

# The Plans of God Are the Only Real Thing Happening Anyway

Isaiah 35:1-10; Matthew 11:2-11

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

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On Wednesday afternoon, I listened to a podcast/sermon by Sarah Condon, a delightfully irreverent Episcopal priest and university chaplain at Rice University in Houston, TX.

The title grabbed my attention, as well-chosen titles do. The title was: “I Guess This is What I’m Doing Today.”<sup>1</sup>

Condon shared about how she had a weekly lunch that she hosted for students at the university. Punctuality is important to her, so she had made sure that all the food was ready to go, left in plenty of time to get everything done that needed doing for the lunch.

And then, on her drive to the university, she saw a homeless woman in the middle of the street.

Now, she was quick to acknowledge that picking up homeless people isn’t something that she normally does. There are plenty of them in Houston, as there are in many American cities, as there are, sadly, even in *our* city. Naomi and I saw a few last night on our drive in to her work Christmas party.

Like most of us, Condon is more accustomed to just driving by. We don’t know how to help; the need seems too big and any potential solutions too complex. *The poor you will always have with you*, we say, probably misunderstanding Jesus’ words at least a little.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://themockingpulpit.fireside.fm/1532>

But *this* woman on *this* street on *this* day had no shoes. And she was pushing a walker. And it was a four-lane highway. Something about this combination of things made it feel different, somehow more desperate, and impossible to ignore.

And so, Sarah Condon picked *this* woman up. She got her out of danger. She found her a place to go. And, of course, she was late for her lunch with the students at the university.

Now, on one level this was a pretty ordinary encounter. An ordinary person setting aside their ordinary plans to help a person in dire circumstances.

People do this kind of thing every day, far away from the spotlight. I know people in this room help people in trouble all the time (I've heard the stories).

But it was interesting to hear Condon interpret her own experience:

“I don't do these things because I am nice or because I like to appear helpful. I do them because God shoves me into that direction and says, ‘Actually, this is what you're doing today.’”

I have had many similar experiences in ministry. Where my plans were thrown out the window, where God shoved me in a different direction.

When I was taking my first steps in pastoral ministry on Vancouver Island, a wise friend and mentor told me that I would need to cultivate what he called a “theology of holy interruptions.”

“Sometimes God speaks in the unplanned, unexpected, even annoying human interjections in our days,” he said. “Make sure you don't allow your other ‘important work’ to trump the divine appointments that might cross your path when you least expect or want them.”

I thought of this when I had finished listening to the podcast. It seemed to me that Sarah Condon had a good “theology of holy interruptions” operating.

She put it well in her sermon:

Are you ready for God to break into your world?... Are you ready for all your best-laid plans to fall apart. Because the plans of God are the only real thing happening anyway.

Well, as I said, all this was Wednesday afternoon.

On Thursday afternoon, I got a phone call at the church. It was from a man living on a southern Alberta reserve.

“This is going to sound really weird,” he said. “My name is \_\_\_\_\_. I’m a recovering addict. I was hoping you might consider helping me along the recovery journey, like be a mentor or something. My mom told me that she had a dream and that I was supposed to call Ryan Dueck at Lethbridge Mennonite Church. So that’s what I’m doing. I don’t really know how to explain it. I think it must just be a kind of ‘God thing’ or something.”

I kind of sat there, flabbergasted. These are not the kind of phone calls one expects on a Thursday afternoon. Or, well, ever.

I told him as much. He laughed kind of sheepishly and said, “No, I guess not.”

I thought about Sarah Condon’s words, about God shoving her in a direction despite all her well-laid plans. About the plans of God being the only real thing happening anyway.

I thought about my friend’s words about a “theology of holy interruptions.” I thought that if this was indeed a “God thing,” I probably shouldn’t stand in the way.

We spoke for a while. He told me the story of his childhood, about a marriage that had ended, about his kids. About the dark places he had found himself and how he had come to the end of his rope. About his hopes for the future. About faith, about how and when and why God gets our attention.

