

The Plans of God and the Hands of Christ

These are the second and third sermons in a series entitled, "The Struggles of a Yoked Life"

Genesis 37:3-28 with Matthew 14:22-33

Sunday, August 9, 2020—Aledo UMC

Old Testament Lesson, Genesis 37:3-28

Reflection by Pastor Dave, "The Plans of God"

For decades, Alexander Hamilton was nothing more than a forgotten face on a ten-dollar bill. That was before Lin-Manuel Miranda took Ron Chernow's biography of the "ten-dollar founding father" on vacation with him: 800 pages! Can you believe it? Candice and I went on vacation in February and I read a novel by John Grisham, and it was only 300 pages long.

Anyway, Lin-Manuel marveled at the way in which the illegitimate son of questionable parentage—and an impoverished immigrant at that—could survive a devastating hurricane and rise to such a position of influence and power to play a critical role in the shaping of our great nation.

In fact, Lin was so captivated by the story, that he wrote a rap song about Hamilton which he debuted at a White House Evening of Poetry, Music, and the Spoken Word on May 12, 2009. Over the next six years, Lin expanded and refined the story of Alexander Hamilton until it became a Broadway phenomenon, earning numerous awards.

I don't know if God had a dream for Alexander Hamilton. If you truly believe that we have been founded as "One Nation, Under God," then it may very well be that God had a dream for Hamilton, and it appears as though that dream was fulfilled, despite the many struggles and trials Hamilton encountered along the way.

I do know, however, that God had a dream for Joseph. And like Alexander Hamilton, the fulfillment of that dream helped shape a nation. Make that two nations: Egypt and the growing nation of Israel.

We see the beginning of that dream in verse 5. And let's be clear: these aren't Joseph's dreams; they're God's dreams. It was God's way of saying, "You're the youngest, Joseph, but you're going to be the greatest." It was God's way of saying, "I've got something special in mind for you."

I believe that God has a dream for you, as well. **God has a dream for me.** God has something special in mind for you. Most likely, God's dream for you does not include ruling over Egypt. But God does have a dream and a purpose for your life. The question is, *Am I living up to God's dream for my life?*

Admittedly, Joseph didn't exercise good judgement in sharing that dream with his older siblings, but he did. And because he shared those dreams with his brothers, they eventually plotted against him and sold him into slavery. As the story unfolds, Joseph

suffered in slavery for many years and eventually was unjustly thrown into an Egyptian prison.

This creates a tremendous theological challenge for us: Was it God's will for Joseph's brothers to sell him into slavery? In other words, were the brothers doing God's bidding, even when their actions were clearly evil? Was God ultimately the One who was behind Joseph enslavement and later imprisonment, even though God knew that Joseph was completely innocent? If that's the case—if that's how God treats his people, why are any of us serving him at all?

And yet, we profess that God is good: **All the time. All the time: God is good.**

Romans 8:28 helps us solve this conundrum: "We know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose" (KJV).

I believe that Joseph's brothers acted out of their own free will; they were not in fulfilling some warped plan of God. Nonetheless God, who is not limited to the constraints of time, could see the future. And in the evil actions of Joseph's brothers, God saw an opportunity to use Joseph to accomplish something great.

What that means is that God's plans for us do not depend on the evil actions of those who hate us. However, sometimes we do struggle through no fault of our own. We might even find ourselves in shackles, though we are innocent. But God is able to turn the evil deeds of others upside down and bring great victory for us and those around us. When that happens, then, God's dream for us is fulfilled. And rather than sinking like a rock, we soar like an eagle.

Thanks be to God.

Gospel Lesson, Matthew 14:22-33

Reflection by Pastor Dave, "The Hands of Christ"

It was just before dawn when Jesus finally finished his prayers. Those prayers were especially important to our Savior because he had just learned of the martyrdom of his cousin John the Baptist and even after feeding the multitudes, it was still fresh on his mind. But now Jesus had to catch up to his disciples who were out on the Sea of Galilee, caught in a storm, battling the winds and waves.

Jesus approached them, walking on the water. It was still early; there was probably a bit of fog on the sea so when the disciples saw a man walking across the water, they thought they were seeing things—maybe even a ghost. And that's an important part of the story: the storms in life will come; but in the midst of the storms, Christ is always right there with us.

As Jesus approached the boat, he called out to them and said, "Take courage! It's me. Don't be afraid!"

And then Peter did something that was quite brave. He called out to Jesus and said, "Lord, if it's really you, tell me to come to you on the water."

And Jesus said, "Come."

And that's when Peter gets out of the boat and begins to walk on the water toward Jesus. We don't know how far he walked: it might've been a few feet; it might've been a much greater distance. What we do know is that Peter took a risk that was rooted in the command of Jesus. One translation says it this way: "Lord, if it's really you, command me to come to you on the water."

Peter got out of the boat and began to walk on the water *at the command of Jesus*. But Jesus *only issued that command because Peter requested it!*

Peter does not ask for supernatural powers; he's not going to become the subject of a Marvel Comic Book series. But he does recognize that whatever Jesus commands, Jesus makes possible.

Whatever Jesus commands, Jesus makes possible. Likewise, the commands of Jesus, taken seriously, create miracles. And that's exactly what happens in Matthew 14.

Of course, we all know that Peter took his eyes off of Jesus and began to sink. That's because Peter was walking on water because of the power of Jesus; Peter had no ability in and of himself to walk on the water,

...so when he took his eyes off of Jesus, he fulfilled the meaning of his own name. *Peter* means *rock* and Peter began to sink like one.

Peter often gets criticized for taking his eyes off Jesus and sinking into the sea, as though he were some kind of loser. But the way I read it, Peter was the winner in this story: he was the only one who was brave enough to get out of the boat—in the middle of a choppy sea on a windy day, mind you, and actually walk on the water.

Where were the other disciples? Back in the boat: too afraid to venture out in faith; too afraid to step out of the safety of their boat and onto the sea.

No, the way I read it, Peter's a hero in this story. He took a risk. And even though he began to sink, the promise of Christ was with him: "Take courage! It's me, Jesus. Don't be afraid!"

And then the Bible says that Jesus stretched out his hand to Peter. How do you think he did it? With an open palm held up as if to say, "Stop! Halt!"

Or do you think Jesus pointed a finger of accusation at Peter? Or was Jesus' fist clenched as if he were ready to punch Peter in the face in a gesture of punishment?

I don't think Jesus used any of those gestures;

I believe he reached out to Peter with an open hand—palm-side up—to welcome Peter back into the boat.

And that raises another question for us: How do you suppose Peter got back to the boat? There are only four possibilities: (1) he was transpoded back as if the boat were the Starship Enterprise; (2) he swam; (3) Jesus carried him; or (4) Peter walked back, on the water.

The Bible doesn't say, but I think there's only one credible answer and that is that Peter walked back to the boat.

Likewise when you slip and begin to sink, Jesus is there to lift you up—not to point at you with a finger of accusation; not to clench his fist at you in anger and disappointment, but with an open, extended hand to lift you up out of the turbulence of the world and get you on your feet again.

Is it time for you to step out of the safety of your boat—your comfort zone, whatever that may be—and take a risk for Jesus? For some of us, the greatest risk we take is

inviting someone to join us in following Jesus. But that is something that Christ himself commands us to do.

It's time to take a risk and engage in the mission of the church in a way we've never been engaged before as we scatter the seed of the Gospel through our words and through our actions.

Peter took a great risk when he got out of that boat and stepped out onto the cold waters of the Sea of Galilee. But in doing so, Peter learned two things: he learned that he was weak. But he also learned that Jesus is strong. What was true then remains true today.