

“Better Than a Plan”

The Rev. Dr. Jean Halligan Vandergrift, Interim Minister
Roslindale Congregational Church (UCC), Boston MA
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It was good to hear Governor Baker announce last Monday more of the details to his four-phase plan for re-opening Massachusetts. Plans are good. They give order to crisis and help us feel like we’re getting somewhere. A financial plan, for instance, helps us feel secure. Interim plans make the uncertainty of searching for a leader easier for a church. **Plans are good.**

So it’s not surprising that when the disciples gather with Jesus before his departure into heaven, they ask him: “What’s the plan? What does God have in mind? Tell us: is it now that God will restore Israel? That’s where all this is headed, right?”

Like us, the disciples probably thought that knowing God’s plan would help them feel in control, empowered, and able to move forward in his absence, because it was painful to them that he was going away again. In the background, I hear the sad song playing: “Every time you go away, you take a part of me with you.”¹

But Jesus didn’t give them the plan. Even more disappointing, he replied: “It’s *not* for you to know the future that God is working toward! I’m sorry. You’re not on the Need to Know List. This is above your pay grade.” And we want to protest, “But, will there be a second wave of the virus? A vaccine? Will church ever be like it used to be?” “Can’t tell you.” “Then, tell me how long I will live.” “Nope.” “Will my kids be happy at least?” “You’ll have to see as it unfolds.”

What Jesus *did* give them, and what he gives *us* is something *better* than a plan. He gives us a promise.

In verse 4, he ordered the disciples not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for *the promise* of the Father – the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Then, in verse 8, Jesus elaborates: “I *promise*. You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses from Jerusalem outward to the ends of the earth.” **Promise before plan.** Just like other adventures: marriage, family, and joining the church; being the church in mission begins with a promise.

In other words, Jesus says: “I promise you. I’ll send you my Spirit, and it will be your power to perceive and carry out my plans. This will enable you to live out my mission! The time may come when knowing more of the plan will be good, but not now.”

We hear Jesus’ promise in our present situation too. He says: “I know that you want to grab this bull by the horns and tame it. I realize that you’re feeling puny and scared about what is coming and what you don’t know. It’s clear that you want to get on with things, and under your own steam, but the plans are mine. The prophet put it well: ‘I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’ (Jeremiah 29:11)

Jesus continues: “The plan is mine, and you need my power to accomplish it. Otherwise, you’ll be tempted to twist it into *your* plan, scheming for your own self-

¹Paul Young, *Every Time You Go Away*, 1985. (I heard it as part of the soundtrack of the movie, *Planes*,

interest, exercising power *over* others instead of *with me for* them! You know it's true! Plus, you'll run out of energy and burn yourselves out if you don't pace yourselves by the Spirit. That's why I'm giving you this promise."

You and I are not ready for all that God has in store. Like Rocky, we need a coach; like Luke Skywalker, Yoda; like Jo March, her sisters. We need the Holy Spirit and time to train in order to come into the dynamis – "dynamis" is the Greek term for power here – of the promise! So the disciples *do* return to Jerusalem and their upper room to wait, pray, and stay together – it sounds a little like a COVID shutdown! And it must have been difficult for the disciples at points too.

Sue Monk Kidd writes about her discomfort during a retreat at a monastery. She saw one of the brothers sitting in silence outdoors, by a tree, so serenely. She tried, but it wasn't happening for her. She approached him later and asked, "How is it that you can wait so patiently in the moment? *I* can't seem to get used to the idea of doing nothing." He grinned. "Well, there's the problem right there. You've bought into the cultural myth that when you're waiting you're doing nothing. When you're waiting, you're doing the most important something there is. You're allowing your soul to grow up. (Training in the promise.) If you can't be still and wait, you can't become what God created you to be."²

Let us pray: Come, Holy Spirit, come. Amen.

²Sue Monk Kidd, *When the Heart Waits* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1990), 21-22.