

## Laying the Foundation

Sermon 123 | Greystone Baptist Church | December 5, 2021

Luke 1:57-80 & Philippians 1:3-11

“Woody Allen is [often] credited with saying, ‘If you want to make God laugh, tell Him your plans.’ We could add to it, ‘If you want to hear him laugh even louder, tell him how much you know.’”<sup>1</sup> The same phrase is echoed in songs like Van Zant’s “Help Somebody” and has been turned into artful memes, t-shirts, and bumper stickers. The quote has Jewish roots, coming from the Yiddish proverb *Der mentsh trakht un Got lakht*. Man plans and God laughs.

When you have time, later on, you should look up some other Yiddish proverbs – little wisdom statements that summarize deep truths in just a few words. You’ll find sayings like: “A tree doesn’t fall with one blow.” “Don’t pour oil on fire.” “Sometimes the cure is worse than the disease.” And “Be wary in front of a billy goat, in back of a horse, or on any side of a fool.”<sup>2</sup> You see, there’s a lot of wisdom in that.

It does seem, though, that we are living – for better or worse – the proverb “Man plans, God laughs.”

After the year 2020, many of us placed our hope in 2021. Here we are in the final month of the year, once again, trying to summon our hope so that we might dare to place it in 2022. We were planning on a different year. One with fewer masks and more vaccines. One with fewer cancelled events and more stability. One with fewer hours of quarantine and more social engagements. We were hopeful. And now we are not so sure.

We had hoped the jobs would return and people could regain some financial stability. We had hoped we might learn some things about our pre-COVID lives, things like income inequality, healthcare disparities, and the lack of affordable housing in our community. We had hoped to learn and do better on the other side.

We had hoped to emerge more compassionate, more grounded in our faith and in our relationships, more connected as one human family, more concerned with the things that matter the most... and yet all of those plans for a better version of ourselves seem as far off as they did twenty months ago.

Man plans, God laughs.

We know this proverb to be true in our personal lives as well. How many times have we planned a relaxing weekend away only to find it interrupted by a stomach bug, a

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.barrypopik.com/index.php/new\\_york\\_city/entry/if\\_you\\_want\\_to\\_make\\_god\\_laugh\\_tell\\_him\\_your\\_plans](https://www.barrypopik.com/index.php/new_york_city/entry/if_you_want_to_make_god_laugh_tell_him_your_plans)

<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Yiddish\\_proverbs](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Yiddish_proverbs)

cancelled flight, an emergency at work, or a flat tire 5 miles after pulling out of the driveway?

Man plans, God laughs.

Sometimes these words offer us the necessary levity to survive life's more frustrating moments. But other times, the idea that God might be sitting up on high enjoying a good laugh at our expense, can feel cruel, distant, and well... it can feel like the opposite of love.

Even though, the words of the proverb may rub us the wrong way at times, the deeper wisdom conveyed is perhaps one that *does* ring true with the God we have come to know through scripture.

The verses read this morning tell the story of a foundation layer, a prophet, a baby born into the family just before Jesus' birth. John the Baptist, as he would come to be known, prepared the way for Jesus by calling humanity to repent, to change, to turn away from sin and toward God. His message would be a warning of love as we would come to discover.

But before John the Baptist was *John the Baptist* he was a tiny babe growing in Elizabeth's womb. And his story is one of surprise, abrupt change, and interrupted plans.

John's parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth were both devout Jews with a priestly lineage. In fact, his father was "on duty" at the temple when the angel Gabriel came to him with the news that his wife would bear a son. When the angelic visitation occurred, Zechariah certainly wasn't planning on the interruption, in fact, his whole congregation is gathered outside waiting on him to come and deliver a speech, a sermon perhaps. But Zechariah would not be delivering a word to them any time soon.

When Gabriel told him the news that he would soon be a father, Zechariah did not believe it, he couldn't believe it. He and his wife Elizabeth believed that their time had passed and now, interrupted by an angel before going to stand before his congregation, his life changes course. His plans are irrelevant.

