

A Plan to Unite

Acts 17:22-31

May 17, 2020

I recently saw on Facebook a post from a friend that read, “The biggest waste of money for 2019: a 2020 planner.” While humorous, there is a certain level of truth to this statement, one that I can relate to. Towards the end of 2019, I bought a 2020 desk calendar for my office here at the church, and one morning, I went through and wrote in when Singers and choir practices were, when the potlucks and game nights would take place, when the Session would meet, and so much more. I filled out my calendar to the best of my ability at the time. Soon after, news of COVID-19 started spreading, and I was scratching out all the plans I had spent a morning writing down. Just like that, my plans went up in smoke, and that’s not true for just me. We all had plans that unfortunately have had to be canceled, those cancelations causing greater trouble for some than others. However, this is not the only time that we as humans have had to do this.

Just as the sign by the Lutheran church here in town read for a number of weeks, “Give God a laugh: tell Him your plans,” so too do our plans not always come to fruition because our plan is not aligned with God’s plan. As a teenager, I planned on becoming an OBGYN and marrying right out of medical school. I planned on entering the SourceAmerica Program which sends high school grads to Bulgaria for six years to get through medical school faster, cheaper, and get doctors on the front lines of our healthcare system sooner. As a child, I planned on being a superhero with a pet tiger. As you can see, none of those plans actually came to fruition, and this is because my plans were not God’s plans. We all know this as well: we plan on living one place, marrying one type of person, having one job, but God leads us in a whole new direction entirely. This plan that God has for each of us, God has for all of us, and this plan is in fact what Paul is speaking to the Areopagus about in the passage today.

Paul starts off with recounting how everything up to this point has been a part of God’s plan. He refers to God as “The God who made the world and everything in it . . . he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things.” So, we have a reference to Creation, to the formation not only of the world but all the animals and humanity as well, of how God breathed

life into the nostrils of the man he made from dirt. Paul then continues, speaking of how from this one ancestor came “all nations to inhabit the whole earth.” Scholars argue whether this is still Adam being spoken of or if this is Abraham, but regardless, we see a continuance of God’s plan of everything between Adam and Abraham. Moving forward, Paul speaks of the boundaries God sets in regards to both the physical space that humans can occupy (e.g. we can’t live underwater or in volcanos) and the time we can occupy it (“to everything there is a season”). Paul defines this boundary setting as motivation for humans to “search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him.” In other words, the vastness of Creation, of the plan God has for Creation and all its inhabitants in every time and place, amazes humans to the point of our wanting to draw near to God, to know God just as God knows us. This is even reflected in the statue Paul begins by mentioning that is “to an unknown God.” In short then, Paul is recounting for them how everything in Creation, from the tangible (e.g. water, earth, air) to the intangible (e.g. time, reasoning, intelligence/wisdom), is from God. This is not the selling point of his argument though.

Paul then moves forward, saying, “While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.” We have in this one sentence a proclamation of Jesus’ resurrection and of his coming in the future to judge the world. Then again, who better to call humans to repentance and assure them that no one is beyond repentance than Paul. Bear in mind, Paul was once known as “Saul” and was not a Christian. Rather, he persecuted Christians. He maliciously attacked, killed, and ostracized them for following Christ. Then, Saul is blinded, repents, and the scales are removed from his eyes, reborn as an advocate for Jesus as opposed to an opponent of Jesus. This however is not all there is to the plan.

This plan that Paul speaks of to the Greeks here is greater than “If you repent, you can be a part of the plan.” God’s plan is one that all of us are *already* a part of. Paul references God creating *all* of earth’s inhabitants, of *all* nations descending from *one* ancestor, says “*we* are God’s offspring,” that “*all* people are called to repent” and that “of this he has given assurance to *all*.” Not only then is the plan for humanity to be in a communal relationship with God but for humanity to be in a communal relationship with one another, for all humans in all times and

places to love one another as fellow heirs to God's Kingdom. In short, God's plan is for unity. Bridgett Green sums it up best, writing, "In the end, God's overall plan for humanity surpasses earthly imagination and limits. As Christians, we look to the resurrection to renew our faith as recipients of and participants in God's plan. As creator of all things in heaven and earth (v. 24), God unifies humans to Godself and one another."

What does this mean for us then? First and foremost, it means that no matter what happens, for better or for worse, everything is a part of God's plan. Every purpose behind our thanksgivings and supplications are, while not necessarily caused by God, part of God's plan and being used for furthering God's plan for Creation. We do not always understand *why* something happens to prevent our plans from coming to fruition or what is wrong with our plan that it doesn't align with God's plan, but we can rest assured that to everything there is a purpose. Nothing happens without it having a greater purpose in the grand scheme of things. This pandemic is no exception. When this is all over and we are meeting in person again, we are guaranteed to cherish those fellowship and worship times more than we did before. When this is over, having been forced to stay home, to "stop and smell the roses," perhaps humans will be more attentive to caring for God's Creation as we were so charged to do back in Eden. It's possible that the answer is as simple as "when this is over, humans will have better hygiene." The end result as of yet is unseen, but yet, we can still rest assured that this too is serving a purpose in God's plan to bring us closer as a congregation, as a nation, and as a species. I call you all, therefore, to ask yourselves how you have seen this plan taking place in the moment. How have you seen unity, connection, reconciliation happening for you?