



The Trinity Pulpit



Plan B Genesis 21:8-21 Dr. Jeff Roberts June 21, 2009

Plan B! How many of us are working on Plan B? Or for that matter, how many of us are working on Plans C, D, or E. Life is filled with adjusting, re-dreaming, and moments that do not go our way or as we have planned. We experience this in our personal lives as well as our corporate lives. We did not plan to get laid off; that was not included in our financial plan; that was not how we envisioned our life at 50. We did not plan the stock market melt down. We had saved enough to retire but now retirement will be another five years away. This was not in our plans. We did not plan a disease in our 30s. That is not when you are supposed to get disease; that is when you are to be healthy and active, not sick.

In my years as pastor, I have never met a couple that comes to the altar not all dressed up. The groom is handsome even though some look pretty uncomfortable in their tuxedo. The bride is beautiful; she has prepared for this moment. They come together and they make their promises. None of them make those promises without the intention of keeping them. Not in that moment. But along the way they have conflict. Along the way someone gives in to temptation with someone at work. Along the way they spend more time making money than making a life together, and what seems all of a sudden, even though it is not, they find themselves separated and in Plan B. Some of you have gone through the pain of divorce and find yourself rethinking your life. Not what you envisioned your 40s to look like, at least not on your wedding day. It is plan B.

There is an old saying “the person who does not plan plans to fail.” Yet, the other saying is also true: “nothing ultimately goes as planned.” Life is full of Plan Bs.

Maybe that describes you today. You find yourself in the midst of a transition to Plan B. Life has not gone as planned. You are wondering if God has a plan for your life now that your plans have gone by the wayside. Where is God in Plan B?

That is the question that begs to be answered in our first story we are looking at this summer in our series “Stories We Should Know and Others We Think We Know.” Our story is the story of Hagar and Ishmael. For those of us who might recognize the story, we also recognize that we know little about the story. Most of us who do know something about the story would simply say, in our current political culture, that it is the story that explains the conflict between Islam and Judaism. This is the story of two sons and the animosity that is produced between the two lines of their father Abraham.

Our text reminds us of the conflict between Hagar and Sarah. God had promised Abraham and Sarah that they would have a great family. Abraham is told by God that he would have descendants that were like the grains of sands on the seashore and the stars in the sky. Yet, when we get to chapter 16 in Genesis, Sarah and Abraham still have no children. In fact in Chapter 15, Abraham is making plans to pass his estate to his ally – or his relative – Eliezar of Damascus. When Abraham reminds God that he is childless, God reminds him of his promise to Abraham. However, in chapter 16, Abraham and Sarah grow impatient with God. They decide to take matters in their own hands and produce a child for Abraham. Sarah had a maidservant who was an Egyptian named Hagar. Sarah decides to give Hagar to Abraham as a wife. So after 10 years in Canaan and waiting on God, Hagar becomes Abraham’s wife and she conceives a child. From the very beginning her pregnancy caused trouble between Sarah and Hagar. Sarah, according to Genesis 16, says that Hagar despised her. Probably meaning that once Hagar was able to do for Abraham what Sarah could not, Hagar may have flaunted her ability to bear a child. The result is that Sarah begins to mistreat Hagar to the point that Hagar runs away. She runs into the desert and there she meets the angel of the Lord. The angel of the Lord tells her to return to Sarah and not to fear, for God would bless her and her son.

She was to give her son the name Ishmael which means “God hears.” God had heard Hagar’s pain and God would bless. Ishmael is born to Abraham. From the beginning Abraham loved Ishmael. He circumcises Ishmael along with the whole household as a sign of the covenant between God and Abraham. Ishmael is not treated as a second class part of the family until God blesses Sarah and Abraham with Isaac. Isaac has been God’s plan, not Ishmael. Just because Abraham and Sarah had given up on God, God had not given up on the plan he had for Abraham. God reminds them again that he will bless Abraham and Sarah with a child. Fourteen years pass between Ishmael’s birth and Isaac’s birth. Yet, the animosity between Sarah and Hagar never subsided.

When Isaac is born, Sarah again becomes jealous of Hagar and Ishmael and demands of Abraham that now that the son of promise has been born, he should send Ishmael and Hagar away. Although distressed by the circumstance, Abraham, encouraged by God, sends Hagar and Ishmael into the desert. They are essentially sent away to die. They are given provisions, but the provisions do not last; soon, Ishmael and Hagar come to the place they are preparing to die. Hagar places her son, who I am sure is weak at this point, under a bush so she does not have to watch him die. She goes several yards away to die herself. Yet, God hears. Remember, Ishmael means “God hears.” God hears the boy crying and comes to her. The angel arrives again in the desert and tells Hagar not to give up but to take the boy and go. When she is obedient, all of a sudden it seems her eyes are opened to a well of water; they are not only saved, but sustained and blessed.

Ishmael and Hagar are people whose lives have not gone as planned. They were once the focus of the family and part of the promise and covenant, only to be sent away to die. Ishmael is the true “other son” in this story. Isaac is the child of promise and Ishmael is the son of determination and planning. Isaac is the gift and Ishmael is the expected. Isaac is the elected one and Ishmael is the non-elected one but yet treasured by his father.¹ Isaac is Plan A and Ishmael is Plan B.

