

Advent 4C, 2012

Text: Luke 1:39-45

Title: The Birth Plan

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When our first child was born, I was introduced to the concept of a “birth plan.” In case you’ve never heard of a “birth plan” this is when expecting moms and dads plan out every last detail of the birth of their child. It could include things like what sorts of pain medications you plan to take, or who you want with you in the delivery room to details like what you want to wear and how you want the room decorated, the music you want playing when your baby is born, or even the smells and fragrances you want surrounding you. One nurse told us about a couple who wanted to have a silent delivery. They didn’t want anyone talking, and so the doctors and nurses had to communicate using signs and hand signals. It can get pretty outrageous.

Most of the time, it’s the first time parents who come up with the most elaborate and detailed birth plans. But when labor comes, things don’t always go according to plan, and the birth plan goes out the window.

Even if Mary and Joseph had a birth plan, Christmas did not go according to their plan. This is not the way they would have planned things. This is not how any of us would plan the birth of a child.

First was the conception of Jesus before their marriage. Mary was promised to Joseph and remained a virgin before getting married, an example to all of us. Too many people easily give in to temptation, and fail to remain sexually pure. But not Mary. Mary was faithful and was waiting for her wedding, but then she got a visit from Gabriel. That was certainly not according to plan.

It was not according to Joseph’s plan, either. He decided to divorce Mary, until the angel came and told him what was going on, that Mary had not done anything wrong, and that the child was to be the Son of God and the Savior of the world.

So Joseph went ahead with the wedding, and then they probably made some plans for the birth of their child. Whatever plans they made, a cross country trip at the last minute was probably not one of them. They would have planned to have their baby in the comforts of their home, and not halfway across the country.

Nowadays doctors often place travel restrictions on pregnant women, so they don’t go into labor on an airplane or somewhere far from a hospital or doctor. But Joseph and Mary had no choice. When Caesar says, “Go!” you go.

When Mary and Joseph set out for Bethlehem, they probably had plans to stay with relatives. This was Joseph’s ancestral home, because he came from David’s family. He would have had plenty of uncles and cousins and distant relations that he could have stayed with.

But once again, things didn't go according to plan. No one would invite them in. No one had a place for them, not even a spare couch. Not even the inn had any room. They probably knew that Mary had gotten pregnant before the wedding, and they didn't want anything to do with them.

And so instead of giving birth in the comforts of home, or at the very least in a relative's house or an inn, they are out with the animals in a barn. Certainly not what they had planned.

And even after Jesus had been born, Mary and Joseph probably planned to have a restful night, but then a bunch of shepherds showed up out of nowhere.

Mary and Joseph must have felt like everything in their life was chaotic and out of control. They had made these plans to get married and have a peaceful life together, only to have one major crisis to deal with after another.

So how has the Christmas season gone for you this year? Has everything gone smoothly and according to plan? Or does it seem like you've been dealing with one major crisis after another? And what about your life as a whole? Has everything gone exactly the way you planned it out? Or has your whole life felt chaotic and out of control?

If I had to bet, I would wager that chaos seems more likely than calm, that everything hasn't gone according to plan.

Sometimes it's a good thing. Sometimes what happens to us is better than we could have planned or imagined. Sometimes we lose one job only to find a better one. Sometimes we get dumped by a boyfriend or girlfriend, the one you were sure was "the one," only to fall in love with someone much better for you.

But more often than not, when things don't go according to plan, it's not better, it's worse. Often it's sickness and pain that come when we least expect it. Often it's a loved one who dies or moves away, leaving an emptiness behind. Often it's disappointment when someone you trust lies to you or lets you down, and nothing seems to go according to plan.

So how did Mary and Joseph deal with this chaos in their lives? How did they respond when things didn't go according to plan?

Mary's response to the angel is a good place to start. When the angel told her that she would be the mother of God, she simply said, "I am the Lord's servant, may it be unto me as you have said."

Mary trusted the Lord, and she knew that even if things didn't go according to her plan, that the Lord had a plan, and she was His servant.

Our sense of chaos and confusion comes when we try to be the Lord, when we try to control things, when we pretend like we're in charge, instead of being servants, and trusting in God.

God had a plan. It must have been difficult for Mary and Joseph to see at times. It must have been hard for Joseph to trust in God when he heard that his fiancée was pregnant. It must have been hard for Mary to trust in God when she was giving birth in a barn (the angel hadn't mentioned that part). But the Lord kept them safe through it all, and used them in His plan of salvation.

This what we do, when we face chaos and confusion in our lives. We trust in the Lord, and we find examples in the Bible and in our own lives of the Lord's care for people.

Now you might be thinking, if God has a plan and everything goes according to His plan, why does all the bad stuff still happen? Were the shooting in Connecticut part of his plan? Was losing my job part of His plan? Is all the pain and strife in my family part of His plan?

The answer is not going to satisfy you. The answer is "yes and no." Yes, God is all-powerful. Yes, God knows what will happen even before it happens. Yes, God could change things if He wanted to.

No, God doesn't want evil things to happen. God has given us the ability to make choices, and sometimes we make evil choices. No, God doesn't expect you to like it or just sit back and ignore these evil things.

No, God doesn't reveal all the details of His plans to you. No, you are never going to be able to understand or comprehend God. That's what makes Him God.

Last week we heard about John in prison. Things did not go according to plan for John, either. But what did Jesus tell him to do? Look and listen to Jesus. What does Jesus say? What does Jesus do? How does Jesus deal with the chaos and confusion around Him?

Jesus brings order and peace. Jesus heals and He blesses. He gives His disciples a picture of the coming kingdom and what that will be like. He suffers and dies, giving His life for the salvation of the world. He sends His disciples to baptize and teach, to forgive sins and preach good news.

There are two ways that Jesus deals with all the chaos that evil causes in the world.

First, He deals with evil here and now. He forgives you for the times that your decisions have brought evil into the world, when the chaos and confusion are your fault. He forgives you for all the wrong choices that you have made, the plans that you have created that were not His plans.

He also forgives you for your lack of faith and trust in Him, when things don't go the way that you expect. He strengthens your faith to trust in Him even when things go wrong, whether it's your fault or not. He does this through His Word, which carries the Holy Spirit to you.

Second, He will deal with evil once and for all when He returns. I know that Christmas Eve is already tomorrow, but it's still Advent today. We're still waiting and watching for Jesus' second coming. When Jesus returns He will put an end to all the chaos and confusion that reigns in

our world. He will destroy death and the devil, He will put an end to pain and suffering, and there will only be peace and joy and happiness.

Until that day, we live in a chaotic world. Our plans don't always turn out. And that's okay. God is with you. He was with Mary and Joseph every step of the way to Bethlehem. You are His servant, He won't let anything happen that is too much for you to bear. God Himself came in the flesh at Christmas to live and die for you, that you will be set free from the chaos that evil brings into our world. That's God's plan for you, and it will happen.