

And God Laughed...

The Rev. Debbie Cook, Grace Church in Haddonfield

Christmas, Proper I

December 24, 2009; 8 p.m. Service

It was the weekend before Christmas: so much to do, so many plans had been made. Some no doubt had plans to finish (or perhaps start) their Christmas shopping; others needed just to get a few stocking stuffers, or had plans to start wrapping but needed to go and get the necessary supplies. Maybe there was still a tree to get! Or perhaps there were party plans—food and drink had been purchased, the house cleaned and decorated. Or you were a guest, looking forward to a friend's or relative's gathering—good food, good drink, good company. There may have a company party to attend, a concert or theater performance planned. College students with their carefully made flight or driving plans to get back home after a long week of finals and papers; relatives trying for an extended visit with far-flung family members had made their flight or train or bus plans. There may have been a winter wedding planned that weekend; a funeral to attend. So many plans, so many carefully orchestrated lives.

And then the snow fell, and continued falling, and falling....

You know what they say: Tell God your plans, and God laughs. "Your plans!" God chuckles. "That's a good one."

But we aren't the first people to make plans. Zechariah and Elizabeth had plans too—plans for a quiet life, with Zechariah serving in his village, and at the temple, in his priestly capacity. Elizabeth caring for Zechariah, doing the necessary housekeeping, day in and day out. A quiet life, a quiet old age. No child to care for them or help provide for them, but they had relatives. God would provide.

And God Laughed...

The Rev. Debbie Cook, Grace Church in Haddonfield

Christmas, Proper I

December 24, 2009; 8 p.m. Service

Mary and Joseph had plans—plans for a new life together. We will never know if Joseph was Mary's choice or her father's choice, but it was a good choice for Joseph was an honorable man. Mary's plans were for a wedding with all its celebration, her marriage, a home, children, being part of the village community, a respected wife of a respectable man. Joseph looked forward to wedding the younger Mary, providing for her and their children, teaching sons about how to measure and cut and plane wood, joining it together for tables, and chairs, doors, farm equipment. Sons and daughters that would grow up knowing the Law, knowing the Lord, until God willing, someday, they would wed and begin their own families. Mary and Joseph's families, no doubt, looked with anticipation at the life and hope this union would create in such trying times—a daughter cared for, future grandchildren to celebrate.

But then the angel came.

The angel came first to Zechariah and told him of a son's birth, and when Zechariah dared to doubt the angel's words, he was struck dumb. But a son! One to be a prophet of the Most High to boot!

Elizabeth and he were at the age of grandparents, not parents—and yet, the angel's words were true:

Elizabeth conceived and carried until term, and the baby, strong and healthy, was born. There was confusion over his name, but that was soon settled when Zechariah insisted the child would be named John, as the angel had told him—and Zechariah's tongue was loosened. And then he could sing praises to the Lord, the Lord who had done a marvelous, impossible thing, and given them a child, a child dedicated to God. So much for their plans for a quiet life—now it was busy and tiring and exhilarating and terrifying all at the same time. Plans disrupted, a gift given.

And God Laughed...

The Rev. Debbie Cook, Grace Church in Haddonfield

Christmas, Proper I

December 24, 2009; 8 p.m. Service

The angel came to Mary next, telling her that she had been chosen to bear the Savior of the world, the Messiah, the Son of God. An incredulous Mary wondered and inquired, and then consented. In a brief encounter, her whole life's plan was thrown out of kilter; for it was to be marriage and then children, and certainly not the other way around. But she believed the words the angel spoke to her, and even at great personal risk to herself, she allowed her plans to be set aside for God's.

Joseph was heartbroken when he found out; how could Mary dishonor him this way? How could he believe her story of an angel, and the work of the Holy Spirit, and bearing the Son of God? And even if he did, no one else would. His plans for a marriage, a respectable family life were dashed. But in his sleep, the angel spoke, and Joseph realized that while his plans were not bad ones, they just hadn't been big enough to include God's plan. He need not give up his plans for marriage to Mary, for children of his own to raise—he just need to make room for one more, and adjust the timing somewhat.

And so, Mary and Joseph embraced God's plan, even at the cost of innuendo and rumor—not knowing what the future would bring but knowing that it was most definitely in God's hands. Even when the census order came, and they had to take the long trip to Bethlehem from Nazareth, they went even if the timing was not good. It was not in their plan that this child of God would come then, in a strange town, in a stable, away from the comfort of home and family. But then again, this child of God had his own plans.

The shepherds may have plans of a sort as well. Their lives were ones of isolation, surrounded were they by more sheep than people. There were times of quiet and nearly boredom, and times of tension

And God Laughed...

The Rev. Debbie Cook, Grace Church in Haddonfield

Christmas, Proper I

December 24, 2009; 8 p.m. Service

and action: a lamb being born, a predator on the prowl. They moved the sheep from hillside to valley depending on the season, with lambs being born in one season, and shearing taking place in another. They knew where to find water and food and what trouble spots to watch out for. All in all, it was a relatively predictable, quiet life.

Until the angels came.

The angels appeared that one night, lighting up the dark and telling them of the good news of the Savior's birth, Christ the Lord. Here is how you can find him, go and see for yourselves! And so they went, their carefully ordered plans for a quiet night changed—and found the infant just as it had been told to them. The angels' words were true, the long-awaited Messiah had been born—and they, lowly shepherds, were of the first to know! Their isolated lives were now changed, for they became heralds instead—heralds of joy and wonder and awe as they went forth praising God.

As always, in the world, the powers that be had their own plans too. Plans for bigger buildings, stronger armies, more power. No matter how much Herod taxed his people, it seems there was always room for more, for Herod's hunger for glory and greatness was insatiable. His brutality, largely ignored or even permitted by the foreign Roman government he cooperated with, was renown, and he was much feared as well as much hated. Paranoid, his life always on a tether, he stood for no threat against his rule, his power. And Rome at that time was quiet, confident in its power and authority, probably quite impressed with themselves for amassing such an empire and managing it so efficiently. There were no plans, certainly not even an inkling, that anything would change anytime soon. The

And God Laughed...

The Rev. Debbie Cook, Grace Church in Haddonfield

Christmas, Proper I

December 24, 2009; 8 p.m. Service

world had always belonged to the winners, to the powerful, to the ones who enforce their will on others, and in their mind, it always would.

But then the baby came.

A baby boy, born in a stable, far away from home; born to parents not even fully wed, under a cloud of rumors. The infant born in the small village of Bethlehem, a child coming from a village smaller still—Nazareth. The Son of God, the Prince of Peace, the Messiah, the Savior—born under the cover of darkness with animals as his attendants, and shepherds as his esteemed first visitors. God slipping quietly into the world, joining with God's creation to transform and save it. Love incarnate dropping into the pool of the suffering, sin-sick world, infusing and changing it in ways yet to be seen. The creator of the universe, in a dependent and vulnerable infant, now being cared for by his creation. The world and humanity and all of its plans, forever changed.

And God laughed.

“Let me tell you of my plans to love you and save you,” God said.

Amen.