

I. Introduction: Those who know me & my personality know I'm a perfectionist

A. I like to get things right the 1st time

1. I plan what I'm doing so I don't have to correct mistakes later
2. In school & in college when preparing an essay, I might make a simple outline, but then I would choose my words carefully & try to write up the finished piece the first time
3. I hated assignments where the teacher expected to see 3 or 4 different rough drafts, because I didn't need that many & it felt like a waste of time
4. In short, as I was growing up, my personal instinct was: If your Plan A is good enough, you shouldn't need a Plan B

B. Boy did I have a lot to learn!

1. I have learned the hard way that, whether or not I start out with a Plan B in mind, more times than not, I end up on Plan B anyway
2. Life itself throws monkey wrenches into our carefully made plans, even if you don't factor God into the equation
3. But God ... oh yes, God ...
 - a) God has a way of moving us to Plan B when we liked Plan A just fine
 - b) On the other hand, through history, it also works the other way around: Our human choices & stubbornness have prompted God to make a Plan B

C. That's what we're talking about today: God's Plan B, and how we line up with that

II. (God's bigger story)

A. The Scriptures we heard today are 2 very different stories, essentially about Abram & Sarai, & about Jesus & Nicodemus

1. The stories are separated by about 2K years from each other & another 2K years from us today but if our attention focuses only on starting in Gen. 12, then we'll miss much of the real significance of both Scripture stories ...
2. So before looking specifically at Abram or Nicodemus, let's review how God's big salvation story starts out
 - a) 1st 11 chapters set the background for the major stories of the patriarchs & matriarchs, which form most of the book of Genesis

b) Rest of Genesis from ch. 12 on consists of clusters of stories about 4 main patriarchs of the O.T. and their wives:

Abraham & Sarah ... Isaac & Rebekah

Jacob, Leah & Rachel ... Joseph & Asenath

3. In broad strokes, 1st 11 chapters describe God's creation of the world & then the spread of the problem of sin

a) This happens thru 4 stories that show the fall of humanity

Adam & Eve & the serpent in the Garden (last week)

Cain & Abel & the beginning of human violence & murder

Widespread human evil & violence resulting in the Great Flood, w/ God saving Noah & his family

Tower of Babel story, where humans once again try to exceed what they were meant to be

b) Thru these 11 chapters, the gap between God & humanity is widening ... It seems like God's Plan A is not working

Last part of ch. 11 is a genealogy that bridges between Shem (son of Noah) & the 1st patriarch Abram

End of 11 & beginning of 12 mark a key pivot point for the Bible as a whole:

After being introduced to all the sin in human hearts, our attention is drawn to one particular family who descended from Noah & Shem ... let's hear what it says about them:

B. Read Gen. 11:27-32

1. Did you catch the fact that Terah & Abram & their families set out originally from Ur to go to Canaan, but then they stopped in Haran & didn't go on?

a) Maybe Abram's father liked it so much in Haran that they decided to settle there instead ...

2. In any case, Abram & Sarai were comfortable in Haran with their extended family for decades.

a) Only real problem: they were getting old & childless, but still ... in Haran, they had it made! ... UNTIL ...

3. @ age 75, God told Abram to leave all this security behind, pack up everything & head off to ... off to ... well, to someplace that God would show them along the way.

C. Now we see that God has a Plan B in mind

1. It's a plan much bigger than just for Abram & Sarai ... it's for all of humanity
2. Yes, there's an amazing blessing in it for this elderly couple
 - a) They will become famous ... and
 - b) A great nation shall come out of them! (impossible as it sounds)
3. But what matters even more is that they will be blessed in order to be a blessing
 - a) God has in mind for all families to be blessed thru this one couple
 - b) The blessing is not meant for Abram & Sarai to bask in their favored status. It's for the sake of God's mission in the world

III. As we begin with Gen. 12, it seems like God's Plan B is unfolding with this invitation & promise to Abram & Sarai

A. But what a risk God took ... to let the salvation story depend on the response of this couple

1. What if Abram & Sarai had decided to just stay put in Haran?
2. What if they had concluded they were just too old for this traveling nonsense?

B. Yes, this Plan B of God's was a risky thing to do ... but in fact all through the Bible, finding a Plan B was not unusual for God

1. God kept coming up with alternate plans when God's human partners messed things up in the Bible story
 - a) For e.g. it happened in Numbers 14 when God extended the length of the Israelites' wandering in the wilderness after the spies who'd been sent out to Canaan lacked the faith to give an encouraging report
 - b) God accepted a Plan B in Judges chapter 4, when the people chose to fight their enemies alongside of God, rather than following God's original Holy War model of standing back in faith & letting God fight for them
 - c) This happened over & over again in the Old Testament
2. Now if you're one who appreciates hearing how some of these various stories of the Bible relate to each other within God's bigger story, stay tuned ...
3. This fall we'll be telling that bigger salvation story over several months in our worship, as part of a major Year of the Bible emphasis, starting in September

C. Later on, God produced the ultimate Plan B: Jesus Christ the Messiah, sent to finally resolve the sin problem

1. But if you think it was risky depending on some elderly childless couple, imagine how risky the "Jesus Plan B" was!
2. The "Jesus Plan B" meant ...
 - a) Leaving behind the safety of divinity & taking on the vulnerability of flesh & blood ...
 - b) Providing a Messiah not on the model of a conquering King but a suffering servant Messiah ... one who chose to sacrifice himself for his enemies rather than to dominate them
 - c) God left the salvation history of this world in a very precarious place there during those last 2 days before Jesus died

@ Gethsemane Jesus actually prayed for this cup of suffering to be taken from him ... there was a desire within him to turn back!

