

**Homily, St. Andrew's
Advent 4A, Dec 18, 2016
Matthew 1:18-25**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

The best laid plans... it's an expression we use to express our frustration when our plans, however well thought out, don't come to pass as we hoped. Curious about it, I typed the phrase into Google this week and discovered its origin. Some of you undoubtedly already know but for the rest of us... it comes from a poem titled "To a Mouse" written in the Scot language in 1785 by Robert Burns. The subtitle of the poem points to the occasion that prompted its writing: "To a Mouse, on Turning Her Up in Her Nest with the Plough." "According to legend, Burns was ploughing in the fields and accidentally destroyed a mouse's nest, which it needed to survive the winter. In fact, Burns's brother claimed that the poet composed the poem while still holding his plough." (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/To_a_Mouse)

It's a sweet little poem in which Burns laments his unintentional act of destruction, recognizing how much his actions impacted a fellow creature needing to get through the coming winter. It is the penultimate stanza where Burns waxes philosophical: "But little Mouse, you are not alone; In proving foresight may be vain: The best laid plans of mice and men; Go oft awry; And leave us nothing but grief and pain; For promised joy!" Given that a line from the poem has become a cultural and linguistic idiom, Burns clearly struck a nerve deeper than a lament for a mouse's house. The idea has appeared in a number of other mediums, most notably John Steinbeck's 1937 novel "Of Mice and Men." "The best laid plans of mice and men, go oft awry..." We all know what he meant.

Our ancient ancestors are no exception and today we hear how human plans, even the best laid plans, can seemingly go awry when our wily God of surprise shows up. Today we hear the story of Jesus' birth according to the Gospel of Matthew. Did you hear how different a tale it is from the more familiar story in the Gospel of Luke? In Matthew's telling, there is no journey to Bethlehem and no manger. There are no shepherds or choir of angels singing God's praises. Even Mary is barely present in Matthew's story. Instead, it is Joseph who is centre stage, though only as a supporting actor to God's starring role, played by an angel.

The Gospel of Matthew begins with a genealogy delineating 14 generations from Abraham to David, 14 generations from David to the deportation to Babylon and 14 generations from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah. The purpose of the genealogy is to determine Jesus' place in human history, Jesus' human pedigree, as a true "son of David". The purpose of today's story, the story of Jesus' birth, is to determine Jesus' place in sacred history, Jesus' divine pedigree. And so, the focus is on God and God's action in relationship with Joseph's human plans.

The story begins with the narrator giving us a 'Coles notes' version of the backstory before the action begins. Mary and Joseph are already engaged. Mary is already pregnant and while we learn it's due to the Holy Spirit, Joseph doesn't yet know this information. Joseph has, however, already learned of Mary's pregnancy and has worked out a plan for how to deal with

the situation. We learn something of Joseph's character as an explanation for his plans: "Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly." Joseph's plan for how to deal with his soon-to-be wife's indiscretion is significant because it is crafted in love. Let me explain.

To be engaged in that ancient context is to already be bound together such that they would be legally considered husband and wife. As such, to be unbound could only be accomplished by death or divorce and unfaithfulness would have been considered adultery. The punishment for the crime of adultery would have been both severe and humiliating. Perhaps even more importantly, any severe and humiliating punishment would be merciful compared to the capital punishment proscribed by the letter of the Law of Moses. So Joseph's plan to dismiss Mary quietly was merciful, gracious and loving. And yet it is interesting to note that Joseph is described as 'righteous,' not loving or merciful or gracious. 'Righteous' is usually a word used to describe behaviour that is just, not merciful. 'Righteous' means doing what is right, following the law of God, not altering it, even in the service of love. And yet here, in the opening scene of Matthew's Gospel, Joseph is named 'righteous' while he plans to act with grace over justice. As one writer put it, "Joseph is pictured as 'righteous,' even though he had decided to act out of care for another person's dignity rather than strictly adhere to the Law." (NIB, 136) It is an important signal that the story that follows is going to shift categories and meanings and may, in fact, upset everything we thought we knew.

It is only after Joseph had decided on a course of action, that the real action of the Gospel begins. Once Joseph has planned to do what is right... once Joseph has chosen love, it is then that God acts, by sending an angel to him in a dream to speak God's will, saying: "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." Joseph had a good plan, a right plan, but God had a better one. Joseph had already chosen love, but God had a greater love that needed Joseph's obedience to come to fruition. And given Joseph's righteous and loving plan, God knew Joseph was the man for the immense job God had for him... to be father to God's own child.

And God was right. Joseph's response to the angel's words, to God's word, was to do as the angel commanded. Joseph took Mary as his wife and named the child Jesus. The narrator's note that Joseph and Mary had no marital relations until the boy was born only serves to highlight the point that the child was indeed of God. The name Jesus was a common name in the first century, and so it unites Jesus to the community and to human history while also linking him to salvation history as a successor to Moses, like Joshua before him. With Joseph's obedience in naming Jesus as the angel commanded, Jesus truly becomes a "son of David." The name Jesus means "Yahweh helps" or "Yahweh saves," which the angel describes as "saving people from their sins." And so in Jesus, in this baby born of Mary and named by Joseph, humanity and divinity are forever linked together.

This story of Jesus' birth as told in the Gospel of Matthew is a beautiful way for us to celebrate love on this fourth Sunday of Advent. It is a starker story than that of Luke, it is a story that may not have all the bells and whistles we are so accustomed to, and yet it is a story of love magnified. The guiding star of this story is God's own self, but God couldn't have done it, God couldn't have worked a miracle, without Joseph's loving obedience. Before Joseph even knew

what was God was up to, he showed himself to be a righteous man who lived not the letter of the law, but the heart of the law. Joseph understood the heart of God, as expressed in the Law of Moses, and planned accordingly in his attitude and actions towards his wife-to-be. Joseph couldn't have known that God would take Joseph's love and intensify beyond anyone's expectation or imagination. It is a perfect example of what can happen to our plans, particularly those best laid out of love, when God shows up and asks us to change our planned course of action to go even further in our practice of love.

“But little Mouse, you are not alone; In proving foresight may be vain: The best laid plans of mice and men; Go oft awry; And leave us nothing but grief and pain; For promised joy!” We all know the grief and pain that can replace the promise of joy when our best laid plans go awry. It is perhaps even more true at Christmas-time than other times because of the memories and emotional investment we have around the holiday season. Sudden bad weather or unexpected illness may curtail travel or visiting plans. Family relationships may be become strained with new or familiar conflict rising with the busyness. Economic stress may require a change in gift-giving or other traditional ways we celebrate. But the point of our Gospel story today is that when God comes to change our plans, it is not to bring grief and pain but greater joy and deeper peace than we can imagine.

Whatever your plans are for Christmas, I hope they are expressions of righteousness that show your heart of love, and not just the letter of what is expected. And I hope you hold your plans lightly so that when God shows up and causes our plans to go awry, you are willing, like Joseph, to make a change in service to an even greater love - an unexpected, impossible, and miraculous love. As we follow Joseph's example of love and obedience this Christmas, may we hear God's word and watch for Emmanuel... God with us... to come.