



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea

*The Episcopal Church
in Destin, Florida*

**THE FIRST SUNDAY
AFTER EPIPHANY**

JANUARY 12, 2025

A Homily by the Rev. James J. Popham

“God has a plan.” That can express great truth. Or it can mask a bald-faced lie. We have to be very careful with the word “plan.” Because how we define it can say so much about God and so much about us.

How often in the midst of adversity do we hear people say, “It will be alright. God has a plan,” or “It’s part of God’s plan,” or “God is in control.” Do we really mean that our individual lives are planned out by God down to every detail? Does it mean that God controls our every move to fit God’s plan? Could we ever admit to God’s being a puppet master that keeps each and every one of us dancing on strings held tightly in God’s grasp?

That would be a specious and perilous theology. A puppet has no will beyond that of the puppet master. And if God is in total control, then God must be the pulling strings that cause us to behave badly. Or worse, causing war and storms and famine and disease and the entire categories of human waywardness and natural disaster.

Carried to its logical extreme, if we are acting out some pre-ordained plan of God, then as sinners we would have to assume that God is perpetrating evil. It would not be, “The devil made me do it.” It would be “God made me do it.” God made me lie, cheat, and steal. God made me drink too much, get behind the wheel, and cause a fatal accident.

Or God made my cells mutate and infiltrate my body with deadly cancer. Any notion of our having free will goes right out the window. And our God of light and love becomes also a god of death and darkness.

And if we want to believe that God has laid out some intricate, minute-by-minute plan for our lives, then as I look back on my life, at least, God better have plan B...and C and D and E and so on. Because I can guarantee that my life is littered with missteps and misdeeds that reveal that my will is, indeed, free, and not always guided by love of God and love of neighbor.

Each of us here will confess to that reality of life as a human being in just a few minutes:

[W]e confess that we have sinned against you
in thought, word, and deed,
by what we have done,
and by what we have left undone.
We have not loved you with our whole heart;
we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.

Words we would never have to say if we were mere puppets of God.

Now none of this is to suggest that God has no plan. Perhaps, the better definition of plan focuses on vision or purpose. God created the world. God created us. God blessed us with memory, reason, and skill, and made us the rulers of God's creation, and God charged us to realize the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven.

And that means we are here to do something. Jesus' first century disciples did not just sit around and ponder the glory of God and debate the intricacies of their faith.

Yes, they gathered at the table, as we do. Yes, they recounted the stories of Jesus' life, as we do. Yes, they prayed, as we still do.

But look at the reading from the Acts of the Apostles this morning. They sent. They went. They prayed. They laid hands. It's all about the verbs.

We should understand, too, that the laying on of hands was no mere gesture, no mere pat on the head. In the Jewish religion and community in the first century, the laying on of hands was a transference of certain qualities that depended on the character of the person laying hands. And that meaning carried over into the early Church. It imparted the same Holy Spirit that had confirmed the early apostles in their faith and driven and inspired them. It imparted a connection and continuity, as it does still today. We are, in the laying on of hands at our confirmation, infused with that same Holy Spirit that has been flowing in the succession of bishops from the first century to us in the twenty-first century today.

So what does that mean for us? What are the verbs in the narratives of our lives? And let me suggest that the answer to that question for each of us is no less important today than it was to Peter and John as they travelled to Samaria.

Today, we will renew our Baptismal Covenant, which states unequivocally our responsibility not only to “continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers,” but also to “proclaim by word and example the good news of God in Christ.”

And we have to wonder whether the culture and times we live in are much different from the times Peter and John went to Samaria. We know in our hearts and minds, if only because our eyes look wistfully at so many empty pews, that they are not.. Outside our walls, these same eyes see a constantly and rapidly changing culture that seems to be giving up on religion. A culture that is now several generations younger than most of us. Even our Gen X and millennial children might find themselves on unfamiliar turf among late Gen Ys, Gen Zs, and Gen Alphas. And our “contemporary prayer book” was adopted in 1979, now more than a generation ago.

We might lose hope entirely, but for the promise and the challenge imparted by the hands laid on us, the hands that conveyed the same spirit that challenged and empowered the Church to form and evolve and spread two-thousand years ago. And that same trust and confidence in the Holy Spirit can carry us and guide us and support us as we take that same spirit into a culture little less foreign to us as Samaria was to Peter and John.

Here at St. Andrew's By-the-Sea, we, too, will face the challenge of our time and place in our culture. We are not the first church to discern how to speak the message of Jesus Christ to a new, current, younger culture, without disenfranchising those of us who are older and relate to God best through our existing forms of worship.

We are not the first church to have to relocate to more suitable facilities.

We are not the first church to prove that a church is not a building, but the people gathered in it.

We are not the first church called to pause and discern the gifts and talents of aging boomers and members of the great generation.

And we are not the first church called to discover how our skills, talents, and gifts could shine the light of God's Kingdom in our community.

Is our circumstance daunting? Yes. But we are also mightily blessed. We have made some tough decisions. We are not short of resources, human or financial. Our ministries are more than ably led. Our volunteers are dedicated and tireless. We have a bishop and diocese anxious to maintain and renew St. Andrew's By-the-Sea. Most of all, we have heard the Holy Spirit. And we will hear the Holy Spirit again. So, yes, it is a time to reflect and remember, and to pray and discern, but also a time to act.

That's why they call it the Acts of the Apostles. Not the musing of the apostles. Not the opinions of the apostles. Not even the faith of the apostles. It is the acts of the Apostles, the actions of the apostles. And it will be the same Holy Spirit, conveyed over the millennia by the laying on of hands, that will guide and inspire and encourage and empower and sustain us as we make the old new and remind Destin that the Kingdom of God, indeed, is at hand. We are, after all, God's people, and that what God called us to do.