

Making Plans

This morning finds us in the divided kingdom once again. Things continue to unravel, and the hope of re-unifying the two kingdoms into one has all but completely crumbled. The two kingdoms have now become enemy states:

It is in the southern part, Judah, where Isaiah lives and prophesies. The northern kingdom, Israel, was at this time at war with Assyria, and Judah refused to get involved. Judah was then invaded by Israel so Judah asked [for] help from Assyria (Israel's enemy) who came to their aid and [held] off Israel...To pay for all of this, [Judah's king] Ahaz paid the Assyrian king money from Judah's coffers along with giving him holy items from the Temple. He also let the Assyrians build idols in the holy places of Judah.¹

As you may imagine, God is not pleased with King Ahaz choosing political and strategic safety at the expense of devotion to the one true God, nor is Isaiah. However, Isaiah does see hope for Judah in a coming king. [Read Isaiah 9:2-7]

After my younger brother had been home from the hospital for about six weeks, I told my mother that this was not working out and that we should take him back. His arrival had messed up everything, and I was convinced that life had been just fine before he arrived. Why mess with perfection? (I do want to go on record and say that I'm eternally grateful that my parents did not listen to 2-year-old me.) Disruption by a newborn is nothing new; we've seen it

¹ *Spill the Beans*, vol. 24, p.86

several times over just this fall. Abraham and Sarah find their lives turned upside down with the birth of Isaac when their Silver Sneakers are threadbare and buried somewhere in the closet. No one is expecting anything from Moses—the Hebrew baby hidden in a basket who floats right under Pharaoh’s nose and into his court, the same baby who goes on to lead the Hebrew people out of Egypt and out of slavery through the parted Red Sea. And of course there is that other baby, the one whose birth we’ll celebrate in a few weeks. No one in power expects much from him either, and yet he goes on to turn the world upside down for good.

The child of whom Isaiah speaks will also be one to upend the status quo. He is light for the darkness after long years of war and uncertainty. He is one to bring in peace, not simply the absence of war, but full, deep, and lasting wholeness. His birth is cause for celebration—like the celebrations thrown at the time of an abundant harvest or an underdog’s victory in battle. He’s a big deal with titles to match. We know these names by heart thanks to Handel and Amy Grant—Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. I’m not sure how to fit those names on a baby blanket or a Christmas stocking. These are big names for a tiny child, huge expectations from a nation in crisis. It’s a lot to ask of a baby.

This morning, I got to do one of my favorite things: I got to baptize not one, not two, but three children, Murphy, Ward, and baby Fletcher. With babies and children come hope and joy. No matter how fraught or treacherous the landscape may be, the arrival of a child gives us a sense that there is a future, that we have a future, that God has not given up on humanity just yet. And that’s no small thing. The great good news is that God had not given up on Israel

or Judah. The great good news is that God has not given up on us either. And Sundays like this one give us a chance to remember that.

Each time we gather at the font, we are invited to remember our own baptism, the time when the water was splashed on our heads, the moment when those gathered around us made promises to us and to each other and to God. We are reminded that we do absolutely nothing to earn or deserve God's love or God's grace and that God—the true keeper of promises—will stop at nothing to free us and bring us home. Our tradition has always made a practice of baptizing infants, which throws some people a bit. They worry that the child doesn't get to decide for herself. They insist that the child can't yet fully understand what it means to be a child of God. Although I'm not sure any one of us can claim that we fully understand that gift either. As precious as each child is, however, in the end, baptism is not strictly about the baby or the child (or the teenager or the adult for that matter). Yes, we are right to make a fuss over each precious little one. We make important and solemn promises to the children and to their parents on behalf of the church universal. We celebrate and giggle and ooh and ahh, but ultimately the sacrament points not to any one child but to the God who loves that child beyond measure before the child can even utter God's name.

Which brings us back to those names given to this baby in Isaiah. Where Handel has us sing about the Wonderful Counselor, another translation names him, "The Mighty God is planning grace; The Eternal Father, a peaceable ruler."² That is a mouthful. These names will not fit easily on a baby blanket, but in this translation these names explicitly point beyond the

² Isaiah 9:5, The Jewish Study Bible, Tanakh translation

child to the God who brings hope and transformation *through* that child. In the original historical context, Isaiah appears to hold out hope for a new beginning in Hezekiah, the next King of Judah who manages to hold off a foreign king and save Jerusalem—at least for a moment. These names and this promise are a lot to place on the shoulders of any human being, let alone a small child. In the end it's more than any one human being can pull off. But then there's that phrase at the end of the passage—"The zeal of the Lord of Hosts will do this."