The question is whether God has a plan for Plan B. That is Abraham’s question as well. Abraham, even before Isaac is born, is asking this question of God. In chapter 17, as part of the covenant conversation Abraham says to God “If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!” (Genesis 17:18) God’s answer is “Yes, but your wife Sarah will bear you a son and you will call him Isaac.” (Genesis 17:19) God’s answer is “Yes!” God is able to bless Plan B. It is not his first choice. It is not God’s plan; God’s plan is going to be to bless the world through Isaac. Isaac is the plan but that does not mean

that God is unable to bless Ishmael as well. God can bless Plan B. That is the good news for us when we find our self living our lives, not in God’s original plan for our lives but, in some shape or form of Plan B.

As I have thought about Plan B in our lives, I want to suggest there are four thoughts for us today when we find ourselves in the middle of Plan B. The first thought I have from our text regarding Plan B is that Plan B is sometimes the result of our own choice and sometimes the result of the choice of others.

We can arrive at Plan B as the result of our own choices. Because God has blessed us and gifted us with free will, we can make a choice or a decision that can land us in Plan B. It might be God’s will for us to take a job, make a move, or use a certain talent, but if we fail to recognize God’s will in our lives, we can, by making a choice or even by not spending time reflecting what God’s will might be, choose to place our self in Plan B.

In our story, Abraham and Sarah just gave up on God. They had heard God’s promises over and over again, but God’s promise was not enough for them. They had to do it themselves. They made the choice for Hagar to become Abraham’s wife and birth a child. That decision was not God’s plan but their choice. They made the choice not to wait on God and the consequences were many. In some ways I think that is why Sarah has such a hard time with Hagar and Ishmael, for really Plan B was her idea, and when she realized the consequences, she did not like them. God let Sarah and Abraham make their own choice in regards to Hagar and Ishmael, and they did not like what they received by their own decisions. That is usually how we get to Plan B. We are not patient with God or we are not even considering God’s will when we make decisions, and the result, many times, is we find ourselves smack dab in the middle of Plan B.

Yet, let me also remind you that Plan B can be the result of another’s decision. Ishmael is the picture of a person who is innocent and yet suffering the consequences of others’ decisions. Ishmael, who is Abraham’s loved son, part of the covenant, protected by God, and blessed by God, finds his life about to come to an end out in the desert because of the consequences of Abraham and Sarah’s decisions. I think that this part of Plan B is the hardest. It is hard when we realize that our choices have placed us in a hard place, but it is even harder when we get there by the choice of another.

You file bankruptcy because your partner, who you would have trusted with all you had, proved he could not be trusted after all. His choice leaves you in Plan B. A drunk driver strikes your child, or your family and either

kills them or alters their life. It was not your choice but you are in Plan B. You would have worked for your company the rest of your life but they chose to ship your job overseas. They can do what you do for much less in India and you are in Plan B. It was not your choice but it is still Plan B.

Plan B arrives in our lives as the result of the gift of free will. God will not make us follow his plan for our lives. God gives us the choice to follow him, but he will not make us. Because God has placed us in a world that is interconnected, we live in community and not isolation; therefore, free will means that we arrive in Plan B by our choice and the choice of others.

The second thought for us today is when we find our self in Plan B we need to learn to accept it. If it was our choice, accept the responsibility for our choice. If it was the result of another's choice, accept the reality of our situation. You may have not wanted it. You would do it differently if you could, but in many cases Plan B means things have changed and we cannot move forward until we accept things have changed.

Hagar and Ishmael's life had changed and they were facing the reality. They found themselves in the desert, without provision, and preparing to die. They were not in denial of the situation; they realized that their lives were changed. They could not go back to Abraham's tent and live under Abraham's care. Their lives had changed and they had to face reality.

One of the steps we must take in Plan B is to admit that we are in Plan B and that things are not going back to the way they were. There are consequences that accompany Plan B. Some of these consequences are irreversible but not unredeemable. Ishmael and Hagar are banished and in isolation. Ishmael and Hagar will suffer from living in hostility with others as a result of Plan B. Yet, we will discover that although some of the consequences are for life they are not beyond God's creative redemption.

Plan B means facing reality and accepting consequences. My illness or my injury means that things have changed; I am in Plan B. She is not coming back; I can hope for it, I can wish for it, and I can even pray for it but she is not coming back. Things have changed Plan B. Death is certain; it was not what you envisioned for your loved one. You thought you would share this moment in life together but it is not to be. Plan B.

It is often tempting to avoid facing reality. Patrick Henry expressed this in 1775 in his speech about Britain's intentions to subjugate the colonies. In his speech he said:

We are apt to shut our eyes against a painful truth, and listen to the song of that siren till she transforms us into beasts. Is this the part of wise men, engaged in a great and arduous struggle for liberty? Are we disposed to be of the number of those who, having eyes, see not, and, having ears, hear not, the things which so nearly concern their temporal salvation? For my part, whatever anguish of spirit it may cost, I am willing to know the whole truth; to know the worst, and to provide for it.

