

“FAITH AND FILM: I – GOD WILL MAKE A WAY”

(Under the Tuscan Sun)

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Genesis 50:15-21

John 21:15-19

Long ago, in the year 1785, a Scottish poet by the name of Robert Burns was plowing in a field. He accidentally dug up a mouse’s nest, and that night he sat down and penned a poem, entitled “To a Mouse.” And from that poem came a very famous line that doubtless many of us have quoted with no idea from whence it came – and it goes like this: “The best laid plans of mice and men often go astray.”

Burns sure knew what he was talking, and so do all of us, don’t we? We know about making plans. All of us make them to different degrees, of course. Some of us just make plans for the next hour, or for the day ahead. Some of us are serious planners, laying everything out ahead of time.

But I think it’s safe to say that, in terms of our lives, all of us have some general plans. We want to stay healthy, we want to be relatively happy, we want to have people that love us, we want to have a place to lay our head at night. We make those plans and most of the time, life goes along smoothly, but then something happens, and those plans, as Burn said, “go astray.”

I want to talk to you this morning about three people whose life plans went astray. Two of them are Biblical characters, and one of them is a character in a movie. As you saw in the bulletin, today is the first in my summer series of sermons entitled “Faith and Film.” We’ll look at some films and the Biblical truths they share, and we’ll begin that today.

But before we look at the film character, let’s revisit the stories of two well-known Biblical characters. The first is named Joseph – the Joseph of the Hebrew scriptures, not the Joseph of the Gospels (Jesus’ earthly father). Joseph, you might recall was the youngest son of Jacob, in a family that had a lot of sons. Jacob doted on Joseph, much to the irritation of his older brothers. They felt, like many older siblings have over the centuries, that their younger brother got away with anything, that he didn’t have to work as hard as they did, and that he was well, basically, spoiled!

And, in fact, Joseph was a little spoiled. Consider the lavish gift his father gave him – that famous “coat of many colors”! That was probably the last straw for the brothers, and they began to figure out a way to get rid of him.

They took him far from home, and sold him to some travelers who passed by. Then they took that fancy coat, dipped it in animal’s blood and showed it to their father as they reported to him on Joseph’s untimely demise. He was plunged into despair.

Meantime, Joseph is now in the clutches of foreigners, going who knows where to do who knows what? Not exactly the path he had planned out for his life. He was going to be something, he was going to be a star, he had the world on a string, and suddenly, in the blink of an eye, it all changed, it all “went astray.”

The apostle Peter, whose story is our Gospel lesson today, probably knew the story of Joseph. It was part of his faith history, part of the stories that were passed down from generation to generation. But could he have even imagined that his life could go awry as well?

Let’s remember his story. Remember that he was a fisherman, and probably his life plan was to be the best fisherman possible, to settle down in a nice fishing village, marry, have a wife and family, and be comfortable. Well, it started out that day, until one day when he was fishing, along came a man named Jesus who invited him to a different life. He was compelled to follow Jesus and so he did, and it was, for the most part, pretty wonderful. It wasn’t what he had planned to do with his life, but now that it had happened, he made the most of it.

Peter was one of Jesus’ inner circle, he was powerful and influential, and he got to witness the most amazing things. He was Jesus’ right hand man, and I’m sure that on more than one occasion his ego got the most of him, and he really had delusions of grandeur. “Look where I am, look how much Jesus needs me, look how much he confides in me. This is great.”

So things were going along pretty well, until the tide of public opinion against Jesus turned, and they were suddenly all in danger. After being betrayed by Judas, Jesus was arrested, and I’m sure at that point Peter didn’t know what the future held. But within a few hours, Peter’s life plans would come to a screeching halt, for in the darkness of a courtyard, when asked if he knew Jesus, Peter denied knowing him three times. And as soon as he did it, he regretted it, and as soon as he did it, his life plan was shattered, and as soon as he did it, he didn’t know how he could go on. “The best laid plans of mice and men often go astray.”

Her name was Frances, and she was a successful book reviewer living with her professor husband in San Francisco. Life was good for this main character in

the movie “Under the Tuscan Sun.” They had it all – a beautiful home, thriving careers, great friends, they travelled all over the place – their plans were all working out. They were the ultimate yuppie couple.

Then, one day, Francis found out it was all an illusion because she discovered her husband was having an affair, and before she knew it, she was divorced. She lost her home, she lost her hope, she lost her dreams, in her mind, she lost everything.

