

Sermon | Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Exodus 3:1-15, Matthew 16:21-28 | The Rev. Barnabas Pusunur | September 3, 2023

We have plans for our lives.
And then... God has plans for us too.

We use our God-given rationality, the wisdom of scripture and tradition, and our own unique experiences to chart the course of our lives. And this is how it's supposed to be. At least this is how it's supposed to be most of the time. But we err when we think that this is exclusively how God can and must operate. We err when we limit God to operate only in ways we understand. We err when we try and domesticate God to human limits.

Two people in this Sunday's scripture readings encountered a God who had plans different from theirs.

Moses had made peace with his life. He had started anew. Back in the days of his youthful vigor and royal upbringing, he had thought he could bring justice to the oppression his people suffered in Egypt. However, he soon realized that he was no leader. His own people told him: "Who made you ruler and judge over us?". He therefore fled from Egypt, away from the Egyptian soldiers because of the treason of siding with the Hebrews, and away from his people since they did not want him. He escaped and no longer wanted to have anything to do with the events in Egypt.

He had journeyed far enough east to the land of the Midianites. He chose to settle down there to start a new life. This was his plan. His promising plan for his life. There seemed to be some confirmation that this plan was good. One day he sees some women coming to a well to draw water for their flock. However, they are harassed and driven away by some shepherds. Moses comes to their defense, draws water for their flock, and ends up meeting their family. The chance encounter with the family leads him to stay with them and eventually even marry one of the daughters of the family. His wife is Zipporah. They soon have a son and name him Gershom.

So, Moses now has a new identity. A new address: he is a Midianite. A new profession: he is a shepherd and takes care of the flock of his father-in-law. A new culture and maybe a new variation of faith as well: though the Midianites were an offshoot of Abraham's extended family, it had been generations, and this wilderness tribe must have developed its own religious customs.

On top of that Moses' own father-in-law was a priest in this community.

All is good for Moses. He is at a good place in his life. Or so he thought.

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A long time had passed, the Pharaoh in Egypt that Moses knew had died, and as one day Moses was shepherding the flock beyond Midian, he comes to this mountain called Horeb. To him this may have been an ordinary mountain. But this mountain was to become a mountain of great significance in Israelite history.

That day, Moses was to encounter God who had a completely different plan for his life. At that mountain God appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush. God's appearance in ancient Israel had always been a mysterious and consuming presence. When God calls out Moses' name and speaks to him, Moses hides his face out of fear.

And then God lays out the plan he has for Moses. A plan that Moses might have never even dreamt of. God says, I have heard the cry of my people in Egypt and the suffering they have been experiencing. And then out of the blue he declares his plan: "So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." This must have been like a lightning bolt to Moses. Moses might have thought that there is obviously some mistake here. Maybe God is speaking to the wrong guy. Maybe God forgot that Moses now has a nice and settled life and family in Midian. Maybe God did not really think through the implications of this assignment on his family life. There is definitely some error here!

And so Moses immediately responds: "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" I am not part of this. I have left behind that world long back. I am a nobody when it comes to the political and civic affairs of Egypt. "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"

But God had other plans.

The disciple Peter had a similar encounter with God. He thought he understood divine things. He thought he knew how God

operates. Just a while before this encounter Jesus had asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

Peter's response showed his profound understanding of Jesus. It showed that for Peter Jesus was someone who was way more significant than just a good man, a good ethical teacher, or even a prophet. Peter, hit the nail on the head, when he declared: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

Jesus too was greatly impressed by Peter's understanding. Jesus says: "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven." Peter has received special understanding from God. Peter must have indeed felt blessed at that.

And then Jesus doesn't stop, he declares a glowing future for Peter. Jesus continues: "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

How would Peter have felt at this amazing declaration for his life. Humbled, blessed, and simply amazed!

If I was in Peter's place, I would have felt so glad from this assurance of my calling to be a leader in this Jesus movement. I would have thought that this is the beginning of a new and exciting phase of my ministry. That Jesus who was the founder of this movement has just declared me to be the CEO. I would not take this responsibility lightly and may have been charting plans of how this Jesus movement would succeed. How Jesus, this Messiah, this Son of the living God, would liberate Israel and the world.

All is good for Peter. He is at a good place in his life. Or so he thought.

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As soon as Jesus gives this amazing declaration for Peter, he states the next plan of action for the movement. I "must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised."

Just like Moses, this plan of action was a lightning bolt for Peter. Where did this come from? Peter might have had plans for this movement to grow and be strong, and here is Jesus is talking of what looks like a doomed strategy- go to Jerusalem, be persecuted, and killed, and hope to be raised from the dead. What?! Is this even a plan?

So, Peter immediately takes Jesus aside, and like a true leader and well-wisher rebukes Jesus. "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." Jesus had just said, I *must* go to Jerusalem and suffer, and here is Peter saying, this *must* never happen.

Jesus' response to Peter's rebuke, though extremely harsh, highlights the point of how we miserably err when we draw boundaries around God and try and domesticate him to our own understanding. Jesus says, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

Like all of us, Moses and Peter may have for a moment forgotten that the ways of the divine are beyond us. Beyond us in comprehension and beyond us in power. We are limited by our humanity. But God is not.

An unexpected and confusing turn in our lives, may just need us to be more open to God's way. To strive to set our minds on divine things: on God's infinite wisdom and power. God's ways are sometimes different than ours. And it is good once in a while to be reminded of it: whether through difficult circumstances, or through unexpectedly good life changes. It may be wise for us to keep ourselves open to God mysterious work and plan in our lives.

Moses did end up bringing the people of Israel out of Egypt. Peter did end up leading the church after Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection. They did find their way after a moment of confusion, hesitation, and anxiety. May we hold on to God through such unexpected times and always keep our minds open to God's mysterious work in our lives. Amen.