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Does God Have a Plan?

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*God lures us on the endless adventure of creation transformation and becoming—
but there is no predetermined plan or roadmap.*

A sermon preached at the Church of the Village, August 23, 2020

Reading: Jeremiah 29:11-14 (recommended: *NRSV* and *The Message*)

Does God have a plan for your life? For mine? For our church? For these trees or the river behind me? For the whole universe? That seems to be what the prophet Jeremiah has God saying: “I know the plans I have for you.” In Jeremiah, God was addressing not an individual, but the community of the Israelites in exile in Babylon. From Jeremiah’s perspective, God promised to bring them back home.

Jeremiah understood God to have that kind of power—the power to make plans and then make them happen. There’s an aphorism about “plans” that I’m sure most of you have heard. It says, “We make plans and God laughs.” That implies that whatever plans we come up with, God can overrule them. Yet, two weeks ago, we talked about process theology, we learned that God exercises power through persuasion and not coercion. So, God lures us. God invites us. God offers us a range of possibilities in each moment. And God desires to influence our decisions and actions. God wants us to choose well, but God does not coerce or control. Instead, God is in a beautiful and mutual relationship with us. It’s an amazing ongoing creative process of becoming—our becoming and God’s own becoming.

So, if God cannot impose “God’s will,” is there still value in the image of God Jeremiah offers? Can we reinterpret Jeremiah’s words and re-envision the Israelites’ God for our own time? Can we reimagine the meaning of “plan”?

God cannot have a *specific* plan for you or me or for our community or species or world in the way people so often conceive of it. God can’t have a plan in that sense because God doesn’t coerce *and* God does not know the future. While God knows everything that has ever happened and knows all the possibilities that might occur or choices we might make, God does not know what *will* occur until it actually happens. *God does not know the future.* In any given moment, God offers us a range of possibilities. Then, in the split second of our choosing, we get to surprise God! God does not like all the outcomes, but I think God thrives on being surprised!

So, God doesn’t have “a plan,” but God *does have* an intention, a desire, an ethos, a set of guiding principles grounded in love and justice. God is love and we could say that God is always dreaming about what could be. So, in each moment of our lives, God sees what choice or action or failure to act is going to move us, individually and collectively, in a worse or a better direction. That means in every event, every choice, God’s intention and desire are part of the process. As we choose and change and the universe changes, God changes too. We have an impact on God.

Let’s think about this another way. God does not have plans, but God sees and offers many possible pathways, for you and me and our community and the environment and for the stars and planets—possibilities for our becoming, our growth, our transformation, our fulfillment. God can handle whatever we throw at her. She is capable of offering a new set of possibilities for every move we make—or fail to make. I suspect you can recognize that pattern in your own life experience—in your own behavior. Has your own “plan” or “vision” for your life remained static?

For me, it has been a process in which there were a lot of roadblocks, detours, disappointments, and also unanticipated joys, successes, and surprises.

My own understanding of who I am and the purpose or direction of my life has changed many times in my 63 years. Isn't that true for you? As I prepared this message, I thought, especially, about how my vocational calling has evolved.

First, I thought about my call to "preach." I used to think that God had a plan. I thought God really meant for me to become a pastor and preacher. I bought into the idea that this was "God's will" all along, but that I had ignored or run away from "God's plan." In my mind, I was Jonah, trying to go in the opposite direction and get as far away as possible. But, now I believe God offered me the idea of "preaching" as one of several possible good avenues *at that moment in my life*. I don't believe God was saying, "This is my sole plan for your life—you must do this." Also, that morning in 1999 when I was meditating in my kitchen, all I heard from God was the word "preach." I could have taken that in a number of directions. God did not say, "go to seminary, learn to preach, and be ordained in the United Methodist Church." God invited me to consider "preaching," in the broad sense, as one among many possible directions. And God desired that I would continue to listen to God's leading and co-create a future.

