

Pentecost 8B 18 July 2021
Mark 6:30-34, 53-56
St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth
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Grace and Peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen. Let's pray:

Today's gospel [Mark 6:30-34, 53-56] is about life interrupted. So, I want to ask you two questions about today's gospel to see if it describes your life, the way I think it does.

1. Have you ever made plans for your life? and,
2. Have your plans ever been interrupted?

To the first, I say with little doubt, "Yes." To the second, I'd say without a shadow of doubt that the last 18 months has given everyone the "irits". So, "Yes" and "Yes."

We've all made plans. For an hour, a day, a weekend, a holiday. And we've all experienced the interruption of those plans by unexpected circumstances. Every one of us could say about today's gospel, "Hey, that's me! That describes my life", because today's gospel describes the tension in which we live. And it's the same tension in which Jesus and his disciples lived.

The apostles have just returned from teaching, casting out demons, and anointing and curing the sick. I can imagine them greatly animated; recounting the reactions to their messages and the amazing things they saw and did. With a gentle and knowing smile, Jesus says to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." Jesus makes a plan for he and the apostles to rest from their labour; at least, that's his expectation.

The plan is to take a boat ride across the lake to a quiet place where they can rest, eat, and re-energise. That's the plan. However, Jesus' intentions are interrupted by the many people who run ahead to meet them. There's no quiet, there's no food, and there's no rest. There's only the great crowd of people, lost like sheep without a shepherd, interrupting, "the best laid plans of mice and men."

Isn't that what happens to us? The situation might be different but we all know what it's like when things go pear-shaped. What is said about, "The best-laid plans of mice and men"? "They often go awry."

We all live on a rollercoaster of ups and downs between our plans and interruptions. Life as we want it to be and life as it happens. Some things are small; some large. Things like: the baby waking up early when you really needed that extra hour to snooze, or a day that had nothing on the calendar that turns into a day you'd rather forget. The diagnosis that interrupts retirement plans. A shattered dream, a death. The plans we make get interrupted in many different ways and the unexpected happens regularly.

Take today, for example. What are your plans for the rest of the day? What things could crop up and spoil your day? Where do you find God in all of that for you? Where is God when you need him the most?

If you react the way I do when my plans are interrupted; you work even harder to make it happen, strengthen your boundaries, blame others, rage about things not working out, or pray that God will make it all go the way you want. Yes, I do all of that, and curse Covid for good measure.

Jesus doesn't do any of that. He doesn't turn the boat around when he sees the crowd. He doesn't get angry or resentful. He doesn't blame or complain. He doesn't ignore or deny the interruption. Jesus just rolls with life and is simply present to what is.

We always see our plans and the interruptions as opposites. That's where the tension headaches come from. But what if we were to accept both, together? What if one isn't necessarily more important than the other? What if we trusted that God's spirit was present and moving in both?

God doesn't choose one over the other; rather, he's present and calling within both the plans and the interruptions. I'm not suggesting that we give up planning, or stop caring. The point I'm trying to make is that everyday life with all its plans and interruptions is our most important spiritual practice.

Everyday life is where God shows up. Everyday life is where we learn about ourselves. Everyday life teaches patience and offers opportunities to soften our hearts and act with compassion. Everyday life invites us into the mystery of creation. Everyday life is a school of love. We learn to forgive. We practice faithfulness and hope, amidst the uncertainty of life.

I don't want to take anything away from prayer, study, outreach, charitable giving, or any of the other things we adopt as our spiritual practices. I do want you to understand that all those are about the relationships that're embedded in everyday life. That means we must learn to be more present to whatever is, whether planned or unexpected, desired or unwanted.

Faithfulness is about being just as intentional and caring toward the interruptions as we are to our plans. Isn't that how Jesus lived? Think of the stories preceding today's gospel. Jesus and the disciples are in a boat. A storm arises. Jesus is asleep. The disciples interrupt his nap. He calms the sea and the wind [Mark 4:35-39]. As soon as they get across the sea, Jesus is immediately met by a man with an unclean spirit. Jesus calls the spirit out of the man [Mark 5:1-13]. They go back across the sea and Jairus comes to beg Jesus' help for his dying daughter. Jesus goes with him but then gets interrupted by the touch of the haemorrhaging woman. She's healed and Jesus goes with Jairus. Messengers interrupt to say it's useless. Jesus raises the girl [Mark 5:21-43]. Jesus goes to his hometown and teaches but is interrupted by questions and unbelief [Mark 6:1-6]. His baptiser and herald meets a brutal end [Mark 6:14-29]. And then we come to today's gospel. It's a litany of one interruption after another.

Throughout Jesus' ministry, he is present and faithful to whatever and whoever is before him, whether planned or unexpected. That's how Jesus tends to his life. He knows the spirit of God "blows where it chooses" (John 3:8). That means we too must constantly discern the movement of the spirit in our lives; in our plans and interruptions alike.

So, I encourage you to discern what that movement might be in the plans and interruptions of your life today. When things go awry; pause, think, listen, look. In what way do you think God is present and calling in the midst of the unexpected? What might be hidden at the intersection where your plans and interruptions meet?

There's always something of God hidden at that intersection. Whom do you think is the source of light that intersects with darkness in the valley of the shadow of death, and is with you to protect you from evil [Psalm 23:4]?

The feeding of the five thousand men in [Mark 6:35-44] and Jesus walking on the water in [Mark 6:45-52] are hidden at the intersection of Jesus' planned retreat and the interruption by the crowd. Five thousand men interrupted Jesus' plans, "And all ate and were filled" (Mark 6:42).

Those two stories aren't part of today's lectionary reading. They fall between the two parts of today's gospel, [Mark 6:30-34] and [Mark 6:53-56]. What if they weren't deliberately excluded from today's reading but were intended to be understood as hidden? What if abundance and nourishment, presence and reassurance, are somehow hidden at the intersection of our plans and interruptions?

What if the fringe of Jesus' cloak [Mark 6:56] is always available to us? Although we have hopes and desires for ourselves and our lives, when things go awry, we feel like sheep without a shepherd. But, let's not lose sight of the bigger picture of the hopes and desires that God has for us and for our lives. The truth is that Jesus is with us in all our plans and interruptions. We are no longer alienated from God; rather, we are members of his household – his children [Ephesians 2:19]. We can never again be alone because no one can ever snatch us out of his hand [John 10:28,29]. He continues to lavish us with his rich grace, forgive our sins [Ephesians 1:7,8], and has great compassion for us [Mark 6:34].

Dear friends, regardless of the best laid plans of mice and men, God's plans will never go awry. Like little Genevieve here today, Jesus will raise us all in the great resurrection to "dwell in the house of the LORD Forever" (Psalm 23:6 NKJV). All praise be to God, the LORD of hosts, the King of glory [Psalm 24:10]. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will remain with you always, guarding your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.