We get nervous about this zeal business. Too often zealots from any host of religious traditions—including our own—twist their religious views and cause harm and bring destruction in the name of something holy or sacred. God's zeal is different. God's passion is for the weak and the worn out, the vulnerable and the forgotten. And this God, Isaiah reminds us, is zealous, passionate and determined about bringing mercy, about planning for grace. And again, this planning is not about the baby, not yet anyway. Instead, it is about the God who has been bringing light in the darkness, hope in the face of despair, and life at even the deadest of dead ends from the birth of creation until now. I've lost count of how many second chances this God has given the people of God in our texts this fall, just as I have lost count of how many second chances this God has given me. This God, our God chooses—and keeps choosing—to work transformation and forgiveness and justice and peace not through might or force or scare tactics or lightning bolts, but through the most vulnerable and most ordinary means—through human beings, who begin as babies, one and all.

This God who plans grace, this God who creates the world and pushes back cosmic chaos is the same God who is passionate about making the world right, the same God who

chooses to work those plans, those schemes through people like you and Murphy and Ward and Fletcher and me, through people like Mary Katherine Strobel and her baby boy Charles. Mary Katherine routinely fed her unhoused neighbors and gave them clothes out of her kitchen in her Germantown neighborhood in Nashville, Tennessee. As he was growing up, Charles saw nothing unusual about his mother's caring ways. Because she did them so routinely, these things were normal, just the way things were done. Charles went on to become a Catholic priest in the same neighborhood and fed his unhoused neighbors peanut butter and jelly sandwiches on the church steps. When the Army Corps of Engineers planned to close an encampment near the Cumberland River, Strobel came up with a plan of his own. He invited the ones who had gathered in the church parking lot that night to sleep inside the church. He jokingly told them, "Don't hurt each other and don't burn the building down, and I'll feed you breakfast in the morning." They didn't and he did. Strobel understood that one night and one church could not solve the larger problem, so he contacted other churches and with four founding congregations, the life-changing ministry known as Room in the Inn was born. Mary Katherine was killed one week after that first night. Rather than turn away in grief, Charles chose instead to leave parish work and devote himself to Room in the Inn full time. Today, Room in the Inn is a shared ministry of hundreds of congregations throughout Nashville. In addition to the cold weather shelters they offer each winter, this ministry is also responsible for helping approximately 125 people transition into permanent housing each year. A few years ago, Mary Katherine's baby boy spoke about how she inspired his work:

‘She increasingly found reasons to love, not to criticize, not to reject, no matter who it was,’ he [said]. ‘I hope I can continue to try to be that way.’³

And he did, right up until his death in 2023.

Grace in action, mercy and hospitality in the flesh. It doesn’t take a throne. Grace can come in a PB&J or in a warm place to sleep or a path toward permanent housing. Mary Katherine and Father Charles saw a child of God in every single person who crossed their paths. They are local heroes in my hometown. They have been called lifesavers, wonderworkers, and saviors, but they would be the first to tell you it was never about them. They would be the first to tell you that it was always about our mighty grace-planning God at work in and through them.

We are busy making plans of our own, plans to gather for Thanksgiving, followed by plans to celebrate the birth of another baby boy in a few weeks, and my heart begins to race at the mere mention of such things. But I’m fairly certain that God is not as concerned as I am about roasting the right size turkey or placing perfectly wrapped presents under a swoon worthy tree. As Isaiah reminds me elsewhere, God’s thoughts are not my thoughts, nor are God’s plans to be confused with mine. In the child whose birth we will celebrate in a few short weeks, we meet the one King in whom the hopes and fears of all the years find their home and meet their match. In Jesus we welcome God-made-flesh, Emmanuel himself in a tiny infant, the Savior of the world born to nobodies in a nowhere town in the thick of a brutal empire. And yet even then it isn’t simply about the baby, but also about the God who remains fiercely

³ <http://www.tennessean.com/story/life/2015/12/24/moms-love-inspired-room-inn/76729224/>

determined to work for us and through us, the God who is determined to shape a kingdom of justice and righteousness and welcome, of hope and peace and love. And in this very moment, while the world burns and churns, while far too many plot revenge, the God who chose to give us his own child wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger has something else in mind. For this God, our God is planning grace—abundant, undeserved, unmatched grace—for us and for all. What might we plan in response? How might our plans reflect his? How might our plans honor him?

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.