

Your Plans for Christmas? 2020
2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16 James 4:13-15

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16 (New Revised Standard Version)

Now when the king was settled in his house, and the Lord had given him rest from all his enemies around him, the king said to the prophet Nathan, "See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent." Nathan said to the king, "Go, do all that you have in mind; for the Lord is with you." But that same night the word of the Lord came to Nathan: Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the Lord: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, "Why have you not built me a house of cedar?" Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the Lord of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly, from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house. Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.

James 4:13-15 (New Revised Standard Version)

Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money." Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that."

For most of my adult life,
a large part of Christmas has been about **making plans**.
During college, arranging for a ride to spend Christmas at home,
finding a job over the break and getting together with friends.

Later, when I operated office product and stationery stores
Christmas gift-merchandise was an important part of that business.
I needed to plan & budget for advertising & gift items well in advance
by May so that I could negotiate deals with vendors
at the New York National Stationery and Gift Show.
All that planning was essential for my business to grow and succeed.

This year,
Christmas is not going to be like we're used to, for any of us.
Our **familiar plans**, traditions & gatherings aren't going to happen...
... so what do we make of all that?

In 2nd Samuel we read about David **making plans** for some construction.
He had come a very long way, rising from a shepherd boy to king,
and under his leadership, consolidating Israel into a nation,
and building himself a palace made of costly cedar...

... and it seemed to be the right time to build a temple to honor God.

So King David checked-in with the prophet Nathan,
to confirm his plans about building a grand temple,
who quickly agreed that it was indeed a very good idea...

... and in fact it all seemed so very sensible to the prophet,
that he didn't bother check it out with God before speaking.

But that night, after having approved and supported David's plan,
in a prophetic vision, David's building permit was revoked, vs. 4~7

But that same night the word of the LORD came to Nathan: Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the LORD: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle.... did I ever speak a word ... saying, "Why have you not built me a house of cedar?"

Sometimes, we can get so wrapped up in our own plans & expectations,
that we assume they must be God's will and that surely
our pet project or program has God's full blessing.
In fact, so sure, we may stop listening and paying attention to God.

In our text, the Lord God reasserts his sovereignty and rule, vs. 8

Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the LORD of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel.

Notice, that God refers to David as my servant David, and not king.
Now truly David is loved, blessed and called by God,
but the Lord is still in charge... not David.

It's never the creature's place to direct or control the Creator!

Therefore, any temple building will be God's way, in God's time,
and not according to any plans or blueprints drawn up by David.
Like grace, God accomplishes the planning & heavy lifting, not us.

As believers and disciples of Christ, we are called and invited
to join-in & participate **following** God's will, mission & purpose.

It's never about us telling God how to fulfill our plans & agenda.

The issue is not that the Lord is being difficult or obstinate,
but that God is up to something far better & more marvelous, vs. 10~12.

I will make for you a great name, ... Moreover the LORD declares to you that **the LORD will make you a house. ... **I will** raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and **I will** establish his kingdom.**

Did you catch that string of promises? **those I will assurances?**

Now this is the best part --- God flatly rejects David's plans,
because God has something far beyond even David's wildest dreams...

... which was of course was fulfilled in the coming of Christ,
when God chose to be human in the person of Jesus
whose family lineage descended through David.

**David won't be building a house for God, because in fact,
God intends to build David into a house ...**

... not a human-built temple, but a dynasty – the family lineage,
through which Jesus Christ, the promised Messiah would come.

There's also an additional meaning or wordplay on this word "house".

God won't dwell in structure of stone and brick made by humans,
but rather God chooses to dwell in flesh, in human hearts,
among the people of God those gathered in God's name--

- as the Apostle Paul describes it in (1 Corinthians 3:16-17b NRSV)

Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? ... For God's temple is holy,
and you are that temple.

"You aren't going to build me a temple,
because I am going to build you **into a temple**."

The Temple is a gift and grace from the Lord God
and not something we do or accomplish by trying harder.

No, it's about a shift in our focus,
to reset our perspective to the divine, toward what God is doing,
and join-in with God's work-project, God's purpose and agenda.

The point is, **a critical and powerful change in our perspective.**

It's about drawing closer, cooperating with God's grace, and letting
the Holy Spirit guide us to refocus on the works and will **of God**,
by embracing the truth that God is good and his promises are sure.

As the prophet Isaiah wrote, 26:4

Trust in the Lord forever, for in the Lord God you have an everlasting rock.

We have an everlasting rock, thanks be to God!

It's all grace, as God opens our eyes to see a new perspective,

or as Paul explains, 2 Cor. 5:7, for we walk by faith, not by sight.

It really comes down to what do we truly trust and actually believe.

Am I absolutely certain and am I entirely confident
that God is good, powerful and does have it all worked out,
and that in the end, God will surely accomplish all of it?

If we do believe and trust that all of that is true and reliable,
then it doesn't depend on us, on our works or accomplishments.

No, our task is to be in line with God's will, and not get in the way.