We talked about how and when and where we could meet to talk further. This will be complicated by the fact that he can’t drive at the moment, but we’re going to do what we can to make it work.

“I have a thumb,” he said. “Maybe I can get to Lethbridge. I think there’s a real connection here Maybe that’s a ‘God thing,’ too.” I could only agree.

Friday morning, I scrapped my sermon title (the one you see in your bulletin—sorry Joani!) and set off to write a new one with this title, plagiarized from Sarah Condon.

**The plans of God are the only real thing happening anyway.**

God has this habit of rerouting my sermons on Friday mornings.

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My Thursday conversation was rare. I can't think of anything else like it in fourteen-and-a-half years of pastoral ministry. And I have no idea where the conversation might go from here.

But I have at the very least learned to be open to God shoving me off in directions I might not otherwise choose.

God doesn't need much of an open door, I have learned, both from personal experience and from hearing the stories of others.

Just a bit of openness to surprise and possibility, just a bit of willingness to take a risk can be a way that God pulls back the curtain and shows us that whatever it looks like on the surface of things, there is often a vast landscape of human beings searching for connection and meaning and hope and salvation.

It's easy to forget this. Even for pastors, you might be surprised to know. I was completely caught off guard by this conversation.

On Friday morning, I revisited an article I had read a while back. It was a piece in *The New York Times* about how life expectancy is, for the first time in decades, actually going *down* in America.<sup>2</sup>

People are, evidently, dying before they're supposed to. It's the economy, of course. And it's fentanyl and the opioid crisis. And it's suicide and addictions and overdoses and the so-called "deaths of despair" fuelled by anxiety and depression and social dislocation and who knows what else. It's all of the above and many more things, no doubt.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/26/health/life-expectancy-rate-usa.html?action=click&module=Latest&pgtype=Homepage>

It's also, almost certainly, a crisis of meaning and hope. It's embarrassingly easy to forget this as a pastor.

You can just get in the habit of preaching the sermons, saying the prayers, interpreting the Scriptures, responding to the needs, keeping the machine going, and all the while forgetting that there is an incredible urgency to the work of the church, particularly in these hopeless times.

People actually *are* desperate for connection, for transcendence, for something worth living and dying for, for a mercy that outruns all of our blindness and folly, for a forgiveness that can wash over our darkest secrets and most shameful deeds, for a joy and a hope that is not tied to the ups and downs of our daily lives, for a love that never lets us go and a hope that stretches out beyond what we can imagine.

People are desperate for God, even if they aren't aware of it, even if they would not use that language.

People actually *are* eager for God to break into their world—into *the* world—with good news.

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John the Baptist was ready for God to break in, as he sat in a grungy prison, where he had been for the bulk of Jesus' public ministry in Galilee.

It seems King Herod took exception to John's fiery preaching about "The one who is to come" and *really* didn't appreciate it when John denounced him for marrying his brother's ex-wife (Mat 14:3-12).

So, John's been sitting in his cell for a long time now, and he's heard rumours and whispers of what this Jesus has been doing all over the countryside. He has been healing, preaching, teaching, and generally causing quite a bit of a stir.

John is intrigued. But he's also a little disappointed. Or, at least confused.

He had been expecting a fiery Messiah to come up and execute judgment on Israel's corrupt leaders. He had probably even been expecting Israel's liberator to confront the power of Rome and overthrow Rome's puppet king Herod.

He had been expecting a glorious king!

He was expecting this Jesus to do what Israel's Messiah was *supposed* to do: come in with a flourish, mobilize an army, set Israel free, judge and defeat her enemies, and put all things right.

Remember, this is the same John who had this to say about the one who he was preparing the way for:

His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire (Mat. 3:12).

John clearly expected the Messiah to clean house!

But John is still in jail. Herod is still ruling with an iron fist. His people, the Jews, are still led by religious leaders who are corrupt and governed by self-interest. And Rome is still the ominous threat that hung over all of the known world.