Because Zechariah doubts what the angel has told him, he does not believe Gabriel's words, he loses his voice and he endures a season of forced silence, until everything that the angel has foretold comes to fruition.

This would be bad enough for anyone, but for a priest this would mean taking a time out from the most public aspects of his job. Let's remember though that being a priest in the ancient world was more than a job, it was an inheritance, a family, a purpose, Zechariah's season of silence put his very identity in question. Being a priest was the thread that connected him to his ancestors. His fathers, grandfathers, and great grandfathers had all been priests before him. And what good is a priest who cannot preach? Who cannot prophesy? Who cannot offer a word of prayer? Who cannot serve as a mouthpiece for God in a community of faith?

Man plans, God laughs.

The amazing thing is, that during Zechariah's season of silence, God was hard at work.

When the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, everybody assumed the boy would be named Zechariah, like his father, after all that was the custom. But as the angel foretold, this boy is going to be different.

It's impossible to know what Zechariah was thinking as he silently waited for the birth of his son. There isn't a whole lot about it in the Gospel, after Zechariah loses his voice, Luke's focus shifts to the women. Mary visits Elizabeth and just after she leaves to return home, Elizabeth gives birth to a son. Soon the neighbors circle around prepared to name the boy after his father. Elizabeth tells them that his name isn't as they might expect, but it isn't until Zechariah writes it down that they believe. "His name is John."

Suddenly the floodgates open up as Zechariah's voice returns and his lips are filled with prophetic song. A song of praise to God who sees the pain and the suffering of God's people. A song of gratitude to God who intervenes, entering our world with acts of mercy. A song that proclaims a new way forward – light for those who sit in darkness – a new direction, a change of course, a way of peace in a world that so often tends toward discord.

Man plans, God laughs.

Sometimes it seems that the whole Gospel, especially the birth narratives, tells a story of interrupted plans, unassuming characters, and unexpected outcomes.

Elizabeth and Zechariah's story certainly fits that bill.

Maybe they'd planned on having children, but they grew old and the child never came.

Maybe a miracle would come and they'd give him a family name, but the angel had a different name in mind.

Maybe the way it happened wasn't at all what anyone expected, but it seems that God was at work all the way through, laying the foundation for a prophet named John.

One who would live on the margins and offer a baptism of repentance.

One who's voice would provoke the status quo.

One who would prepare the way for the Prince of Peace saying I baptize with water but he will baptize with the Holy Spirit.

Maybe while humanity was planning, God wasn't laughing, God was working in and through all of our disrupted plans and shattered dreams, maybe through it all God was laying a foundation for a different kind of king, a different kind of world than we could ever have imagined.

We plan... but when we make our plans they are based on our limited experiences, our limited knowledge, our limited understanding of what might be possible.

Sometimes when God is at work in our lives and in our world, our plans – thoughtful as they may be – get in the way of God’s dream of a different kind of reality. And when that happens, sometimes it’s best for us to get out of the way, to quiet our own doubts, thoughts, and ideas (like Zechariah had to do), as God lays a new foundation.

We may feel like we have been living in the proverb: *Man plans, God laughs* these last couple of years as everything we planned and dreamt possible seems to have flown out the window. But I’m not ready to give up yet because I do believe, like Paul writes to the Philippians, that the *God who began a good work in us, will see it through to completion.*

Maybe we just have to wait it out a little longer?

Maybe God is laying a foundation for something new, something better than anything we could have imagined.

After all, it is the season of incarnation, a season of miraculous interruption and unprecedented possibility.

We plan, yes...

But when God interrupts, even when it feels like an interruption we didn’t ask for, didn’t plan on, and didn’t want ... sometimes it would serve us well to quiet down, to wait, to watch, and to see what kind of foundation God is laying.

We plan, yes. But we all know that things don’t always work out as planned.

...and sometimes, that is the best gift we could ever receive.