

SERMON: "GOD WITH US ... WITH JOHN"
TEXTS: OLD TESTAMENT ISAIAH 40:1-5
NEW TESTAMENT LUKE 1:5-25, 57-66

November 27, 2022
First Sunday in Advent

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INTRODUCTION

One of the major lessons learned during my sabbatical (actually re-learned because experience has been teaching me this lesson for some time) is that things don't always go according to plan. Plans change.

I did a lot of planning for my sabbatical

We put together a committee to help me with that planning
Put together a solid proposal for a grant to fund the sabbatical including overseas travel to Qatar for the World Cup, and to Armenia (the first nation to claim the title as a 'Christian nation) and to Turkey, once home to Christianity, now majority Muslim

Did not get the grant. Plan B. That plan included several trips here in the US To New York, to Washington DC, out west to national parks, to Georgia and North Carolina for football, family and friends. Those plans all changed along the way. My plan also included spending lots of time riding my bike We have great bike trails here in the Cedar Valley

That plan changed dramatically with my first ride two days into the sabbatical Making a turn to cross over the river heading north there by the Hampton Inn I got hit by another cyclist. Head on. I flew off my bike about 6 feet Just had a bloody nose at that point. The swelling started later

It was a week later after several x-rays, that I found I couldn't eat or drink Lost 15 pounds in two days. Decided to go the emergency room. Got there around 8:00 on a Friday night. Had a CT scan around 10:00 Had emergency surgery to remove an abyss at 2:00 Saturday morning.

Got out of the hospital on Tuesday. Was scheduled to fly to NYC to visit our oldest daughter, Sophie Ann, on Thursday. I asked if I could make that trip. The surgeon said I could. My wife and daughter, in their wisdom, said 'no.' Sophie Ann flew to Iowa. Plans change.

Another example of plans changing. My insurance company originally denied the claim. They said I need pre-certification for that surgery. I walked through the timeline with them and said, 'That's why they call it emergency surgery.' Guess the insurance folks need that reminder too ... Plans change

GOD'S PATIENT PLANNING

So while I'm learning this lesson again, that plans change
That I need flexibility and humility about my own plans
I come back from sabbatical to this first Sunday in Advent
Now I remember we're not following the lectionary this time, plans change

Johnny had an idea about a sermon series, about God being with us. Good idea.
Our New Testament lesson then is about John the Baptist
going all the way back to the story of his birth and what it means
It is a story about plans ... God's plans. An angel announces those plans

But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit

You see God at work here, doing what God usually does ... working through people
God is doing some prep work. You know prep work, doing the things
that need to be done to get started. In the kitchen, that's getting all the ingredients
maybe brining a turkey, chopping some veggies, peeling some potatoes.

God is at work in this story prepping for the day Jesus will be born, God with us.
And God gets started early. The story doesn't start with Jesus,
not even with Mary or Joseph. The prep begins with another set
of parents ... with John's parents.

We know about John. We hear about him in Advent every year.
We understand that John's role will be to prepare the way for Jesus.
The angel tells Zechariah, soon to be a father, as much, saying about the child

He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

Luke does us a favor in telling us this story about John's parents
We can see several things here that can help us understand that
while our plans change, God's been at work for quite some time

One, God is quite capable of the unexpected.
Zechariah and Elizabeth were without children, 'getting on in years.' the bible says
And yet here is an angel telling the father to be that Elizabeth will soon be expecting

BEYOND, BEHIND AND BEFORE

God is full of surprises. We see that throughout the bible.

With eyes to see, we see that in our world today, God working in unexpected ways

Two, God is at work through other people. The story of Jesus

is the story of Joseph and Mary, of Zechariah and Elizabeth and John

And all that is just at the beginning of the story. The story of Jesus goes on

with God expanding the cast of characters to include disciples we know well

like Peter and James and John, and others we hardly remember like Thaddeus

And then there are more and more names ... and unnamed folks too

All playing a part in God's ongoing work.

And three, the main thing I want you to see, what I most need to see.

God is at work in the prep work ... and the prep work before the prep work

The Christmas story begins long before Bethlehem

It begins with Zechariah and Elizabeth ... decades before Christmas Day

You've noticed how the celebration of Christmas, especially the shopping

our planning and purchasing keep starting earlier and earlier

The stores have the Christmas decorations and ads up right after

they take down the Halloween decorations and discount the candy

God's plans started well before that ... much, much earlier

Especially when I consider how often and how much my plans change,

It gives me both some correction and comfort to know God has been

planning and prepping, busy at work for us and with us before we know it

God is at work beyond our expectations

God is at work behind the scenes

And God is at work before, long before, we even know

Johnny, as usual, was on to something with this idea of a focus on God being with us

What a great and much needed reminder at Thanksgiving and in Advent

a great reminder in the December darkness and amidst all our plans

God is very much with us ... has been for quite some time

God is with us ... especially when we don't notice it

Admit it, we're a bit like John's dad, Zechariah ... a little slow to get it

Let me try explaining it this way. Another story from my sabbatical

With a focus on the relationship of church and state, I planned a trip to DC

The plan was to meet my friend Randy Shepley who serves a church in Norfolk

He served at First Baptist just down the street from my church in Georgia

We did a lot of work together in that community, lots of lunches together

SUMMARY

We planned on visiting the respective offices of each of our denominations there in DC to influence policy and policy makers. Those plans fell through because of some last minute schedule changes with staff.

That's okay. We still got to visit with each other,
visit multiple museums and memorials and see the sights.

Let me show you just a few pictures. This are a few selfies I took.

Please show pictures – one at a time as prompted

Those are supposed to be pictures of me and Randy in front of the White House. Yes, I am a terrible photographer. I tell people I am the French Revolution of photographers – 'off with their heads.'

As you can see, I am even worse trying to take selfies.

These pictures are really bad, but worse are the pictures I do not take.

It may be because I know I'm a bad photographer

It may be that I just get caught up in the moment when I'm with people

Whatever the reason, the worst thing about my picture taking

is that I don't take pictures of myself with the people I care about. I just forget.

I visited our son Jerry in Asheville. No pictures

I visited my good friend Greg, who officiated our wedding, No pictures.

I visited my uncle Josh, my mom's brother. No pictures.

I missed those opportunities. I wish I had those memories in a frame.

Beth helped me realize that mistake. Did get pictures with our grandson and with our oldest son, Durham and his wife, Anna. Beth took those pictures.

So here's why I'm telling you this ... not just to show off my Ansel Adams like skills

I missed taking those pictures and I will miss those memories

because I didn't take the time to capture the moments for memory

I did not see who I was with the way I could have

I am afraid I have often done the same and missed seeing the Good Lord at work in my life ... right there in the present, in the picture, with me

They say a picture is worth a thousand words.

That may not be true with the pictures I take

But I do hope that the 1,682 words I have shared in this sermon

might help you see that God is very much there with you ... at work beyond expectation, behind the scenes and before you know it