

September 7, 2025
Rev. Jennifer Gleichauf
What is the Plan?

There's a great story about noted thinker and inventor Albert Einstein. Einstein was on a train leaving Princeton Junction in New Jersey, heading north. When the conductor came to his seat, Einstein was unable to find his ticket. He searched through all his pockets and looked in his briefcase, becoming extremely disturbed. The conductor tried to comfort him, saying, "Dr. Einstein, don't worry about the ticket. I know who you are and you don't have to present your ticket to me. I trust that you purchased a ticket." About twenty minutes later, the conductor came down the aisle of the train once again and saw Einstein, still searching widely for the misplaced ticket. The conductor again said to him, "Dr. Einstein, please don't worry about the ticket. I know who you are!" At that, Einstein stood and said in a gruff voice, "Young man, I know who I am, but I am trying to find my ticket because I want to know where I am going!"

That's a question many of us wrestle with too: *Where am I going?* Sometimes it's as simple as forgetting why we walked into a room, or what time we promised to be somewhere. But other times it's deeper—*What's the direction of my life? What am I supposed to be doing? Who am I meant to be?*

Many of us believe God has a plan for our lives and part of our life's work is to figure out what that plan is. Who has God made us to be? What does God want us to do with our lives? Wouldn't it be easier if God just told us the plan in advance? Just gave us a script to follow and clear directions about where we should go?

We certainly see examples in scripture of what seems like God carrying out plans. Joseph in the Old Testament famously says to his brothers who sold him into slavery, "you meant this for evil, but God meant this for good." This gives the idea that God is at work in the world, taking events and shaping them into something for the better. Jesus himself seems to understand God has a plan for his life when in the garden of Gethesame he begs to be released from the plan, to not have to follow the path laid before him, but then, eventually relents to the plan. And it can be a great comfort to think that when we mess up, when things go wrong, when other people do things to hurt us or take us off course, that God has a plan and regardless of our missteps somehow they are all part of God's good plan somehow.

However, there are also examples in scripture of God changing course, changing the plan. God causes the flood in Genesis, but after the destruction, God promises not to do that again. God plans to destroy the city of Ninevah in the story of Jonah, but when Jonah preaches to them and they repent, God changes God's mind, changes the plan. If

God has a plan, it seems God is also free to change that plan at any given time. Scripture shows us a God who is not rigid and set on one particular plan, but rather a God who can adapt and respond based on how things unfold.

The scripture today, from Jeremiah, tells us about a God who has the power to build or destroy, plant or pluck up. We believe in a God who can do those things which means a God who has the power to change the course of our lives or the world. But, we also believe in a God who chooses to let us make our own choices – as individuals and as nations. Therein lies the challenge of God's plan, because as long as we have free will, we can do all kinds of things that interfere with those plans.

Will Willamon writes, "Sometimes (talk of God's plan) is put forward as a sort of deterministic scheme in which God has already predetermined (or as we sometimes say, "predestined") that people, like robots, respond to God in certain ways. First Timothy says not that God has a plan to save all of us but that God has a "desire" that all of us should turn and fall into the arms of a loving God. The word desire may be a better term than plan when applied to the future God has for us. God has this grand desire for us, not a point-by-point step-by-definite-step plan for us. God has created us so that we can from time to time fulfill the desires of God. But God has also created us as those who can, from time to time, thwart the desires of God. Whether we can forever, no matter what God does, thwart the desire of God is a question for another sermon. But for now, let us just say that God is not known for being so hard-headedly committed to a plan, because God is known to be a God of love. And desire seems so much more appropriate to speak of God, and God's great love for the world, than the word plan."

Which is why the metaphor comparing God to a potter is such a good one. The word in Hebrew used here for clay is the same word used in Genesis we hear how God shaped the world – the animals and the people – from clay.

Like a potter, God has a vision and intention for who we are meant to be. There is a purpose for our lives and our nations. A potter has a vision – an intention for what they are going to create. As the potter sits at the wheel with the clay they've chosen, they start to create shape from the clay and variety of things might happen: their vision may unfold exactly as planned, but it may not. Along the way the clay may need more water than the potter anticipated or it might require a different level of pressure or the potter may see or feel something in the clay that causes them to shift their vision a bit and, of course, there is always the possibility the whole thing just falls completely apart wobbling right off the wheel. It must be frustrating to see the clay start to take shape the way you hope; the way you've envisioned, only to see it collapse and fall apart or to find terrible flaws in it.

But that metaphor makes sense when we look at the world. Sometimes the vision goes according to plan, but sometimes it does not. Either way, God did not create a world where everything is just haphazard and chaos. There may not be only one path or answer, but there is a vision. This is one of the reasons we spend time in worship – to try and understand the vision and figure out together how to be a part of it. This is why we pray, taking time to listen for God’s voice and nudges from the Holy Spirit to help us discern which way God would want us to go.

And what is the vision? Well, throughout the long book of Jeremiah, (second in length only to the Psalms) God keeps telling Jeremiah all the ways God has a vision of a world that is full of justice and peace, love and grace, kindness and compassion. Instead, God sees a people, a nation, set on evil, set on being the wrong shape. God is very specific with Jeremiah about what evil looks like. It is when people attain wealth corruptly or don’t keep the Sabbath holy. It’s when we worship other Gods, forget to care for the widow, orphan, and immigrant and refuse to treat one another justly. These things run counter to God’s vision. These are not the pots God wanted to shape. So, throughout Jeremiah, as well as lots of other places in scripture, God invites and pleads, demands and instructs, and even finally, warns and threatens, that if we want to be part of God’s vision this can’t be how we act.

I imagine we can all think of ways that we are not individually or collectively participating in the vision. The national and global examples are all too obvious and it can be very tempting to spend a lot of time pointing out all the ways other people, people we know, are missing the vision. But perhaps one of the hardest things to do is to come to terms with ways we, ourselves, are not in line with God’s vision. Can you think of ways that money and wealth cause you to make choices you know aren't what God would want? Do you value rest and find ways to include practices of sabbath in your life? Do you sometimes worship other gods perhaps God's of celebrity or self righteousness, power or greed? Do you speak up for and work to change the plight of the widow, orphan or immigrant, knowing those are descriptions that still apply today but also encompass any person or group who are being marginalized or oppressed? When I consider those things in my own life, I know there are ways I'm living outside of God’s vision for the world. So much so sometimes that it can feel overwhelming.

Which is why I find this metaphor of a potter and clay so comforting because clay has not been fired in the kiln. Clay is still malleable. Clay can still change. Pottery is brittle and breakable, but clay on the wheel can still be shaped. Even when a potter makes a mistake and goes to begin again, the clay is rarely thrown out. It comes off the wheel and goes back in the pile to begin again. And there is plenty of evidence in scripture of God doing just this, but also in our own lives. We know stories of ancestors, but we also

have our own stories of how God can take “our mess and constantly, creatively breathe it into God’s good purposes, which goes to allow that any plan God has for us must be “wonderfully adaptable and flexible.”

This all helps me trust that we don’t always need to know where we are going. We don’t have to be sure of every next step. We don’t have to worry that if we make a wrong turn, we won’t be able to find our way back. Instead, we are invited to trust the Potter. Trust that the One shaping us has both vision and love. Trust that even when our lives wobble off the wheel, God can pick us back up and begin again. And with that promise, we commit ourselves to shaping lives, communities, and a world which look more like the vision God has dreamed of since the beginning of creation.

May we go from here willing to be clay—soft enough to be changed, bold enough to be formed, and faithful enough to be used for God’s good purposes. And as we do, may the world around us catch a glimpse of the Potter’s vision through the shape of our lives.