When we find ourselves in Plan B we cannot afford to listen to the song sirens that say it will be alright or one day it will be back the way it was. No, we have to face the whole truth, know the worst and start there. Plan B only becomes a new plan when we face reality.

Thirdly, we are reminded that God is active in Plan B. This is the great news of our story. Hagar and Ishmael have suffered hostility and isolation, but God is right there with them in Plan B. In fact, every time that Hagar has arrived in the place of isolation God has met her. When she fled on her own and now when she has been sent away, God has been right there. Our text gives us some comforting thoughts about God's activity in Plan B.

We know that God hears. In fact the angel tells Hagar that God hears her cry and God hears Ishmael's cry. For God to hear means God is attentive to us. God has not abandoned us in Plan B. Our choices and the choices of others may have the power to change our circumstance, but they do not have the power to change God's love and care for us. Paul gets at this when he asks "What can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus? Nothing," Paul concludes. Plan B might have placed Ishmael and Hagar in the desert, but God was attentive to them and present with them.

No matter how much you think you have made the wrong decision or how much time you have wasted not following God's will, God still cares for you and has a plan for your life. You might be on Plan Z but that does not matter. In the place where we are, our situation has become barren and hopeless and our only plan is no plan at all; however, God is there and attentive to us.

I cannot tell you how many people in our economic downturn have told me that it has been a good thing for them and their family. It was not what they had planned for, but they had discovered God's peace, provision and presence like never before. For the first time in their lives, they were including prayer as a part of making decisions and setting priorities. They have discovered that God did not abandon them, but just the opposite – God was present.

Not only is God present but God provides and blesses. God provides water for the present need for Hagar and Ishmael, and not just a drink but a well, a place that will sustain them. God also provides for Ishmael a wife and a future, as he keeps his promise to Ishmael to make him a father of a great nation. Here is the good news. In Plan B we do not have to simply settle for God's provision or getting by, but in Plan B we can experience God's blessing. God blessed Ishmael. He was not the son of the promise but God still blessed him. He was not the gift but the impatient plan of Abraham and Sarah. He did not bring joy but his very presence brought hostility. Yet, God did not forget Ishmael. God provided for him and blessed him.

What does God's blessing look like in Plan B. Let me give you two words. One is inclusion. God includes us. I am astonished when I read that Ishmael was circumcised as part of God's covenanting with Abraham. Ishmael is cast off by Abraham and Sarah but not by God. God includes him. Never does God curse Ishmael. Just the opposite is true. Even though Ishmael is the other son he is still precious to God, Abraham, the angel and Hagar. Just because we find our self in Plan B does not mean we cannot still be included in what God is doing. The second word is restoration. Sometimes we never fully experience what God first intended when we start in Plan B. Remember, there are consequences. However, when we allow God to work in the Plan B moments of life, we get to experience God's intent for our lives.

There is an interesting story in Chapter 25 of Genesis. We are told in Genesis 25:7 and the following verses that Abraham lived a long life and died at an old age. When he died he was gathered to his people. Then Genesis 25:9-10 startles us: "His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah near Mamre, in the field of Ephron son of Zohar the Hittite, the field Abraham had bought from the Hittites. There Abraham was buried with his wife Sarah." The next section tells us of Ishmael's family and his death. There is really

nothing more said about Ishmael after he buries his father along with his half brother Isaac. Could it be that after all the hostility, and the hostility that would follow, that what we have here is a moment where God restored relationship, if just for a moment? I want to think so. I want to think that here at Abraham's grave two brothers, one who was planned by human impatience and one who was the gift of the promise came to the same moment and place to do God's will. If just for a moment, Ishmael's Plan B had led him back to his father and a moment of restoration with his brother. It's not perfect; life seldom is. But it is a reminder that God is at work leading us to these special God moments that he has planned for our lives. Sometimes we get there when we follow God's original plan, and sometimes God, through his grace, leads us there even in Plan B.

Is that not what Paul promises us? "And in all things God is working good for those who love him and have been called according to his purpose." (Romans 8:28) Is this not what Paul means when he says "and being confident of this that He who began a good work in you will be faithful to bring it to completion until the day of our Lord Jesus Christ?" (Philippians 1:6)

I was once lost out in the country trying to get to a funeral in a rural church. I finally gave up trying to find it on my own and stopped at a local country general store to ask for directions. I went up to the counter and asked the man where I might find Pond Gap Baptist Church. His answer was a question that stunned me. He asked me "Where are you coming from?" I was not sure what to say. I looked back and said "I am coming from right here. Give me directions from right here."

When we have lost our way and chosen the wrong paths, we really have only one place where we can start to follow God again. It is from right here. Right here, today, whether we are in Plan B, C, D or Z we can be assured that God hears, God is present, God provides and, more than that, God blesses. Yes, God can bless Plan B. ✨

¹Brueggemann, Walter. *Genesis: Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1982). 180-183.



Trinity Baptist Church • 4815 Six Forks Road • Raleigh, NC 27609 • 919.787.3740

www.tbcraleigh.com • jroberts@tbcraleigh.com