

Best Laid Plans
Reading from the Old Testament: 1 Samuel 15:34-16:13

A most disturbing wind that feels like annoyance descends from heaven and if you were to listen closely you might even detect an utterance of ill-tempered holy chagrin: “I told you this was a bad idea.” You weren’t in favor of it. Had no interest in pursuing it. Didn’t want to go there. Knew it was a train wreck of a plan, a disaster in the making, a fool’s journey. Yet, you went along to get along, acquiesced to their insistence, conformed to their scheme. But you refused to be happy about it, at least until it failed, and your cynicism was vindicated. Then you’d crack a smile; then in a most twisted way you’d revel in the failure of it.

“I told you this was a bad idea. But nooooo, you wouldn’t listen. Thought you were sooo smart. What did you say? ‘I’ve got this’ you said. Claimed I never trust you. Well duh! Not looking so unimpeachable now are you, Dr. MENSA?”

The best laid plans of mice and men oft go astray, observed the great Scot, Robbie Burns, not that it has ever happened to you. Or has it?

It's 1:00 in the morning and you are on the interstate out in the middle of nowhere with an eighth of a tank of gas and a brimming bladder, a string of no vacancy signs receding in the distance behind you. Reservations? We don't need no stinking reservations, you thought. Wouldn't want that to limit how far we can get toward our destination. Surely, there will plenty of options for a room along the way when we get tired.

I don't know about you but that was a common theme during my childhood. Midwesterners will appreciate this. On our way to Virginia, we were almost to Paducah when it became apparent there would be no vacancies all the way to Wheeling, and burning the midnight fuel, we had to retrace the miles back to Mt. Vernon, IL before we could find a bed in some no-tell, motel. Who'd a thought there'd be such a crowd headed to the World's Fair in Knoxville? For that matter who remembered there **was** a World's Fair in Knoxville that year? Let's just say that though it was another hot summer night, there was a noticeable frost inside the Buick out there all alone on Interstate 24.

"I told you this was a bad idea." You hired someone against your better judgment; you said yes to the habanero burger when you knew

your stomach would be cursing your birth in a couple of hours; you fell for it when your cousin said he knew a guy who's uncle was related to a guy who could get you a good deal on your air conditioner, even though the guys your cousin tends to know could be the guest list for the *Jerry Springer Show*; you quit your job to open a Croc's store; booked a cruise to Alaska in December when the rates are lowest; watched *Flip or Flop* and thought, "I could do that."

"I told you this was a bad idea." It won't be the last time you hear that or think that, and it certainly wasn't the first. "And the Lord was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel." Wow! Even the Holy One has regrets. Just a couple of weeks ago, we were listening to Samuel, Yahweh's man on the ground in Israel, who was repeating the misgivings God had about Israel's insistent desire for a king. "These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen ... He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers ... But the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; they said, "No! but we are determined to have a king over us, so that we also may be like other nations."

Well, if *the other nations* were a hot mess, the Israelites got what they wanted. “And the Lord was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel.” The source of Yahweh’s consternation is discovered in the verses preceding today’s text. It seems that Saul failed to fully carry out what Yahweh felt was a pretty clear command.

From the time the Israelites had escaped Egypt centuries earlier, there had been an unresolved grudge with the Amalekites. In Deuteronomy, Moses tells the people, “Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey out of Egypt, how he attacked you on the way, when you were faint and weary, and struck down all who lagged behind you; he did not fear God. Therefore when the Lord your God has given you rest from all your enemies on every hand, in the land that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, you shall blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven; do not forget.”

Well, Saul, as Israel’s first king, was tasked with fulfilling this promise; only when Saul’s army crushed the Amalekites, Saul decided it would be such a shame to throw out the good stuff, the valuables, the precious treasures, not to mention the sheep and the goats ... and so he kept them. And in one of the great gotcha moments in history, Samuel

confronts the king: When Samuel came to Saul, Saul said to him, "May you be blessed by the Lord; I have carried out the command of the Lord." But Samuel said, "What then is this bleating of sheep in my ears, and the lowing of cattle that I hear?" Busted! What did they say after Watergate? Sometimes, it's not the crime, it's the cover-up that gets you into trouble.

