

“Plan A”

Reading: Genesis 18:16-23; Ephesians 1:3-6

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Abraham was having a big day. It had started out as a very ordinary day, and when the sun started getting hot, Abraham was sitting in the shade of his tent, just relaxing, like any normal day. Maybe the heat started making him drowsy, and he might have started dozing a bit, and then as so often happens when you take a nap while sitting up, he jerked back awake when he began to slouch over. And when he woke up and looked around, he saw that he wasn't alone: there were three visitors there with him, standing opposite him. Abraham took hospitality very seriously; these men were guests, and he wasn't about to let them stand there in the heat of the day without taking care of them. So he invited them in, and he prepared his best food for them, and he waited there for them as their servant while they ate.

What Abraham didn't realize at first was that he was in the presence of the Lord. God himself appeared to Abraham that day in human form, and after Abraham had served God, God blessed him with the promise of a child. And then they all got up from there, and they looked down the road, down into the valley in the distance, where the city of Sodom lay. And the Lord started thinking out loud. God asked, seemingly to himself, “Should I hide my plan from Abraham? Should I hide from him that I'm going to destroy Sodom?” God was doing the same thing your mother used to do when she didn't want to do the dishes that night, and after dinner she'd say, “Boy, it sure would be nice if I didn't have to wash the dishes tonight.” She's not *really* thinking out loud, she's trying to tell you in a roundabout way that she wants you to volunteer to do the dishes for her. And likewise, God was wondering out loud whether to tell Abraham about Sodom because he wanted Abraham to ask him about Sodom and intercede for it.

And then comes a remarkable verse: Genesis 18:22. Your translation says something like, “Then the men turned and went toward Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before the Lord.” But that's probably not what the text originally said. When it was written, the text probably said that they went to Sodom and *the Lord* remained standing *before Abraham*. Sometime between then and now, some scribes switched things around, because they knew that surely God wouldn't wait on Abraham. It must have been the other way around, they thought, Abraham must have waited on God, because God is the superior, and a superior doesn't wait on someone less important than they are. It's like when you have a doctor's appointment. If you're late to the appointment, it's too bad for you, because doctors are busy people and they have other patients to see. The doctor isn't going to wait on you; you're going to have to wait on the doctor, and if you're late, you're going to have to make another appointment and come back another time. That's the way it works. So it certainly wouldn't make sense for *God* to wait on *Abraham*, because God's the one in charge and Abraham is the servant.

Even so, it said that God wondered aloud whether he should tell Abraham that he was going to destroy Sodom, and then God waited on Abraham. God had a plan; he knew that Abraham's nephew Lot was living in Sodom, and he was waiting for Abraham to ask God to spare Lot and his family. God had a plan to save Lot's life, but he wanted to involve Abraham in that plan. Fortunately, after God waited for a moment, Abraham asked God not to destroy Lot, and God sent his angels to save Lot's life. All along, that was part of God's plan, and he wanted Abraham to take part in that plan.

This is one of the first examples of God's plan in the Bible. In Genesis, God has a plan to give the descendants of Abraham a home in the land of Canaan; sometimes the story makes us wonder how God is going to give Abraham any descendants, and sometimes it makes us wonder how they're going to get into the land, but all along, there's a plan. It's a big plan, much bigger than just Abraham and his family. And sometimes it's a surprising plan, because God uses people that we don't think he should use, or he takes them places we don't think they should go, or he lets people participate when we don't think they're worthy. But all along, God has a plan.

The apostle Paul wrote the book of Ephesians with that plan in mind. Paul wrote the entire book of Ephesians dealing with the meaning of the church. He wrote the book to explain why we get together on Sunday mornings; to explain why and how we're different from other people; to explain the reason for our faith. The book of Ephesians is one of the best places in the Bible to go to understand what the church is all about. That's what we want to know: we want to discern how God wants this church to join in his work in the world, and we want to know how we can serve him in this community, and so we need to know why we as a church are even here.

So Paul wrote the book of Ephesians partly to explain the foundation of God's church, and he begins the book with the verses we read a little bit ago. Paul says that God chose us to be in Christ even before the creation of the world; even before God made light or land or the sky, he had already decided that we would be holy and blameless, set apart for him. Before any of us were even born, God had a plan that we would be adopted as his sons and daughters. The church was predestined to be set apart for God before humans even existed. To give you some perspective on just how big of a deal that is, Jesus is mentioned elsewhere throughout the New Testament as being predestined before creation as well; the plans that God had since before creation are big-league stuff. The core of our message is how the death and resurrection of Jesus changed the world, how nothing is the same after Easter as it was before, and so it's fitting that God would have plans for something that big since before creation. But Paul is saying that God's plan for the church is on that same scale; God was planning for the church at the same time that he was planning for Jesus to come and change the world.

