

“Plans and Dreams”
A Sermon for Christmas Eve 2021
At Christ Church Greenwich
By the Rev. Marek P. Zabriskie

Let us pray:

O God, as the candles flicker in the still of the night on this holy Christmas Eve, we ask you to fill us with your love so that as our carefully crafted plans are sometimes disrupted we may make room for your unexpected and surprising dreams which lead us to wonder, love and joy. Amen.

Have you ever wondered what it would be like if Joseph and Mary were alive today and seeking a place to give birth? They would certainly find a hospital, but there’s no guarantee that they would get a room.

They would need proof of insurance, two valid forms of ID, referral from their primary point of contact, a negative COVID test taken within 24 hours, and Mary would be discharged 12 hours after giving birth.

This evening is another unusual Christmas, where COVID has disrupted many of our carefully crafted plans. The plans that each of us had made are probably not going exactly according to script, but there is still ample room for hope.

Years ago, a Presbyterian preacher named Craig Barnes wrote a book with a one-word title called “Yearning.” The book’s subtitle was “Living Between the Way It Is and How It Ought to Be.”

In his book Barnes drew a distinction between plans and dreams. Plans, he said, originate with us. They are our way of organizing our lives and creating our future. Dreams, however, are different. They originate in our subconscious. They are a gift that God gives us while we sleep. As you know, the Bible is full of stories about how God came to individuals in a dream and offered them a hopeful way forward.

But in order for God’s dream to come true each of us must be willing to let go of some of our carefully made plans so that God’s dream might be born in us. Like Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, we must be willing to say to God, “Not my will, but Thy will be done.” Barnes said that the distinction between plans and dreams is how God actually came into history. Nine months before that Christmas Day, an angel appeared to a young woman named Mary, who was probably just a teenager. The angel startled her and said, “The Holy Spirit wants to enter your life so that you might give birth to the Son of God.”

As you can imagine, Mary must have been absolutely shocked. She undoubtedly had plans of her own. She wanted to marry Joseph and start a family, and the angel’s revelation threatened

to ruin all of this. Mary knew that if she said “Yes” to God, it would alter her future and end her relationship with Joseph. Therefore, Mary’s response to the angel’s dream was nothing shy of miraculous, and this is why she has been so greatly venerated throughout centuries. Because in the face of all that it would cost her to say “yes” to God, Mary said, “Let it be to me, your servant, as you would have it.”

Joseph also had plans. He expected to take Mary as his wife and to start a family. When Mary told him that she was pregnant, he suspected that Mary had been unfaithful to him. God, however, came to Joseph in a dream and said, “Fear not. The Holy Spirit has conceived the child that is in Mary’s womb, and she shall give birth to a son, and his name shall be Jesus.” And so, Joseph, like Mary, relinquished his plans in order that God’s dream might become a reality and provide hope beyond all hopes forever.

As God’s dream unfolded all of history was changed. This has meaning for each of us tonight because it suggests that God has dreams for each of our lives that are richer and more joyful than our carefully crafted plans. The epitome of pride is to say, “My plans are greater than anything that God might dream for my life” just as the sin of cynicism is to think “God does not exist” or “God doesn’t care about me.” If we believe that God has no interest in us then surely something has already died within us. But if we believe that God can make dreams come true, then makes all the difference in our lives.

God can take something small and do something incredible with it. Let me illustrate this by telling two brief stories of two people whose last name was Eliot, both of whom lived in the 19th century. One exhibited the sin of cynicism and other the gift of hope, and it made all the difference.

The first Eliot was Charles Eliot, President of Harvard University. He came from a prestigious East Coast family that looked down on uneducated people, especially people living on the West Coast. So, he was upset one day in 1884 when he learned that his secretary had made an appointment for a couple from California to meet with him.

When they arrived at his office, all of his prejudices were confirmed. They were simply dressed. There was nothing distinguished about them. They sat down and explained that their only child, a son, had died of typhoid in Florence during the summer while traveling in Europe. This young man had dreamed of attending Harvard.

As a result, his parents wanted to do something special to honor his life. They asked President Eliot if Harvard needed a new building. This confirmed Charles Eliot’s prejudices. He replied, “Property values are so much more expensive in Boston than in California. Why don’t you do something within your means and put up a plaque in one of our buildings to honor of your son. One of our deans will be glad to help you.” Then he stood up indicating that their meeting was over.

