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C: Epiphany Sunday
Ephesians 3:1-12, Matthew 2:1-12

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Salem, Bridgeport

“When God’s Plan Is Not Your Plan”

Do you remember the memory eraser that the “men in black” used on people?
Sometimes I would love to have one of those
that I could use before reading a Bible lesson or preaching on a text,
because I think it would be an incredible experience to hear the gospel for the very 1st time.
If I could wipe your memories of the other gospel stories and you were to hear just Matthew,
it would be very revealing –
because in his version of the nativity story, Matthew does not say much about Jesus or Mary or the birth.

Rather, he begins with 17 verses of genealogy going back 42 generations through David to Abraham.
Then he tells of a young girl named Mary who finds out she’s pregnant & knows it’s not by her fiancé, Joseph.
When he finds out, he does what any reasonable human being would do:
he takes the information, analyzes it, considers all his options,
and their potential consequences on all involved, and makes his decision.
Of course every one of his thoughts is driven by emotion.
He is shocked and stunned and hurt and embarrassed and angry and afraid.
This is not his fault – it’s hers.
And he decides he can’t marry this woman.
Despite the embarrassment and shame of calling the marriage off, he simply cannot go through with it.
Yet despite his anger and his desire to lash out at the one who has betrayed him,
he can’t go so far as to make all of this mess public because that could get her killed.
And despite the hurt and pain, he doesn’t want her to be stoned to death.
So he decides to divorce her quietly.

Joseph used all the wisdom and knowledge he possessed and came up with his plan.
But the problem is, Joseph’s plan was NOT God’s plan.

My guess is that God had hoped that Joseph would come to a different decision –
that Joseph would be loving enough to go beyond not hurting Mary and to step up to help her.
But when Joseph didn’t come to that conclusion, when he made the wrong decision,
God wasn’t about to let Joseph’s plan succeed.
God stepped in and interrupted Joseph’s plan with divine revelation.

That scene ends with these words,
*“[and] Joseph did as God’s messenger commanded – he took Mary as his wife,
but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.”*
That is ALL Matthew says about the birth – that he was born and was named Jesus.

The next scene begins with these words,
*“In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea,
wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking,
“Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?
For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.”*

Wise men from the East, perhaps Zoroastrian priest astrologers
whose job it was to search the heavens for their own Messiah,
notice a certain star that they believe heralds the birth of a Jewish king,
and they take all the info they have, consider it, discuss it, and at last decide to go and pay their respects.

If you read the text carefully, it does not say they followed the star from all the way to Jerusalem –
which, if they were coming from Babylon, could have taken anywhere from 4 months to 2 years –
it only says they saw a star initially,
believed that it announced the birth or rising of a Jewish king,
and decided to make the trip to Jerusalem.

It was the logical thing to do, after all.

But as it turns out, they didn't have all the facts.

Going to Jerusalem was a mistake – a big mistake –
because as it turns out, it's not like Herod had just had a son!
King Herod knew nothing about this so called king!
Such news could be a bit threatening to any king, but for Herod,
one of the most paranoid rulers of all time, it sent him into such a panic
that everyone in Jerusalem was terrified of what he would do.

But in order to destroy this young child who threatens his throne, Herod has to find him,
so he decides to manipulate the wise men into doing his detective work for him.

No doubt he was very proud of his brilliant plan and no doubt he had pretty much carried it off
because at that point the wise men give no indication that they doubt Herod's sincerity.

They leave the palace, and head for Bethlehem,
but where in Bethlehem they had no idea – until another divine intervention....

*“When they had heard the king, they set out;
and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising,
until it stopped over the place where the child was.
When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.”*

A star appeared and somehow guided them to Bethlehem
and somehow the star appeared to stop & indicate clearly exactly where the king lay.

Their own knowledge had not been enough;
they needed outside input, and in addition they needed the divine guidance of a unique star.

The wise men fall down on bended knee, they worship and adore,
they give generously and extravagantly,
and then they are ready to return the way they had come.

It was the logical and practical thing to do.

But while they didn't know Herod's plans to kill Jesus, God knew
and God wasn't about to let Herod's plan succeed.

So again, God stepped in and interrupted the wise men's plans with divine revelation in a dream.

But not hearing back from the wise men wasn't going to stop Herod!
Maybe he didn't know which baby, but what did that matter? He'd just kill them all.

God wasn't about to let Herod's plan to kill Jesus succeed, however.

So again, God stepped in and interrupted Herod's plans by appearing to Joseph and warning him of the plot,
instructing him to go to Egypt and stay until God tells him it's safe.

When Herod dies, God again intervenes in the lives of Joseph and his family in Egypt,
sending an angel in a dream to tell Joseph to go back to Israel because the danger is over.

They return to Israel, but before making it to Judea they are warned not to go there
and so they go to Nazareth in Galilee.

That's the Christmas story in Matthew –
a story full of revelation, full of divine intervention,
full of God's interruptions of human plans.

In that one short story, we hear of 4 times that God spoke to Joseph in a dream,
we hear how the wise men are led by a star and warned in a dream,
and we hear how Herod's plans are successfully thwarted.

We see how God's plans are higher and wider and greater
than the plans of the evil King Herod or even those of the good Joseph.

We are confronted with the fact that somehow no matter how blessed we are in terms of
human knowledge and wisdom, desire and experience, logic and common sense,
and even good intentions,
none of it is enough when it comes to discerning and following God's will.

While we may see our little piece of the puzzle we can't see the whole puzzle.

While we have experiences in the past and may have a grasp on the present,
we can't see the future.

While we may (or may not) know our own plans and motivations,
we cannot fully appreciate the plans and motivations of other people,
and we certainly cannot grasp God's overall plan.

And that's why God sometimes intervenes in ways we are not expecting,
in ways we don't understand, and sometime even in ways we don't appreciate.

And yet if we believe what scripture teaches us
it is that God's ways are higher than our ways and God's thoughts than our thoughts.

Paul, too, understood these truths, because he did not get to know Jesus
through reading about him or hearing about him.

Paul got to know Jesus through God's divine intervention,
through Jesus meeting him on the road,
and through the Spirit revealing God's truth directly into his spirit.

You won't find your way to God's will through your own understanding,
any more than Joseph or the wise men or Paul or anyone else did;

God is a mystery, but God delights in revealing God's self to those who are open to revelation,
and to those who are willing to follow where the Spirit leads.

Ask and it will be given. Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened.

In this season of Epiphany, my prayer for each of you is that through Divine Intervention,
you will come to know the power of the living God.

And may the light of God's love shine in all the dark places in your lives
and bring you a joy that knows no bounds. Amen