

SERMON - That's the Plan?

So...what's the plan?

How many times have you asked this question over the past few months? How many times have you been asked this question? As the principal of Immanuel Christian School, I have been asked this question A LOT. Making a plan for the future, when the present changes daily, is a daunting task. Thankfully over the last couple of weeks, many of our "So... what's the plan?" questions are starting to receive answers. Renew PEI has announced their four-phased plan, Atlantic Provinces Travel Bubble and, more recently, a Welcome Back to School Plan. Businesses and faith communities are encouraged to submit their own operational plans as public health restrictions ease. While many of the plans are welcomed and celebrated, others have us wondering, "Wait... that's the Plan?"

I've experienced this "so... what's the plan?" moment in my life, more times than I care to admit. I actually really enjoy making plans. I'm always planning for the future. I always have a plan. And a back up plan. I work hard to make sure I've got all the details in place. While this habit usually simplifies my life, it complicates everything when my plan doesn't seem to line up with God's plan and I'm left scratching my head, "wait... that's the plan?"

Once, nearly ten years ago, Melissa and I made the mistake of writing down our plans. We were living as missionaries in Jos, Nigeria, with our two year old daughter, Hannah. I was the High School Bible teacher at Hillcrest School. We loved the school and community and loved having the opportunity to raise our daughter there. We had been living in Nigeria for nearly a year of our two-year contract and were seriously considering extending our contract to six years. We talked and talked and eventually made the mistake of writing down our short term and long term plans on the back of a discarded envelope. Let me tell you, it was a beautiful, albeit, short-lived plan.

Later that week, the bombings started. The terrorist group, the Boko Haram, made its presence known in Jos. Loosely translated, the name Boko Haram means 'western education is forbidden', and I worked for and lived next to Hillcrest School, a missionary school teaching western education. Here in PEI, kids stay home when there's a snow day. In Jos, we stayed home when there was a known terrorist threat. The school administration created a number of plans in order to keep the school open despite the terrorist situation. We staggered arrival and pick-up times, changed class schedules, built a second wall of cement barriers, and practiced attack drills. Even then, we knew we would stick to our plan. The following Sunday, the church Melissa and Hannah went to each Wednesday for Bible Study Fellowship, was bombed. This was not part of the plan. The bombing and unrest continued. Our mission agency sent representatives to meet with the mission community in Jos. It was during that visit that our mission agency decided to evacuate all missionary families with young children at the end of the school year. Only a few weeks after we'd penciled out our plan, we were packing up our six suitcases to leave Nigeria. After an exhausting two days of travel with a toddler, we arrived at the Toronto airport: homeless, jobless and without a plan. Surely... this isn't the plan. God? This is the plan? How could this possibly be the plan?

I wonder if Joshua ever questioned the plan.

Joshua, son of Nun, from the tribe of Ephraim, was born into slavery in Egypt. Joshua would have been among the Israelite slaves as Moses told them that God had promised to rescue his people out of slavery and bring them to the Promised Land. Joshua saw God use Moses to defy Pharaoh and lead the people of Israel out of Egypt. Joshua followed Moses through the Red Sea on dry land. He would have drank from the waters of Marah after Moses cried out to the LORD on behalf of the grumbling people. Joshua ate manna and quail while following Moses to Mount Sinai. When the Israelites were unexpectedly attacked in the desert, Moses ordered Joshua to lead the fight against the Amalekite army. When the people arrived at Mount Sinai, Joshua followed Moses up Mount Sinai and obediently waited for 40 days and 40 nights while Moses received the commandments from the LORD.

In Exodus 33, we learn that Moses set up the “tent of meeting” outside of the Israelite camp. Exodus 33:11 explains, “The LORD would speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend. Then Moses would return to the camp, but his young aide Joshua son of Nun did not leave the tent.” Perhaps it was this time spent in the proximity of God’s personal presence that gave Joshua the strength and courage to bring back a favourable report when he was sent, along with the leaders of the Israelites, to scout out the land of Canaan. While the other ten leaders spread a bad report about the land, saying, “The land we explored devours those living in it. All the people we saw there are of great size”, Joshua and Caleb insisted, “The land we passed through and explored is exceedingly good. If the LORD is pleased with us, he will lead us into that land, a land flowing with milk and honey, and will give it to us.”

Joshua followed and served Moses as God used him to rescue his people from slavery. Surely this was the part of the plan where God told Moses to lead the people into the Promised Land. Moses was a well-educated and important man, raised in the house of Pharaoh and adopted by Pharaoh’s daughter. Moses was Israel’s prophet, priest and king who spoke face to face with God. Surely, the plan would include Moses leading the people into the Promised Land.