In order to help her out of her despair, a couple of her friends treated her to a tour of Tuscany in Italy. While on that tour, she saw a run-down villa for sale, and on impulse, she bought it and relocated to Italy. Certainly not where she thought she’d be, and certainly not doing what she thought she’d be doing at this point in her life – but nevertheless, there she was.

And it didn’t take her long to come to the conclusion that she had made a monumental mistake. She became depressed. So many things were going wrong. There was a tap on the wall of her house, out of which no water came – bone dry. The people weren’t being that friendly to her – every day she watched a man put flowers in a memorial on a wall near her home, and everyday she waved at him, but he basically ignored her. All she wanted was a normal, happy life – she wanted to fall in love and be married, she wanted to have a family. She wanted her old plans, but it wasn’t happening, as she told probably the one to whom she was closest at that point – the realtor.

Oh, the best laid plans . . .

There’s probably not a one of us here in this room who doesn’t know about plans going astray, is there? Life is just like that, isn’t Like I said earlier, we probably all had plans at one time to find work that brought us joy and meaning, to have people in our lives who love us, to have families, to enjoy good health.

And then, something happened. We lost a job, or lost a home. A beloved spouse died suddenly and without warning, or a spouse fell in love with somebody else. A child ran away and broke off their relationship. A bad health diagnosis changed life forever. We didn’t get into the school of our dreams. The market dropped out and we lost everything. Drinking or drugs destroyed a person we cared about. We had an accident. Life happens! Things happen that take the feet out from under us, and wipe away our plans, and sometimes we find ourselves, like these three characters wondering if things will ever be all right again. Can we go on? How can we go on? What’s going to happen?

Well, my friends, there’s one answer to all of those questions, and the answer is this: God will make a way. God always does. It won’t be the way we planned,

but it will be the way to life, the life God intends for us, a life that is good and abundant and full.

And the ways God will do that are absolutely amazing. Let's look at how he worked in these three lives. Joseph. Old Joseph you remember was sold to foreigners, but those foreigners then passed him on to an official of Pharaoh's government in Egypt, where his gifts were recognized, and before he knew it, he was a valuable member of that society, valued especially by Pharaoh himself, saving lives, changing dire situations. He helped save a nation from famine, when all others around them were dying – including the place where his father and brothers lived. They ended up coming to him for help.

And let me tell you they were mighty scared to do it. Why should he help them, after all – they had basically thrown him away? Yet, help them he did, as we heard in the lesson. Joseph knew that God had been merciful to him, and so he, in turn was merciful to them. And did you hear that wonderful thing he said to his brothers? “Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good.” In other words, God took a very bad situation and made a way – a way to abundant life for all of them.

And look what happened to Peter. After that awful night of betrayal and the depression he suffered afterwards, Peter got to experience the joy of seeing Jesus' rise from the grave. God made a way – death did not have the final word, evil did not have the final word. Jesus was alive!

But could he forgive Peter? Could he forgive him for failing him when he needed help the most. Peter found out one morning on the lakeshore when the risen Jesus appeared, and talked to all of the disciples who were there. He turned directly to Peter and asked him three times “Do you love me?” Three times like the three times Peter denied knowing Jesus. Three times – he gave Peter the chance to say three times “Yes, Lord, I love you.” And then Jesus sent him off into ministry again, and Peter became the first leader of the church. Who would have ever thought that this one who thought himself a complete failure, would now be the leader of Jesus' followers? God did. It was God who made a way, when Peter's life plan fell completely apart. God made a way, and Peter experienced a whole new wonderful, meaningful, abundant life.

Finally, Frances from the movie. I told you that all she wanted when she moved to this new home was to be happy, find love, and have a family. Did God make a way for that in her life? Take a look at this clip and you'll see.

**Clip – Last five minutes of “Under the Tuscan Sun.”**

After her friend helped her see it, Frances certainly understood that God had made a way. There was love in her home, there was a wedding, there was a family. She found friends – even that man who had long ignored her, suddenly had a warm spot in his heart for her.

And I absolutely love that last scene, because I think it says so much. That water pouring out of that old tap was so symbolic of the now abundant life Frances was experiencing.

But it's also, I think, a beautiful portrayal of the abundant life that all can experience in Jesus Christ – who, as he told the woman at the well, is the water of life from whom everyone is invited to drink. That water gushing from that tap is such a beautiful symbol of the fullness of life God pours out for us in Christ Jesus – that is there for the asking, that is there if we trust him with our lives.

Yes, “the best laid plans of mice and men often go astray.” Oh, but when they do, God takes over, always, and makes a way. Thanks be to God for his love that never, ever lets us go!

Amen.