

## **“A Plan for the Fullness of Time”**

John 1:10-18; Ephesians 1:3-14 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn  
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*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might live out our calling as your children and share your inheritance of grace with all. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

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This may seem obvious, but I want to start today by acknowledging that our scripture lessons today have a lot of words. A lot of fairly abstract words. These are the kind of passages that people have tended to grab hold of and run with in a variety of directions, because the verses are vague enough to interpret in a bunch of different ways but strongly written enough to make whatever interpretation you've chosen sound convincing. You can easily see, for instance, some of the roots of the doctrine of predestination in these passages, and related ideas suggesting Christianity is mostly about determining who's on God's nice list and who's on the naughty list. All of which is to say, we should be cautious.

As Disciples, we have largely held to an understanding that scripture was written by humans, inspired by their experiences of the Living God, but still influenced by their life circumstances, the expectations and assumptions of their societies, and their theological hopes and prejudices. So we are not surprised when these more human aspects of faith seep into their writings. This is why we must have an ongoing, robust conversation about the nature of the gospel, that is, what the good news really is, through which to assess and interpret different parts of scripture.

A more modern, but no less unhelpful theological suggestion can find a foothold in the passage we read from Ephesians as well. You've no doubt heard this one, even if you're fuzzier on the older concept of predestination: it's the idea that "God has a plan." You can hear hints of this in verse ten, when the writer speaks of "a plan for the fullness of time". Now I know this idea can be comforting to many people; it's reassuring to believe that someone else – Someone wiser, and better informed, and more powerful than ourselves – has things under control. And in some senses, that is very true. But if you look at how this language about "God's plan" is often used, problems begin to emerge. This idea is far too often brought up when we're trying to explain otherwise unexplainable or unfair, bad things, like untimely deaths, or cancer, or job loss, or divorce. But being told that your suffering is "part of God's plan" is not nearly as comforting as we seem to imagine. Why would God plan for you to suffer? If God is God, couldn't God have planned better, finding a way to achieve the same ends with less pain? Some will say, "oh, it's a test," but that kind of just makes God look like a jerk.

The other problem with this superficial understanding of "God's plan" is that it places God so very far away from us. The implication is that when things don't make sense to us – say because from our perspective there was no need for our faith to be tested by a cancer diagnosis – it's because God is So Much Bigger and So Much More Omnipotent that we couldn't possibly imagine the Big Picture. But that is not the God that has been revealed to us in Jesus Christ. The Incarnation testifies that the

Word became flesh, God took on a specific human body and identity, thus showing us that the little details that make us us are sacred and precious to God. This is not a God whose view is so broad it overlooks our pain; the God of Jesus understands our suffering from the inside out.

So what are we to do with these scriptures that seem to imply theologies that feel counter to our understanding of the gospel? If we believe God to be sovereign, how do we construct a useful idea of “a plan for the fullness of time” that neither trivializes suffering nor removes the incarnate nature of the divine? I believe there are a number of hints in our scripture lessons that can help us out here. Let’s look at three of them briefly.

First of all, there is much talk in these passages about “adoption”. It is clear that Jesus has brought us into the family of God, not as some kind of step-child or in-law, but as a full heir to the hope promised by the Creator of the heavens and earth. This adoption is our redemption, a guarantee that we can find forgiveness when we need it and a call to live in the fullness of God’s grace, both receiving it and bestowing as we can. This grace must become part of our identity, not in a “I’m in and others are not” sort of way, but in a compel you to live in constant gratitude sort of way. Our need for belonging is deep and yet, in God, it can be fulfilled, for we are adopted as beloved children. There is no mistake, no weakness, no shame powerful enough to break that bond of love. Not for us and not for anybody else. This is good news! Hallelujah and Amen!

But there's more. There is this mention of "a plan for the fullness of time." We have discussed recently how our experience of time and God's experience of time are often very different. The same is likely true for plans! Perhaps that is why the writer of Ephesians also talks about "mystery". Let's listen to this one part of that really long sentence again, verses 8b-10: "With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth."

The plan is both a mystery and revealed in Christ. If we want to know how we fit into the plan, we figure that out by following the example and guide of Christ. Jesus is the revelation here; following Jesus is how we participate in the plan of God. This plan is not something unexplainable that happens to us; it is something we enact by aligning our lives with the will of God as revealed through the life and ministry of Jesus. This is good news because, as the writer of Ephesians puts it, it was God's "good pleasure" to reveal this plan of through Jesus. It is a plan of love and grace. It is a plan of redemption and hope. It is a plan of salvation and glory. Hallelujah and Amen!

Finally, and here is where my Disciple bias may be showing through, there is a specific focus to this plan lifted up in those verses. The goal of the plan is to "gather up all things". This is a plan for unity. It's plan for wholeness and restoration. If we want to be part of the plan – and we are part of the plan, as adopted, beloved children

of God – we must be about unity; we must be about restoring what is broken, binding up the brokenhearted and reconciling conflicting forces. This is not a plan that overlooks suffering at all; it is a plan that attends to those who are hurting, gathering them up into the everlasting arms of God’s compassion. That is the plan that we are invited to participate in, this plan for the fullness of time. Perhaps it speaks to the “end of days” but what if pointing us toward the “fullness of time” is a reminder that the reconciling work of Christ is more than enough to fill our days? Helping to enact the unity that is our inheritance in Christ gives us so much to do that we won’t have any time left for deciding who’s in and who’s out. This is the work, the life that we have been invited into by our adoption into the family of God. It is the identity that is sealed by the Holy Spirit, as the writer of Ephesians puts it; that is, made official by our baptism into the unity that is Christ’s presence in our world. An inheritance of grace and glory is ours to share. That is good news indeed! Hallelujah and Amen!