

A PLAN
Matthew 2:1-12

INTRO: It happens every year: with the New Year we make resolutions. We resolve to lose weight, to get into better shape, to love our spouse better, to be more positive, or to do better with finances. We make any number of plans to do better. Back when I had a membership at SNAP Fitness I could count on two things: #1) On January 2 the gym would be packed and #2) On January 31 the gym would be back to the half dozen regulars who rarely if ever missed their morning workout.

Now, don't hear what I'm not saying. Making resolutions is a good thing especially if it's to do better. And remember, if you do make a resolution it takes a good solid three weeks to make it a new habit. If you want to eat less you've got to persist at it.

But, the truth is our plans are often frustrated. Scottish poet Robert Burns wrote an ode to a mouse whose plans were dashed when his winter house is crushed by a farmer's plow. It includes some lines that might be familiar to you:

*Your tiny house lies in a ruin,
Its fragile walls wind-rent and strewn!
Now nothing's left to construct you a new one
Of mosses green!
Since bleak December's winds, ensuing,
Blow fast and keen!
You saw your fields laid bare and waste
With weary winter closing fast,
And cozy here, beneath the blast,
You thought to dwell,
Till crash! The cruel iron ploughshare passed
Straight through your cell!
But mouse-friend, you are not alone
In proving foresight may be vain:
The best-laid schemes of Mice and Men
Go oft awry,
And leave us only grief and pain,
For promised joy!*

The best laid plans of mice and men do oft go awry. My friend Chuck retired from the pastorate several years ago. He had served at Valley Chapel BIC for 20 years and in several BIC churches prior to that. He had big plans for his retirement. He wanted to travel and explore Civil War battlefields. He had in mind to build a custom car on a VW Bug chassis. He had woodworking projects he planned to tackle. His dreams were as big as his big lovable self. And then his back gave out. His large frame and his life, which included combat in Vietnam, all conspired to bring his plans to a grinding halt. He could do little more than sit and that in itself was excruciating.

In November of 2018 Chuck had very risky surgery that held limited promise. It was successful in that the pain was alleviated and for a time, it even looked as if he might be more mobile. Now, after 13 months it looks like he will have mobility only on a motorized scooter. Chuck called on Christmas evening just as our family was sitting down to our Christmas dinner and we all talked to him for a time. As we talked I was, again, impressed by his great attitude, especially for one whose plans have gone awry. He speaks, wistfully of his dreams that have faded, but he also speaks of his great assurance that God's plans are much better.

That's what I want to talk about today – God's better plan and how it will not be thwarted. Specifically I want to speak, in this final message of the Christmas season, about how God's plan went forward even though a powerful man thought he could stop it.

Let me read this familiar passage and then I'll unpack it a bit.

(Read Matthew 2:1-12)

First . . .

God's plan of salvation

- Verse 1 begins with “*After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea*”. This is what we’ve been talking about all month. Jesus came to rescue lost humanity. It’s what the angel promised Mary and it’s what angelic choir proclaimed to the shepherds. Joseph’s plan to divorce Mary quietly completely changed when he was told in a dream, *Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.* Matthew 1:20b-21. The very name Jesus means Savior.
- Salvation is God’s plan. The prophets had proclaimed it for hundreds of years and now it had unfolded. Scholars even saw it written in the stars – not in the way you open the newspaper and read your horoscope – that’s called astrology. Instead it was astronomers who saw an unusual star in the sky and decided to follow it. This unveiled . . .

The Magi's plan to worship

- These Magi, which Peterson describes as scholars, came to Jerusalem looking for the newborn King of the Jews. They had seen something written in the stars that accurately pointed to a Savior. They came from somewhere in the East – probably Persia; so they’d been traveling for quite some time. The draw had been strong – strong enough for them to persist until they found the One they came for.
- And they didn’t just want to see this King. They didn’t just want to meet this King. It says they came to worship him. Their plan could not fail and they carried it through. What extent do you go to worship this King? Just asking.
- Here they are in Jerusalem. The star they were following must have been right over their heads because Bethlehem is only 6 miles from Jerusalem. So they went right to the top, to King Herod’s palace – if they were looking for a newborn King, shouldn’t the king of Judea know where he’d be? It was a good assumption, but Herod knew only that this baby was a threat. Now we see . . .

Herod's plan to destroy

- Herod was a puppet ruler. He was in place only because he had been given the office by Rome. He had the title King of the Jews and wasn’t even a Jew. Instead he was from the despised region of Edom – old enemies of the Jews. His position was tenuous because of this, but it was made worse by his paranoia. Who is threatened by a baby? A man whose insecurity is bigger than his overblown ego.
- He called in his own scholars to figure out what the scholars from the East were talking about. Some fake Jew he is! He doesn’t even know Jewish scripture. So he asks, “*Where is the Messiah supposed to be born?*” Matthew 2:4b (The Message). After putting their heads together, because our text says that they were a bit worried too, the scholars reply to Herod that the prophet Micah wrote, *But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel . . .* Micah 5:2a, and Herod’s plan began to take shape. “Let’s use these worshippers as our unwitting informers and we’ll have this tiny threat to my throne dealt with.”
- Herod’s plan had one big flaw – God knew about it. Herod’s plan was to destroy, but . . .

God's plan is to save

- The Magi found the baby and joyfully worshiped him and brought him extravagant gifts. Their search was successful because their effort was sincere. Anyone who truly looks for God will find him.
- In fact, let me make a little aside to point out something from F. B. Meyer who wrote “*God meets us in the spheres with which we are most familiar.*” He was referring to the Magi who were astronomers, who, in their study of the heavens found Jesus by following a star. That got me to thinking how Ron Sprunger sees God’s handiwork in music, and how my dad saw God’s creativity in a glorious vista and he looked out over a beautiful valley, and how our revered Biology professor at Messiah College, Dr. Kenneth Hoover, saw God’s artwork in the plumage of a bird or in the veins of an oak leaf. What I’m trying to say is God meets us, and we find him, in our own niche, and in the things we love and are most passionate about. This is how he designed us.

- Herod's plan, on the other hand, was designed by the evil one. God knew that, and the Magi did too. They would not be Herod's unwitting accomplices. They returned home having worshipped the true King of the Jews and the promised Savior.
- God's plan went forward and it still is.

Conclusion: A star drew the Magi to Jesus – it all went according to plan. On Christmas Eve I lit a candle from the Christ Candle and passed it on to one person who passed it to another, who passed it to another, until the light of over 90 candles bathed this room and drove the darkness away. Jesus said, and it very much applies to us as his followers, *You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.* Matthew 5:14-16.

His plan has always been for salvation for the lost and for us to be the light that brings them to the Savior. As we enter into 2020 let's be the light of the world ABC. Amen.