Also, "preaching" was not my first vocation. I did not sense the call to preach until I was 43 years old. I did sense from a young age that I wanted to contribute to making the world a better place, but I did not know what I wanted to "be." In college, I majored in history only because that's the area I had the most credits in when I was forced to declare a major. In the early 1970s, I became attracted to the ideas and practices of Marxism. I didn't *plan* to become a Trotskyist, but that's the direction my life took and, for many years, it became a way for me to grow in and express my passion for social justice. After I went to seminary and got ordained, I used to look back on that period of my life and think it was just a diversion from the real purpose of my life. But the more I have reflected on it, the more I think that God may have actually participated in luring me to radical politics. Now, it seems to me quite possible that God's message—that I did not register consciously at the time—was, "I see this passion in you. This is one possible positive direction for you to pursue. You may learn valuable lessons from doing this. Go be a communist!"

Think about how our relationship with God actually works. We are not passive creatures waiting for God to give us direction. God interacts with our own evolving understanding, interests, passions, flaws. We participate with God in a fabulously complex interplay of God's luring possibilities and our history, experience, gifts, resources, and relationships. God lures us in our ongoing becoming toward the fullest possible experience of loving and being loved—toward becoming the most fully alive we can be. How awesome is that!

God intends the greatest possible flourishing, not just for individual creatures, but for groups, communities, and for the whole universe. This complex interplay with God occurs intensively within communities. If we look closely, it's easy to see that in the Church of the Village—a community we share in together and know well. I'll just give you a recent example. Many of you will already have read the letter adopted and published this week by our Vision & Ministry Council. Just imagine how the complexity of God's luring in dialogue with the passions, interests, and impulses of all our individual leaders gets magnified as we try to make a decision and take action together! In our letter to the Bishop and other leaders in our New York Annual Conference, we strongly backed the statement of Black Methodists for Church Renewal and

offered our strong support for addressing the systemic racism and white privilege that have been, and are still, affecting our Conference.

Our letter arose out of a long history of anti-racist proclamations and actions on the part of church members and clergy in churches that became COTV. Those persons and communities were lured by God and made choices in the historical context that extended from the 1960s through the early 2000s. Now, we encounter the contemporary context of the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd, followed by mass protests. Those who came out to protest were also lured by God in the mix of their own histories and experience. This very present context encouraged and inspired already existing groups of NYAC clergy and laity, including Black Methodist for Church Renewal, to issue statements. So, in early August, when I proposed to the Vision & Ministry Council the idea of endorsing the BMCR statement, it led to a rich and complicated conversation, with plenty of contending ideas, and surely the participation of God in each of us AND in our interplay with each other. Ultimately, we came to a consensus around not endorsing, but supporting the efforts to address racism in the NYAC by writing our own statement and encouraging other congregations to do so. If you have not read it, I encourage you to do so. It is a powerful statement that is already being circulated by others and having an impact. Also, I believe the collaborative process that led to has strengthened our leadership and can be a model for how we handle taking this kind of public stand in the future.

God was with us every step of the way. God was intimately involved in the lives of the members of the churches that became COTV, some of whom are in our Vision & Ministry Council. God has been involved in the relationships we have built with each other and with many throughout the Annual Conference. God was immersed in our deliberations over the past three weeks as we moved together toward creating our statement. In that process, God was with us and is always with us, luring us toward always becoming the most loving, affirming, compassionate, and passionate congregation we can be.

At their best, our lives are beautiful mosaics, adventures in continual *becoming*, through our constant interplay with God's love and luring. God loves to participate in the endless wonder of becoming—endless creativity, spontaneity, change, evolution, transformation, and renewal. How much more powerful and relational that is than the vision of God who is either a controlling puppet-master or a distant hands-off observer. God does not offer a roadmap that our lives, our relationships, or our community must follow. Yet, God can lure us out of exile and help us to get back home. To paraphrase Jeremiah, God has “a deeply loving desire for our welfare and not for harm, to give us a future with hope.”

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