

Think of all the plans that we have made in our lives. There are a lot of them right. Sometimes things go absolutely according to plan. Sometimes they are only slightly changed. But other times, the plans were abandoned and something else entirely takes shape. We could say that about this last year and the myriad of ways that plans have been modified or cancelled. I think back to our last gathering pre-covid and how we were praying for those in the Seattle area. None of us in our wildest imaginations ever thought just how much would change in that time. I think we can safely say there have been some good things and some hard things and some downright painful things. And yet, God has been and continues to be with us in all that we say and do.

Our scripture reading today comes from the end of book of Acts and covers Paul trip from Caesarea to Crete to Malta and eventually to Rome. Paul had been arrested back in chapter 20 and was now finally going to Rome to be tried by the Emperor. As a Roman citizen, Paul had the right to this trial. Paul had been in prison for 2 years tossed back and forth between the Jewish authorities and the Roman authorities as a political football by being accused of sedition against Rome as well as violating Jewish law. Paul knew that this was a possibility when he was converted on the road to Damascus. Why, because he had been persecuting Christians. And yet, Paul had been busy in a short period time, having already traveled throughout the area as well as further to Ephesus as well as other communities, sharing widely about his conversion as well as about new life through Jesus Christ.

Paul's life was certainly changed many times. After his arrest, 2 years of imprisonment and now travel to Rome. All the while Paul is faithful.

Does that mean that these hiccups or changes are more or less a part of God's plan for Paul's life? No because there is not just 1 plan for our lives, just like Paul did not have just 1 plan. We have seen through the stories of the matriarchs and patriarchs in Genesis that we have way of making things not go according to plan. God's plan is grace & peace, love and joy. And yet because we do not fully live in the Kingdom of God now it is not perfect. Bad things happen. How we respond to the changes speaks about our faith in God and our witness in the world.

Paul is on his way to the Rome. He tried to tell the crew that it was not safe to set sail but they did anyway. They tried and they tried and what happened was they survived but were shipwrecked on an island. It's safe to say that it was nobodies plan to be there, let alone 3 months. But through the storm at sea as well as the time of being shipwrecked God worked in and through Paul in ministry with the sailors, the soldiers and the natives on Malta. Paul's obedience to God and sharing the words of the angels brings salvation to all those on the boat. Paul's words to the Julius the Centurion keeps all of the sailors on the ship to safely get it to land. Then Julius saves Paul's life when he stops the soldiers from killing all the other prisoners as they struggled to shore.

When we read this story, we see this breakfast that Paul shares with everyone on the ship and cannot help but think of communion. While it is clearly not the bread and the wine, it is a meal shared with gratitude as it strengthens them for the next step. Cold, wet and without any resources they arrive on the island unsure of what will befall them. All of those from the boat are then extended radical hospitality by the island natives who provide food, warmth & shelter. As Paul shares who he is with Publius the

leader of the island he goes on to heal all those on the island. It is safe to say that none of this was in the plan and yet God was at work through Paul in mighty ways.

I know this year has been so hard for us all. None of us can do what we really want – going back to normal. I've had to remind myself and those around me, that while it has been hard, with things like birthday parties, summer camp, sleepovers, weddings, funerals and reunions being canceled or changed that all is not lost. There have been things that we have gained in this time. We've learned who are friends are. We've learned to do new things. We've learned to have a greater appreciation for the little things in life such as smiles, handshakes and hugs. I so wish, our biggest obstacles were finding people to volunteer for VBS. And yet, God is not through with us, by a landslide. I have seen our prayer list grow greatly. What a beautiful thing to be known about us in our community to be faithful prayer partners. We saw our pumpkin patch sell out a week before Halloween. We have seen our landscaping, several plants dead to become a garden of resurrection. Not just the sprouting the bulbs planted after the ice storm, but of plants that have grown back from the root. Lilies & gardenias not just brighten up our land but provide sweet smells.

We cannot ever plan for everything in our lives but we can remain open, always being willing to adapt to the situation before us. Our commitment to loving and caring for each other, above our own comfort, speaks to the depth of commitment to Jesus in our community. The storm changed the plans in our scripture story. We know that storms and pandemics also change our plans but what remains is God's ultimate plan, the love and mercy of God on earth as it is in heaven. Each time we adapt,

each time we try something new, each time we are faithful brings us one step closer. It's hard not be excited about what God can do in us and through us when we are willing participants as Paul was. "I can see clearly now the rain is gone. I can see all obstacles in our way." When we hear these familiar words we can't help but smile for we know that we live in the light of the Son – who sends us out rejoicing, "lift up your heart, lift up your voice! Rejoice, again I say, rejoice!" May we lift up our voice proclaiming our love of God in the storms that change our plans. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.