

CHRISTMAS PLANS
Rev. Gregory Flint
Matthew 2
January 10, 2010 (Epiphany)

So...did Christmas for you go as planned?

We create such high expectations that it's difficult, if not impossible, for any Christmas to actually measure up. And mostly we know that.

Still, we dream and spin the ideal Christmas in our heads. Then we do the best we can to create good memories of Christmas joy and love. But it never all goes as planned – does it?

I mean maybe this was going to be the Christmas when the whole family would be together. But something happened – plane ticket prices soared, an illness, a storm made travel impossible – and someone couldn't be there.

Or maybe, this was the first Christmas following a loved one's death. People were together, but the sense of absence was painful. Grief had not been in anyone's Christmas plan.

Or this was going to be the Christmas when that old hurtful family dynamic would change. But it didn't change.

Maybe, you had planned to simplify things this year – spend and run around less, pray more, listen to Handel's "Messiah" the whole way through. Only it all got away from you again.

For some, the plan was that by this Christmas the addiction problem was going to be dealt with. It wasn't.

Or this was going to be the Christmas without crisis. Instead, a child seems unhappy and won't talk about it. Instead, a medical lab report is still out there. Instead, a job or relationship is even more uncertain.

Maybe, the plan had been as simple as getting the cards out in time. It didn't happen and you're still not sure why. Maybe you just didn't feel like it.

Maybe the news in the world had a paralyzing effect. You had just heard too much political blaming over the economy and taxes and healthcare. You had just seen too many pictures of flag-draped coffins and emaciated refugees in the Sudan. You had read one too many stories about abused children and melting glaciers. And you just couldn't get the cards addressed as planned.

My hunch is that in one way to another, for all of us, Christmas did not go as planned....

Then there's Mary and Joseph – talk about Christmas not going as planned.

When the angel appeared to Mary and told her she would bear this Special Child, Gabriel left out the part about the journey to Bethlehem. And giving birth in that stable was definitely not in Mary's plan for Christmas.

Joseph's plan had been a traditional engagement and wedding. Then Mary tells him she's pregnant with God knows whose child. So Joseph's next plan is to break the engagement and get on with his life.

Only an angel comes to Joseph too...in a dream. And angels are no respecters of human-made plans. And this Christmas angel tells Joseph there is to be a change in plan – that Joseph is being called to put aside his own ego issues, and that he is to love and protect this woman and baby.

You know, Joseph is the patron saint of all for whom Christmas did not go as planned....

Well, Joseph thinks, at least when the baby is born we can get things back to normal around here.

Then these strangers from the East show up – these Magi. Who invited them to Christmas? Joseph's day-planner doesn't say anything about Epiphany.

And if that isn't enough, Joseph has another dream warning him to wake up Mary, bundle up the Baby, and flee into the darkness for God knows where.

And you think your Christmas didn't go as planned....

But so it has ever been, with Christmas, and with our lives. Jesus is born among people for whom things don't go as planned.

I mean, who of us can look back over our lives and say – “Yep, it's all gone just as I thought it would. My life plan has played out just like clockwork. There have been no surprises along the way of my purpose-driven life.”

Oh, this is not to say that it's pointless to plan or that we shouldn't have goals and hopes for the future. Intentionality about life is healthy and good, as long as we understand that life is really more mystery than certainty. As the Apostle Paul wrote in that great chapter 13 of I Corinthians: “Now we see in a mirror dimly...now we know only in part....”

Could it be, then, that real life is also the unplanned thing, the detour, the unexpected departure? What if the best part about life is risking love again and keeping the faith when life doesn't go as planned?

Maybe, what we plan is not the real point of our lives to begin with or finally....

For some, then, the plan was to feel good again by Christmas. Only the pain is not better and more medical appointments await.

For others, the only plan was to live long enough to see one more Christmas. Some did. Some didn't.

Maybe the plan was to be out of the homeless shelter by Christmas. But for many in our land, that was planning too much.

Many children in our land also had just one plan – to make it through Christmas without being hit by a parent or to go back to school without being hungry. For how many children in our land was that wanting too much?

Or maybe you had an unplanned, pre-Christmas crisis of spirit. You laid there wide-eyed in the night and the questions wouldn't stop. Who am I? What should I do next? Does it matter? What does my life mean in the end? Do I actually believe in a God who does this Christ Child thing? What do I really believe? And what is this surprising and frightening darkness of soul about?

Oh, surely, there were moments of great love and reassurance that happened this Christmas: things that you'll carry in your heart for a long time; things that caused you to take a deep breath of gratitude and say, “This is good.”

And maybe those best parts were unplanned too: serendipities of comfort and joy; gifts that money can't buy; occasions when people knew how much we mean in each other's lives; times when Christmas went deep and

the light of love and hope was relit; moments, blessed moments, when you knew as sure as you've known anything that this Christ Child reveals an eternal Will and Purpose of Godly Love.

But whatever happened, however Christmas went, my best hunch is that every one of us looks back now and can say, "You know, that's not really what I planned."

But that's okay – isn't it? For Christmas has never been about what we plan. Rather, the heart of it is believing that God is not finished yet...with the world...or with your life.

And if you want to know more about believing in such a God...and about Christmas, or life not going as planned...just talk to Mary and Joseph....