map the trajectory of this statement in my own life. I used to believe very strongly that God had my life all mapped out. When I heard the call to go into ministry, I looked back at my life and saw how God had guided me to a journalism degree and then to a communications degree in order to prepare me for ministry. Now, as I was preparing to choose a seminary, I knew God would guide me toward God’s plan for me. I need to preface this story by letting you know that I grew up a huge fan of Chris Mullin, the professional basketball player. Mullin was tall, white, and slow, so we were basically twins...except he could play basketball. I had Chris Mullin jerseys and basketball cards. If they had made Chris Mullin pajamas I would have owned two pair. I loved the guy.

As I was considering where to continue my education, I visited two seminaries: Lexington Theological Seminary right here in town and Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis. I just knew God would shine a heavenly light on the one I was supposed to attend. At first, it wasn’t clear. I liked both schools and didn’t feel a divine tug toward one or the other. Lexington was the home of the Kentucky Wildcats – check! – but I had also lived in Lexington before and didn’t have a great experience. Indianapolis was a really cool city with a professional basketball team, the Indiana Pacers– check! – but it wasn’t the home of the Kentucky Wildcats. So, without being 100% sure of what God’s plan was, I chose CTS in Indianapolis.

Two weeks after we moved to Indianapolis, Chris Mullin, who played for the Golden State Warriors on the west coast, was traded to – can you guess which team? – the Indiana Pacers. Aha! I got the divine dinette set! God confirmed for me, through a slow, white basketball player, that I had made the right choice and followed God’s plan for me.

But my understanding of God’s role in our lives changed for me during my time in seminary. In the winter of 2001, I was in my last semester and beginning to start the job search process. I put out my papers and churches had to decide whether or not they want to talk to me. It

can be a bit nerve-wracking, especially for a greenhorn soon-to-be seminary graduate trying to figure out how to be a *real* pastor in a *real* church. Will anyone want me? Will I be any good? Where am I supposed to go? What is God's plan for me?

I ended up interviewing with and visiting two churches: one in Fairmont, W.Va., and one in Lincolnshire, Ill. Both churches were appealing, both had their strengths and weaknesses, and most importantly, both of them actually wanted to pay me money to work for them. They obviously knew less about what they were doing than I did. So I was faced with a decision: Chicago or Fairmont? How was I supposed to know which one was the right one for me? I prayed, "God, give me a sign, draw an arrow pointing in the right direction, smack up upside the head with an atlas opened to the page of the place I was supposed to go." What was God's plan for me?

I chose to go to Lincolnshire and served there for eight years. Was that God's plan? To be honest, I have no idea. I truly don't think God cared whether I went to Lincolnshire or to Fairmont. That may sound callous, as if I believed God didn't care about me, and that's not at all what I mean. What I mean is that I believe I could have fulfilled God's plan for my life either in Fairmont or in Lincolnshire. I'm not questioning whether God has a plan for me; I'm questioning the specificity of that plan.

That's the question this cliché raises for me. Just how closely does God direct what happens in my life? Can every good thing that happens be attributed to God? If so, who gets the blame for the bad things? Satan? God? Me? Was it God's plan for me to go to Lincolnshire? Maybe. But what if I had gone there and had a horrible experience? Would that have been God's plan? Because that's happened to a lot of ministers I know. With this and other clichés, we have to be careful. We'll often use them when the outcome of a situation is favorable. Are you in a fulfilling job? It must have been God's plan for you to work there! But what about the job that started out feeling like God's plan but turned toxic? Was it God's plan for us to experience those things, as well? If we're going to give God all the credit when things go well, we've also got to be willing to give God the responsibility when they don't, or else we need to rethink our beliefs about God's role in controlling what happens in our lives.