I wonder how it felt to receive the news from Moses in Deuteronomy 31, “The LORD has said to me, ‘You shall not cross the Jordan.’ The LORD himself will cross over ahead of you. He will destroy these nations before you, and you will take possession of their land. Joshua also will cross over ahead of you, as the LORD said.” Moses commands Joshua, “Be strong and courageous, for you must go with this people into the land that the LORD swore to their ancestors to give them, and you must divide it among them as their inheritance. The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.”

The book of Joshua begins on this note: “After the death of Moses the servant of the LORD, the LORD said to Joshua son of Nun, Moses’ aide: ‘Moses my servant is dead.’ What a way to begin. After a lifetime of following Moses, Joshua is alone. Alone and on the wrong side of the flooded Jordan River. And alone with a large group of unruly people looking to him for leadership.

God continues, “Now then, you and all these people, get ready to cross the Jordan River into the land I am about to give to them - the Israelites. I will give you every place where you set

your foot, as I promised Moses.” I wonder if Joshua glanced over at the flooded Jordan River -a mile wide at some points. Sure, we’ll just get ready to do the impossible: walk across the Jordan River, during the flood season. I wonder if he thought, ‘sure, you’ll give us every place where we set our feet... as we’re all swept down river and unable to put our feet on solid ground.’ Or perhaps, Joshua remembered watching Moses stretch out his arm and staff over the Red Sea. Perhaps he remembered walking through the Red Sea on dry land and then watching as the waves came crashing down over Pharaoh and his army.

Next God promises and challenges Joshua, “As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you. Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their ancestors”. He commands Joshua, “Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you” and “Keep this book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it.” This law is the same law that Moses received from God on Mount Sinai while Joshua waited on the mountain for 40 days and 40 nights. While the people of Israel were building and worshiping a golden calf and breaking the very covenant that God was giving Moses, Joshua was obediently waiting on the terrifying mountain for Moses’ return. Joshua, the same man who did not leave the tent where God came to speak to Moses and the people of Israel. God concludes his message to Joshua with the following, “Be strong and courageous, Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.”

I wonder if Joshua had his doubts about God’s plan. I wonder if he felt alone and overwhelmed by the challenges before him. I wonder what it was like to stand there, facing the treacherous, flooded Jordan River, looking toward the Promised Land, already populated by powerful Canaanite people.

Or perhaps Joshua stood along the riverbank, remembering God’s faithfulness. Perhaps he could see God’s hand working throughout his life to prepare him for this moment. Maybe God had rescued him from slavery, parted the Red Sea, provided food and water, tested him in battle, brought him into his presence on Mount Sinai and mentored him through Moses for this moment. For this purpose. Maybe this was the plan all along.

This same word applies to us today:

7 “Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. 8 Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. 9 Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.”

The command begins and ends with, “Be strong and courageous.” How are we to find this strength and courage when all we can see are flooded rivers and impossible challenges? The answer is highlighted in the center of the text, “Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night”.

It is when we meditate on God’s Word that we hear his story and watch his plan unfold: a beautiful creation, our fall into sin, and a promise of Redemption. Moses received God’s covenant at Mount Sinai and Joshua led the people into the Promised Land as they awaited the promised Redeemer. As we read through the Old Testament, we see Israel repeatedly fall into sin, one failed leader at a time. Even when Israel is living in exile and all seems lost, the prophets remind us that the true King is coming.

When this King arrives, just as God planned, he is born in a humble stable in the town of Bethlehem. Soon after, just as God planned, an angel appears to Joseph, saying, “take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him”. I wonder if Joseph asked himself, “Really? This is the plan?”.

In his gospel, Matthew repeatedly shows his readers that Jesus is the new Moses. Jesus is the prophet, priest and king that they’ve been waiting for. Mark uses the events in his gospel, beginning with Jesus at the same Jordan River, to show that Jesus is the new Yeshua, he is the new Joshua. Through his ministry and death on the cross, Jesus ushered in the Kingdom of God here on earth, just as God planned.

Now it’s our turn. We too are invited to participate in God’s plan to bring about the Kingdom of God, here on earth. As we stand on the riverbank, looking over the flooded river toward the seemingly impossible challenges we face, we’re called to, “Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.” What impossible situation are you facing today? Be strong and courageous. Keep this book on your lips, meditate on it day and night, be strengthened by the unexpected and wonderful ways in which God invites us to participate in his plan to bring the Kingdom of God here on earth.