
God's Universal Plan

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 5 January 2025

Isaiah 60:1-6 • Ephesians 3:1-12 • Matthew 2:1-12



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

It is a wonderful thing to behold the depth and breadth of God's work in the world. We see in the Christmas story the unfolding of an amazing plan. God sends his Son to become a human being and live among us, to teach us the way to salvation. Everything that happens, everything that God makes happen, contributes to this plan. Circumstances and human action oppose God's plan at every step — yet God prevails, because God wills it so.

From the beginning, God's plans take the unexpected route. Jesus, his Son, is not born in a palace, as befits our King; or into a wealthy family, as might befit a future military ruler (which so many Israelites expected. He can't even be born in a humble hotel in Bethlehem; the innkeepers refuse admittance to his pregnant mother. He has to be born in a stable, in a feed trough she lined with straw. His upbringing is no less humble, and nothing marks him as special, after

the amazement at the coming of angels and wise men wears off. And when he begins his ministry, he is opposed as much as followed. Every step of his life is difficult, right up to the end. But he perseveres, and God is with him at every stage.

Today's story of the wise men is a good example of this. The men (we assume there were three, because there were three gifts) follow a star — not a very precise thing to navigate by. Following a star gives you a direction, but not a specific destination. So it is clear that God guided them all along the way. They make it to Jerusalem, where they are directed by Herod and his advisors to Bethlehem. Herod has his own reasons for discovering the baby; he wants it killed to avoid any competition for him and rebellion from the Jews. But God is with the men, and God advises them to go home by a different route. God thinks of everything. Of course! All our thoughts come from God.

Jesus' mission on earth will end with the crucifixion and resurrection, when all of our sins are forgiven and the doors to heaven are opened for us. This plan of God's also serves as revelation to us of God's love. In fact, God has been steadily revealing himself for thousands of years. Note how the astrologers Herod consults quote from Micah, a prophet who lived 700 years before Christ was incarnated. God revealed some of the plan to Micah then. Isaiah and other prophets contain much more prophecy which relates to Jesus' incarnation and sacrifice. God continued to reveal more and more of himself as the centuries went on. And in the present day, God uses the church as an instrument of revelation: we are the church, and we are tasked with revealing the Good News to all people.

The revelation is not just to us. Reading our Ephesians passage today, we come upon an interesting sentence:

God, who is the Creator of all things, kept his secret hidden through all the past ages, in order that at the present time, by means of the church, the angelic rulers and powers in the heavenly world might learn of his wisdom in all its different forms. (Ephesians 3:9-10)

By means of the church, the angels learn of God's wisdom! Is this not remarkable? The church, as God uses it to reveal his wisdom, is teaching even the angels! They learn of God's wisdom "in all its different forms," and indeed, God's wisdom takes many different forms; perhaps, since all wisdom is from God, his wisdom takes all possible forms. The revelation of God in Jesus Christ and the truth of the Gospel taught by his church reaches far more than just all the people on earth, Jew and Gentile. It reaches all the angels and heavenly powers. In other words, God was not just saving us humans, the creatures he created for himself and whom he loves. God's action in sending Jesus Christ to live on earth, die on the cross and rise again has implications for the entire creation. It

is the beginning of the bringing into balance all that God created, which is all that exists.

As Jesus has existed since the very beginning, and as John says, was in the beginning with God, so has God's plan for the created universe existed for all that time, waiting for the right time, the perfect time, to be set in motion. What does this mean for us? It means we are part of something big — enormous — universe-sized. It means that God loves us and trusts us enough to make us part of the execution of his mighty plan. It makes the spreading of the Gospel, with which we charged, more important than anything, because it is the outworking of God's love. It means that when we bring another person into relationship with God, we are helping to set the whole universe straight. How God must love us, not only to send his Son to die for us, but to include us in his cosmic plan!

It also means that the church's time has not passed, as some seem to think. We are not moving into an era when the church is no longer necessary. We are in an era when many people, at least in western cultures, seem to be falling away from the church; but the church, as the gathering of believers, will continue. We may see ebb and flow in the size of our congregations. That does not mean that the end of the church is near. It means that we must try harder to bring others into God's church. The style and content of church services has changed continually over the years, as the styles of living of the people have changed. It is our challenge to adapt to these changes, while not losing sight of the essential truth we must convey in our services. We will be looking at this together as we go forward — I invite you to join me in meeting this challenge.

For it is not the failure of a congregation that we must fear. It is the failure to follow God's charge to us, of betraying God's confidence in us. We are part of God's plan, and it is a great blessing to be so. Let us go forward in confidence that we walk with God. Amen.