As they were about to leave, the wife turned to President Eliot and asked, “How much would it cost to duplicate a school like Harvard on the West Coast?” President Eliot was aghast. He said,

“It would cost millions and million dollars, which is surely beyond your means.” So, you can imagine his shock a year later when he read the following year that a couple named Leland and Jane Stanford gave \$40 million (or the equivalent of over \$1.1 billion dollars today) to the State of California to found a university where students could study free of charge. This, of course, became Stanford University, one of Harvard’s chief competitors.

Charles Eliot had a clear plan for Harvard, but he wasn’t able to see the dream that God was orchestrating in his very office with two simply dressed individuals. You see Eliot suffered from the sin of cynicism, which is to underestimate what God can do with simple things, for God’s dreams often begin with something small and always exceed all of our expectations.

Now let me contrast this story with that of another Eliot from the 19th century. This was a woman named Mary Ann Evans, who wrote seven novels under the pen name of George Eliot. One of her novels was called *Silas Mariner*. It is a tale of a linen weaver, who lived in the outskirts of rural village in England. He had little contact with his neighbors, because fifteen years earlier he had been falsely accused of stealing money from his church. Then his best friend fell in love with his finance, and she married him, leaving Silas feeling jilted and deeply betrayed.

In a short span of time, Silas lost his faith in God and in his fellow human beings. So, he poured himself into his work and focused solely on earning money. He had no interest in spending his wealth. He hoarded the gold coins that he collected, and he carefully hid his treasure by the fireplace.

One foggy night, while Silas was away, someone broke into his cottage and stole the two bags of gold coins. When word spread, his neighbors came to console him and said, “Perhaps we can help you to find what you have lost.” For the first time in years, he was touched by the kindness of others. The act of their human warmth melted the coldness that had surrounded Silas’s heart.

Each night, he stood at the door of his cottage looking out to see if someone might be coming to bring news of his lost treasure. Then one night someone finally did come, but it was not what he expected. A two-year-old girl stumbled through the snow. She walked right past him and into his cottage and lay down to sleep in the very spot where he had once hidden his gold.

Silas let her sleep as he went outside in search of her mother. He had not walked far when he found her found her frozen to death in a snowbank. She had been addicted to opium, which had led to her death. The child, who had been at her side when she died, simply stumbled in the snow toward the first place where she saw a light shining.

Silas returned to his house and found the little girl asleep. He leaned down to the same spot where his gold had once been hidden and touched her golden locks, and as he did something awoke deep within him that had long ago died. Silas eventually adopted the girl and raised her

as his own, and she in her own way resurrected him. The solitary weaver and miser became a human being once again all because a little child had entered his life by surprise.

There's a parallel between George Eliot's story and the Christmas story. Recall how the shepherds were out in the field watching their sheep at night when an angel came to them and said, "Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." God sent this little child into a world, just as that little child came into Silas Mariner's life. This unexpected gift of the Christ child has been unlocking the hardness of human hearts ever since – hearts that have been shut because of loss or woundedness, or fear. In something as tiny as a little baby God set about to save the world.

What this means for us is that there is hope for each one of us tonight. I suspect that there is not a person here who has not been wounded in some ways by life. Perhaps you have had something that you have treasured taken from you. Perhaps someone or something has altered your life plans, and you have been tempted to become bitter or to despair. But the story of Silas Mariner reminds us that God can take the worst of things like a mother addicted to drugs who froze to death in the snow and use a tiny abandoned child to bring hope to a solitary, cynical old miser who had given up on life itself.

Pastor Craig Barnes was right. There is a significant difference between plans and dreams. Plans are what we create, but dreams are what God uses to restore joy and love in our lives. Hence, each of us has reason to hope tonight, if we recall the first word that the angels spoke, "Be not afraid," because the God of Christmas can bring unexpected hope into your life.

The God who created the universe with its thousands and thousands of galaxies and millions and millions of stars is infinitely bigger than all of your wounds and fears. If God could take something as small as a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger and use it to redeem the world, surely there is hope for each of us. God has a dream for you. The ultimate gift from God this night are the words with your name on it, "Be not afraid." I invite you to trust God and go forth from this sacred place without fear Amen.