Yet Jesus chose to proceed down a hard, scary path ... trusting God to provide what was needed.

3. Friends, lest we think it's easy for some divine supreme being in heaven to sit back & ask us mortals to head off down scary paths to unknown places ... let's remember that the God we love, the God of the salvation story we find in the Bible, knows a thing or 2 about trying a risky Plan B or Plan C!

IV. Returning to the Gospel of John, Jesus invited Nicodemus to join him on God's Plan B

A. Jesus called it a new birth ... being born from above

1. It was a chance to start over spiritually, with a basis in love & grace more than in rule-keeping which Nicodemus knew so well
2. But just like Abram before him, this new "born again" path did not have a destination that Nicodemus could know in advance
 - a) Jesus said, "the wind blows where it chooses ... but you don't know where it comes from or where it goes"
 - b) In his Jewish world, Nicodemus was near the top of the ladder being seen as an educated spiritual leader ... He was both respected & powerful

For such a man, taking this "born again" Plan B of Jesus' might have meant giving up his position & privileges as a Pharisee

For someone used to giving out spiritual advice to others, this would have felt embarrassingly like becoming a spiritual infant

B. When we leave behind some of the places & relationships and baggage of our familiar life in order to be born from above, **God will only show us the destination as the journey unfolds**

1. Oh we know some generalities of what's in store for us if we follow God's Plan B thru Jesus. After all, Jesus himself promised numerous blessings to all who believe & follow him:

- a) He directly said, "I have come so that they may have life and have it abundantly." (John 10:10)
- b) Besides abundant life, He also promised joy to his faithful followers, "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete." (John 15:11)
- c) Just after directly talking with Nicodemus, Jesus proclaimed God's big purpose in love of providing eternal life for all who believe in God's one and only Son (John 3:16)

2. But beyond the eternal life, beyond these great blessings that come from believing & following Jesus, the particular points along the way of this "Jesus Plan B" are not named for us.

- a) It's a journey of faith, not guarantees

V. So what kind of Plan B journey is God calling you to?

A. The 1st step is simply joining God on the "Jesus Plan B"

1. If you've not accepted Jesus Christ as Lord & Savior for your life, every other Plan A you try for your life will prove unfulfilling
2. The first big step in God's ultimate Plan B is to believe in Jesus and follow him. Please come talk to one of us pastors if you're interested in taking this next step on God's ultimate Plan B

B. Most of you here have indeed joined with Jesus on that big Plan B, yet you may find yourself facing different kinds of a "Plan B" in your own life:

1. For some it's a *vocational journey* that you can't yet see ... having to do with how you'll earn a living, or what you will really do with your life

- a) For me, a major vocational Plan B moment came almost 19 years ago

My Plan A was to pursue a Masters degree in library science, but that ended up getting left behind

Instead I entered pastoral ministry thru doors I truly believe God had a hand in opening & closing

b) But not all of you have felt God laying a vocational Plan B in front of you in the way it happened to me ...

sometimes a vocational door painfully shuts in your face & you're not ready to say that God directly did that door shutting

Yet out of those painful circumstances God still calls you to step forth to an unknown place that will be shown to you

My friends JD Smucker & Ruthie Saunders can tell you their own stories of God at work in this kind of Plan B, if you ask them.

2. Some of you have embarked involuntarily on a *grief journey*, when a person or relationship dear to you died

a) Although you may have already found some new learnings & growth, you did not ask to go on this journey

b) Yet on any grieving journey, you will face an important choice:

In your sorrow you can dig in our heels, resist & clench our fists

OR you can weep & complain honestly to God, even while you open your hands to receive whatever God may provide

c) Sometimes the new Plan B God has ready for you on that grief journey depends on which of those 2 choices you make.

3. Perhaps the Plan B God's calling you to is not so private & inward as those I've named, but more about how you practically live out being a disciple of Jesus Christ

a) Maybe you're being called to venture out into new ways of *using your gifts* in the church or in the broader kingdom of God?

b) Or perhaps God's Plan B for you is to open up new ways of *being hospitable*:

Strangers on the street ... newcomers in church ...

Immigrants in our community ... ex-offenders ...

People you normally don't relate to because they're so "different"

Do any of these people stir a God-whisper within you that says, "Plan B"?

VI. Conclusion

A. As a perfectionist, I'm learning that my character & success are not to be measured by how often my Plan A works ...

1. What matters more is how well I adjust to the inevitable Plans B & C & D!

2. And as a Xian, what matters is how open I remain to any Plan B that God is calling me to, even if it takes me down a scary & unknown path.

B. Both Abram & Nicodemus found themselves facing unexpected invitations from God to a Plan B ... blessings awaited them, but the destination was unknown

C. What about you?

1. Can you see or hear the next Plan B that God has for you?
2. How will you respond?