And so, John's confused. He wants to know what's going on. This wasn't what he expected.

Debie Thomas puts it like this:

John is in chains and in crisis, wondering if he has staked his life on the wrong promise and the wrong person. The Messiah, as far as John can tell, has changed nothing. He was supposed to make the world new. He was supposed to bring justice, fairness, and order to human institutions. He was supposed to finish the costly work John started so boldly in the wilderness—to wield the axe, bring the fire, and renew the world.<sup>3</sup>

So, John asks his followers to go and ask this Jesus plainly, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”

*If you're not going to do what needs doing, just let us know so we will save our hopes for someone else!*

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=2479>

And Jesus responds enigmatically as Jesus so often does.

He doesn't say, "Well, yes, John, I am the one who is to come, and if you'll just be a bit more patient, you'll see. I'm not going to be exactly what you're expecting, but just hang on and you'll see that I'm a pretty decent Messiah after all!"

No, he appeals to John's followers themselves. *Go tell John what you hear and see.*

The blind receive their sight (Mat. 9:27-30).

The lame walk (Mat. 9:2-8).

The lepers are cleansed (Mat 8:1-4).

The deaf hear (Mat. 4:23-25).

The dead are raised (Mat 9:18-26).

Good news is proclaimed to the poor (Mat. 5:1-12).

The people who are stumbling around on the margins of society are healed and made whole and welcomed in.

Jesus is speaking directly out of the prophet Isaiah's playbook. But instead of calling to memory texts of judgment and final victory over Israel's enemies (which also exist in Isaiah 35), Jesus directs them to these signs of the kingdom:

- "The lame shall leap like a deer" (Isa. 35:6)
- "The eyes of the blind shall be opened (Isa. 35:5)
- "The ears of the deaf shall be unstopped" (Isa. 35:5)
- "The tongue of the speechless shall sing for joy" (Isa. 35:6)

What Jesus is saying to John is quite simple. The scriptures *are* being fulfilled in me, but the script will not be unfolding exactly as you imagined.

*Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me!*

Don't be embarrassed or disappointed because I'm not meeting your expectations in the way that you imagined that they ought to be. Don't be surprised when God's ways turn out to be different than yours.

I don't know how John reacted. We don't hear anything else from John in Matthew's gospel.

Maybe he said something like, "Well, I guess this is what God is doing today."

It's not what he expected, not what he planned for, not even what he had really been hoping for.

But the plans of God are the only real thing happening anyway, right?

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Back to that phone call, that "holy interruption" when God shoved me off in a different direction.

I could explain the phone call away in a bunch of different ways.

Perhaps this guy's mom found me online. Maybe she had read something I've written and knows a bit of my story (I have, after all, inflicted a *lot* of words on the internet!). Maybe she'll try anything to set her son off on a better path.

It's not hard for me to imagine someone saying that this all sounds more like a "Google thing" than a "God thing."

There are always ways of explaining God away if we want to. And many do want to, even those of us who should know better.

But if we take seriously the Advent message of a God who interrupts business as usual, the God who disrupts, who reroutes, who surprises and confuses and even *offends* in the person of Jesus Christ, the God who sets *all of human history* off course with a baby born in a manger...

... then surely it is not too much of a stretch to believe that God might occasionally interrupt our little lives, too.

The entire Christian narrative is fundamentally about the God who *comes* to his people. The God who reaches down to save us from the impossible task of climbing up to him.

And this is after all the hope to which we are particularly oriented toward and attuned to during the season of Advent, right?

God has come. God comes to us in the present. And God will come again.

So, keep your eyes and your ears open for holy interruptions.

Blessed is the one who does not take offense at the One who shows up to disrupt our world and shove it off in an unexpected direction, who says, “Actually, this is what you’re doing today.”

The plans of God—for you, for those you love, for the lost and the least, for the whole world—are the only real thing happening anyway.

Thanks be to God.