Some Christians interpret that to mean that God has set aside certain individual people to be saved, as though even before creation, God had chosen to save certain people but not others. That's not what Paul is talking about in this passage, though. He's not saying that God predestined Joe to be a Christian and John to be a sinner, so that neither Joe nor John has any say in the matter. What Paul is saying is that before God started creating, he had a plan, and in that plan, God intended that the church would be a part of that plan. God didn't predestine individual people, God predestined the church to be his agent in the world to seek and save those who are lost.

Here's the payoff: God's church throughout the world is part of his plan of saving the world. The church is of cosmic significance; just like the work of Christ was an integral part of God's plan, so too is the church an important part of God's work in the world. And just like God waited for Abraham to ask him to save Lot's life, so too God wants to involve us in his work. Paul says that it was because of God's grace that he planned for the church; the church is founded only on God's grace. God was gracious enough to wait on Abraham, rather than making Abraham wait on him. God wants us to be a part of his work; he doesn't want to do his work without us, and in fact we *are* God's work.

The church is part of God's first and best plan for reconciling us to himself; in fact, we *are* the plan. God wants to save people from sin and death and save them for himself, and the church throughout the world is *plan A* for doing that. It's not that God can't work without help from the church, but he chooses to work in and through us to do his work in the world. If we're plan A, that means we're not plan B, C, D, or anything else. Some people think of the church as a lifeboat or an escape capsule, but that's not what we are. People on a ship will only use the lifeboat when everything else has gone wrong. You only get into the lifeboats when plans A through Y have failed and you have no choice but to abandon ship. Some people think of the world as a sinking ship, and they see the church as the lifeboat for the ship. Everything else has gone wrong, they think; things are so bad that God can't really fix anything, so it's time to let the ship sink and he'll just try again elsewhere. So they think that the job of the church is to be a lifeboat, and our job as people in the lifeboat is to get as many other people into the lifeboat as we can before they drown. Then, when everyone's safely in the lifeboat, we just sit there, maybe sing some songs or play some games to pass the time, but there's not really much else we can do until God comes and rescues us from the wreck. We're not a lifeboat. We're not plan Z. We're not a last refuge, a place to sit and wait for God to do something; the church should be the place where God is doing his best and greatest work today.

Other people think the church is kind of like a country club, where you pay your dues and then you get to sit back, relax, and enjoy the blessings of the good life. They think that all you have to do is get saved, then you get to enjoy all the blessings of God for free, you get to have a good time with all the joy and happiness and prosperity and victory and you don't have to do any work. A country club is a place for recreation, a place to make connections with other people, for some it's a place to see and be seen. And that's fine for a country club, but the church isn't a country club. The church is part of God's plan, and a plan means something is happening, there's work being done, we're making a difference. You don't need a plan for rest and relaxation; you need a plan when you're going to build something, when you're going somewhere, when you've got a mission to accomplish.

The point is that since before the beginning of time, God has had a plan for his creation, and the church throughout the world has always been a part of that plan. Paul tells us in Ephesians 1:10 that God's intent is for all of creation to be summed up in Christ, so that everything and everyone would come under Christ's lordship. If we're a part of that, if God is waiting for us to respond like he waited for Abraham, then we have a fantastic and solemn responsibility. God is gracious enough to involve us, but that means that he expects us to join in the work. Any church that wants to do what it's supposed to do as God's church but isn't willing to buckle down and get busy doing the hard work of building God's kingdom isn't understanding what it means to be part of God's plan. It's hard work bringing all things under Christ's lordship and making disciples of all nations.

If we're going to understand what we as a church should do, then we have to begin by understanding the place that God gives us in his plan. We have to glimpse just how important the church is in God's intent of saving the world. We as the church *are* God's plan, even with our warts and our mistakes and our sins, and we're the plan that he's had since the beginning. As we move forward toward the work God has for us, we have to remember that God is the one who saves, but in his grace he involves us in the hard work of building his kingdom.

We are still in the Easter season, the time of year when we remember that morning when God

raised Jesus from the dead, proclaiming once and for all that Jesus Christ is the Lord of everything. If Jesus is the Lord, we need to know what he wants us to do in response. That's why we're spending these weeks between Easter and Pentecost learning who we are as a church defined by Easter. When Jesus came out of that tomb, everything changed, and even though most people don't know it yet, the world is different. The church is God's plan for living in a different, changed world.

As we seek to respond as God's church, we've given you a space on the back of your bulletin to write the names of three people that you will commit to pray for. Take a moment to write the names of three people you know of who need God to work in their lives. We believe in prayer, and we believe that God hears our prayers, and so if we're going to do the work of God's plan, one way that we can start is by praying for people that we know who need God. This is a small step that we can all take toward being a part of God's plan. In the next few weeks we're going to look at other specific ways that we can live out that plan, but we can begin during the next week to pray and ask God to work in people's lives, and we can ask him to show us how we can participate in that work.



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