“And the Lord was very sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel,” Or, put another way, “I told you this was a bad idea.” And thus, Samuel’s next assignment is to search out the one God has chosen to be Israel’s next king, which is complicated by the obstacle that Israel already has a king. So, Samuel heads south, all the way to Bethlehem, far away from the shadow of an increasingly volatile King Saul.

However, if Samuel was hoping to remain incognito, he was only fooling himself, because everybody knew who Samuel was. When Samuel comes to town, the city leaders get nervous, because if he’s coming in the name of the king, you worry about what his message will be (are you in trouble?); what changes will his orders will invoke? However, if Samuel is not coming in the name of Saul, maybe even running from Saul, you worry that welcoming him will get you in

deeper trouble with the king. Either way, the superficial smiles of the city leaders mask the deep anxiety sparked by a visitor they would have preferred to take the bypass around town.

“Do you come peaceably?” the nervous elders ask Samuel. “Sure, I was just in the neighborhood and thought I’d drop in for worship.” In the neighborhood? Just dropped in? “You came all the way from Ramah to offer a sacrifice here, when you could have offered it at a hundred places in the neighborhood of home?” I’m not thinking the people are really buying Samuel’s cover story, particularly when he starts sizing up Jesse’s sons. “So, Eliab, you have much experience with a sword? Ever happen to organize an army? Negotiate a treaty? What grade did you get in Civics class? Just wondering...”

After seven of these interviews, the observers feel like their watching American Idol and Samuel is getting nervous. “What has the Lord gotten me into this time?”

But here’s the thing. God doesn’t meet our expectations; or act according to our plans; or see the world or see you or see the other guy the way you see the world or see yourself or see the other guy. As Isaiah

the prophet asserts, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord.

Donald Miller offers an image I think may be helpful as we consider the anxieties our plans and schemes have wrought in life. "God sat over the dark nothing and wrote you and me specifically into the story, and He put us in specifically with the sunsets in the rainstorms as though to say, 'Enjoy your place in My story, the very beauty of it means it's not about you, and in time that will give you comfort.'" (Donald Miller, *A Million Miles in a Thousand Years*)

Yes, the best laid plans of mice and men oft go astray. You could actually say our plans inevitably go astray. It's in our wiring to screw up. I believe it was Thomas Edison who said, "I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work."

Well, Edison figured out that light bulb, my parents eventually got us to Virginia, and David, that afterthought of a child, smelling of sheep dung is pulled into a drama that will take him to the height of earthly power, where his hubris will cost lives, threaten a nation, break his heart, and reintroduce him to humility. Maya Angelou said, "You may

encounter many defeats, but you must not be defeated. In fact, it may be necessary to encounter the defeats, so you can know who you are, what you can rise from, how you can still come out of it.”

I had a conversation this week with a wise and trusted friend who is facing one of life’s most difficult truths, the inevitable loss of independence that comes with the passage of time. And yet, as I would have expected, she is facing this stage of her life with grace, daily reciting the prophet’s promise, “I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.”

Today’s text reflects the helter-skelter efforts of humans trying to manage our plans, plug the cracks of our dreams, and attempt to outsmart God. David, youngest son of Jesse, the hand-me-down kid, choosing him to lead Israel is not the result of obsessive, pre-draft analysis. There was no combine for king candidates. It’s not as if David is some pampered prodigy. He’s just a kid, and God’s selection of David may well be God’s response to our insane notions of self-sufficiency, our delusions of grandeur, our attempts to say, “No thanks, God. We’ve got this.”

No, we don't ... we just don't. The Psalmist says, "Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help. When their breath departs, they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish."

It is ironic that in this connected and wired world, the flood of convictions, declarations, and opinions flowing from those wires are winding our anxieties up so tight that we are losing the ability to talk to one another, much less live with one another. If we could just loosen our grips on our treasured truths, our brilliant plans, we may just be able to hold onto God's grace. Amen.