Saying "God has a plan for you" implies that God has mapped out a life route for us, like some divine GPS that already has signaled the turns we should make in order to reach our destination. But I wonder if our route hasn't been planned ahead. What if we are co-creators with God in drawing the map as we go. A pastor friend of mine has written a book called, "We Make the Road by Walking." In other words, we participate in the creation of our plan, using our free will and God-given gifts to plot our journey. This cliché makes it sound like if we sit back and wait, God will illuminate the right way for us like a Yellow Brick Road leading to the Emerald City. But God's plan may simply be for us to get off our keisters and start moving forward. We may not recognize God with us because we are searching for a superhighway of destiny rather than a twisting, meandering road that only appears with the next step. Maybe God's plan for us is simply to take the next step in front of us.

Let's add a little more grist to this mill by turning to our scripture reading for this morning. Moses is speaking to the Israelites at the end of his time with them. He is about to die and they are about to cross over into the Promised Land. So in this last paragraph of the last sermon he'll ever preach, he boils down all of his teachings about God's law and God's guidance to this one simple passage. He basically says to the people, "God's word for you is clear. It's not hard to reach. In fact, it's right inside of you. You know what God's word says: follow God and

live or don't follow God and die." God has set before them life and death, blessings and curses, and Moses exhorts them to choose life.

As I read the passage, that in a nutshell is God's plan for us, to choose life and live out what Christ taught us and showed us: grace, love, and forgiveness. I believe Jesus paraphrases this passage when he says, "Love God and love your neighbor." If you do those things, you choose life. If you are living in such a way that you aren't loving God or loving your neighbor, you have chosen curses. God's plan is for us to live out the gifts Christ has given us. I could have lived out that plan in Fairmont or in Lincolnshire. I could have lived it as a pastor, a professor, or a plumber. I believe God gives each of us certain gifts to use, and then gives us the free will to choose how to use them. I believe God's plan for us has less to do with what we do in our lives and more to do with how we live them.

That's why we need to pay attention to what our statements say about God because clichés like this can portray God in a different light than we think. I've most often heard it said in response to someone's disappointment or disillusionment. A person is fired from their job, or a significant relationship ends, or they come to a fork in the road of life, and their supporters say, "Don't worry, God has a plan for you." That's actually a thinly veiled way of saying, "I'm going to invoke God's omnipotence to let you know that God's got this all taken care of because I have absolutely no idea what to say to you right now, and I certainly don't have any answers about what you should do next." And then we walk away.

What's a lot harder to do is to stay with the person in the midst of their not knowing, in the midst of their lostness. The Jews have a ritual that accompanies the death and burial of a loved one. After the burial, the immediate family returns to a home designated as the "shiva house," to begin a seven-day period of intense mourning. This week is called "sitting shiva," and is an emotionally and spiritually healing time where the mourners dwell together and friends and loved ones come to comfort them with short visits referred to as "shiva calls." The mourners experience a week of intense grief, and the community is there to love and comfort and provide for their needs. This is a critical point, for if a person must feel the heart-wrenching pain of grief and loss, it should be done when they are surrounded by loved ones who can share that burden.

When we use "God has a plan for you" as an escape hatch from a difficult conversation, we are excusing ourselves from helping the other person bear their burdens. Instead, I believe we are called to dwell with them in the midst of their struggle. Regardless of what the plan may be, we are called to sit shiva with them, helping them deal with their own sense of loss and fear and unknowing in a time of disequilibrium by showing them they are not alone.

Ultimately, I do believe God has a plan for us. In Jeremiah, God says to the prophet, "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." Doesn't say anything about who you should marry or where you should live or what you should do for a living. God wants you to thrive, to have hope, to have a future. God has given each of us the gifts necessary to live a life of significance and fulfillment and service, and then we choose how we do that. Can you still serve God in a bad job? Sure. Can you still honor God in the midst of struggle? You bet. I believe God is less concerned with what we do and more concerned with how we do it: we grace, we integrity, with love, each day becoming more and more like Christ. Ah! Striving to become more like Jesus Christ. Now that sounds like a good plan.