When I am at my most faithful and **spiritually-attuned best**,

in every situation and regardless of whatever is going on,

I know the right questions to ask always include:

**Where can I perceive the Lord in this, what might God be up to in this,
and how can this serve to fulfill the will and purpose of the Lord?**

**What could God be intending to show me through all of this,
and how will God transform this challenge into a blessing?**

Our ultimate concern and our focus both need to be on God,
and not limited or governed by our desires or our agenda...

**... for our most carefully constructed plans and preparations
are really no more than just a candle flickering in the wind...**

...as we read in James 4:14-15

Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that."

We do not know what tomorrow holds for us,
but we do know who ---- holds us and holds our tomorrow,
and that is our hope and our secure assurance.

**It is resetting our minds, our self-understanding and perspective,
away from this world, our immediate concerns, and human things,
by learning to perceive and notice divine things ,
God's gracious presence happening all around us...**

... to wait upon the Lord and allow space for healing and hope,
by looking for where God is present and already at work.

It is learning to say: "Not my will, but THY will be done."
It's to focus and trust in God, rather than in ourselves.

It's learning to see **with gratitude** and to have an awareness of God,
and saying, **Lord, you take charge, enter and rule throughout.**

To follow Jesus is to turn from our point of view
and to take up God's point of view **and make it our own.**

The good news is that truly God loves us,
that God provides for us and is doing great things with us,
and that God has something far better in mind for us,
better than even the best of plans we might devise.

My own experience is that God does faithfully lead us,
but usually we can see only a few steps at a time.

I've never experienced the Lord laying out the whole plan before me,
but God seems to delight in gradually leading – lovingly nudging,
step-by-step when I am willing to pause, pray and to listen...
... and how blessed I've been when I've chosen to obey.

**** So, how do these two passages apply to us, today?**

On this last Sunday of Advent,
these texts suggest two major lessons for our consideration.

1st We can get so locked into our planning, demands and desires
that we may miss recognizing and appreciating
the true blessings and gracious gifts received from God.

This can be especially true at Christmas time,
with so many cultural and familiar expectations and pressures,
when we typically run ourselves and others around us ragged
trying to achieve the perfect Christmas celebration...

... when our plans, our memories, expectations and assumptions
may frequently cause us to doubt, reject, or dismiss or devalue
the surprising, the incredible, wonderful and unexpected
that God lovingly intends for us to receive as his gift.

Too often we foolishly and mistakenly suppose or assume
that a good and meaningful Christmas is something we can achieve,
or that we can orchestrate, control or direct our Christmas,
rather than the truth, God's truth and abiding love,
that it is entirely a gift, graciously given by God.

In short, we're not really in charge!

2nd God is sovereign, not our plans, or our intentions or agendas.

Even our ideas and desires for doing and accomplishing good,
will fall short, become corrupted, and even destructive,
if in our pride, self-determination and insistence
we ignore or by-pass listening for the Lord our God.

Remember, God rejected David's plans **for something far better.**

In December of 1914,

Thomas Edison's New Jersey laboratories burned to the ground.

The next morning as he walked among the still-smoldering rubble

where so many of his amazing inventions had originated, he said,

"There is great value in disaster. All our mistakes are burned up and now we can start anew."

Or as the Apostle Paul wrote, Phil. 3:13-14

... this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

No, our Christmas this year is not going to be what we've been used to,

but since so much of our busy planning and activities won't happen,

perhaps that will allow us more focus on what really does matter.

With a quieter, and less hectic and demanding Christmas this year,

rather than complaining or worrying about what isn't & cannot be,

instead let's pour ourselves into the many blessings that we do have.

Considering my own life, the changes and events of my own history,

my own planning and plotting toward the future I intended to build...

... today I am so grateful for all those times when God said, "No, Norm",

no, I will not leave you doing science in a laboratory

no, I will not leave you working in the business world ...

... I have something for you **that will fit you much better**, and

what an amazingly gracious, wise and wonderful God we serve.

Did you know that back in March, the elders on Session had a retreat

and we spent the day talking, praying & making plans for the church?

The Corona virus was just starting to appear in news reports,

so the elders decided to discontinue after-worship fellowship,

until we knew more about it and this virus-thing was resolved.

This past week I looked at the notes I prepared for that retreat,

and my comments addressed to the Session included this statement:

"We must improve our communication and use of technology,

and be able make videos and live-stream our worship services."

That's a quote,

and two weeks later we were locked-down by the Governor's order,

and had to rely entirely on making credible worship videos.

Isn't it remarkable how abundantly our church has been blessed,

as God transformed a challenge and difficulty forced upon us,

into an amazing opportunity to change and to grow in new ways?

The Christian life is not about us trying to build our lives,

**but, it's God in us, God in charge of our lives, God building us,
God accomplishing far better and more than we could figure out.**

It's about Advent, the coming of Jesus Christ into our lives.

Or, as the Apostle Paul reminds us in Ephesians 3:20-21

Now to him who by the power **at work within us** is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.