

Sermon for Sunday, August 31, 2014 Exodus 3:1-15, Matthew 16:21-28 "Change of Plans"

How do we live with a changing world? You and I, we're facing that question in a very immediate way.

You should have received communication from me – either via email or by letter - this week that I am leaving Epiphany to go to work as Director of Transition Ministries for the Diocese as of October 1st.

Your response to this may have been one of three different types:

- 1) How could Mary possibly leave us? We love her and need her here!
- 2) Well, the heck with her. We are glad to see her go! She always made us chant and stuff.
- 3) That darned Bishop, taking our priest! How dare he!

I could address each of these reactions separately in a theologically sound but pastoral way, but instead I'd like to pose another way of looking at this change.

How about this: God is doing something here. It isn't what we planned. It isn't comfortable. We may not like it. But it is God doing something, and we won't know the rest of the story of what God is doing except, perhaps, in the rear view mirror.

God often works that way, I've discovered. I make plans and checklists, and then something happens that upsets the applecart and I am back to square one. And my reaction is usually either "Oh, no! That's messed everything up" or "well, it was probably not a good plan anyway" or "who can I blame for this?"

Oftentimes, though, my plan turns out to be just what I didn't need, and God's movement in my life takes me to someplace marvelous.

Okay, at this point, I can hear you thinking "all well and good for her! She's going to a cool new job at the diocese, and we're left here figuring out which end is up." And that is a fair thing to say.

But God is not only moving in my life, God is moving in yours as well.

If you think this is something new, revisit the story of Moses that we just heard.

He's minding his own business – actually, he's minding his father-in-law's business, herding his sheep – and suddenly in the middle of nowhere, there's this burning bush. It's on fire, but it doesn't burn up. It just keeps on burning. And then God speaks to Moses out of the bush. A talking burning bush...that wasn't part of Moses' plan for the day. And God tells him this is holy ground, and lays out God's plan for rescuing the Israelites from the oppression of Pharaoh. Moses is a little surprised by this, and says, "When I go back to tell the people this, they're going to think I'm nuts. Who should I say told me this plan?" And God doesn't make it easy – what's his answer? "I am who I am."

Interesting name. All present tense – no "I am who I will be," or "I am who I was back in the beginning."

"I am who I am." Right now. Always in the present. Always in the midst of everything.

We know the story of Moses, so we might be tempted to say, "Yeah. Sure. This is God. Okay, eventually, everything will work out."

But Moses' story ends before the Israelites reach the promised land, doesn't it? Even the plan that God gave Moses got changed on the fly. "I am who I am" does that sometimes.

Then we have the Gospel for today. Things are going well for Jesus and his disciples, despite the annoying Pharisees. Lots of people listening to Jesus, lots of people healed of disease and demons, huge crowds coming to hear Jesus. And you can picture Peter, big energetic Peter, thinking "Well, the boss said we were going to change

the world but not like an earthly king conquering people and nations. But maybe he's wrong. Look at all Jesus has accomplished, how many followers he has now. Surely they will make him a King." And in the midst of this reverie where Peter imagines how they would all live in a luxurious palace and the Romans would wait on them rather than the other way around, Jesus starts reminding him of things. Unpleasant things. That he will go to Jerusalem and be tortured and die and then rise from the dead after three days.

And Peter snaps his head around, brought back from his daydreams, and says "God forbid! Don't say those things!" The last thing Peter wants to hear is bad news.

And Jesus gets angry with him. "You don't want me to fulfill God's plan? The heck with you – you're just like the tempter Satan, trying to distract me from what I am supposed to do." And Jesus turned to the rest of the disciples and said, "Here's the deal. You want to be a part of what I am intended to accomplish here, you've got to be ready for the hard things that are to come. This won't be easy, but there will be a reward. Not an earthly one, but a reward in heaven." I can picture him looking at them after he says this, with an expression that says "are you in or out?"

We construct plans in our heads, but sometimes God has another plan in mind, one that we are not fully aware of. And it makes us a little bit crazy when it happens, and then we have to figure out how to deal with it.

That was the situation for me when the position of transition ministry director came up. In some ways, it was a great match for my skill set. But it would also mean leaving this place that I love relatively soon after I came, and leaving work unfinished, which I don't like to do. I love parish ministry, and this position would be something very different.

So I thought long and hard before I decided to see what God's plan was for me, for you, and for the diocese. I prayed. I talked to my spiritual director and two other mentors whom I respected. I prayed some more. I talked to Doug. I prayed some more. Then I took a deep breath, and sent in my resume. I figured God would let me know what the plan was. If I was meant to be in the new position, God would place me there. If I was meant to stay at Epiphany – which was just as wonderful an option, believe me – God would not place me in the diocese.

God's plan, not mine. It may seem like I'm punting and letting God take the heat for this change in the life of this parish. But in the end, that's the way it works. It is God who moves in our lives in ways we don't always understand.

Here's my hope for Epiphany: that the next rector takes you to levels I could never bring you to. That you are continually surprised in the ways that God is helping each of you grow. That the good work we did together is built upon and expanded and that it will evolve into what God has in mind for Epiphany next.

This is not a crisis. There were 13 rectors at Epiphany before me and God willing there will be 13 times 13 after me. Each and every one of us has brought their gifts and their flaws and their love and their baggage to Epiphany, and then each one of us has gone...and another rector came along to do the same.

You are not alone. This is a strong healthy vibrant place. The diocese will be working with you, supporting your discernment, and I assure you the next rector will not take 2 and a half years to find. In the meantime, face the burning bush and say "okay, God, what do you have in mind." Face our Lord and say "I get that it's not going to be a walk in the park. Where do I sign up for hauling that cross up the road?"

Know that God will be with you each step of the way, and that my prayers and Doug's prayers will always be with you. God's plan may not seem obvious right now, but it will reveal itself, as strange and wonderful as a burning bush, as challenging as a wooden cross, but always with the one who loves us best waiting as we take on our next journey.

Amen.