



"Drawn Out"

*A Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Benjamin Boswell at Myers Park Baptist Church
on August 13, 2023, from Exodus 2:1-10*

In 1889 "Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show" starring the famous sharpshooter Annie Oakley went on tour through Europe and stopped for a special show in Berlin. During her show, Annie always asked for a volunteer to hold a cigar in their mouth while she shot the ashes off! It was a joke. Nobody ever volunteered. Everyone usually laughed, and her hapless husband would come out to hold the cigar. However, that day in Berlin, a man walked into the arena and volunteered. It was Kaiser Wilhelm II, the king of Prussia. The Kaiser was a fan of Annie's, and wanted to show how brave he was. German officers tried to stop him, but he waved them off. He was a volatile man whose aggressive colonizing in Africa was to blame for World War I, which many scholars believe was an entirely avoidable war that decimated Europe and kicked off the bloodiest century in the history.

Annie was freaking out, but thought, "I can't back out of this now." So, she paced her usual distance, sweating profusely, regretting she'd consumed more than her usual amount of whiskey the night before, raised her Colt, took aim, and blew the ashes off Kaiser Wilhelm's cigar. What would the world be like today if Annie missed and shot the Kaiser instead. What if the wind was blowing, or something distracted her, or she had too much whiskey the night before? A war might have been avoided. 40 million people died in WWI, which led to WWII, the Cold War and Vietnam. Just a few degrees and the world might be a different place. Years later, after World War I began, Annie wrote a letter to King Wilhelm to ask if she could take another shot! He didn't reply, but you've got to love her spirit!

Sometimes the most important events in history turn on just a few degrees or a few inches. The deliverance of the Hebrew people from the empire of Egypt is a story that turns on a few inches and a few extraordinary decisions made by three women—Jochebed, Miriam, and the daughter of Pharaoh—whose actions changed the course of history and led to the liberation of their people from bondage in Egypt. For many of us, this story is colored by films like *The Ten Commandments* or *The Prince of Egypt*, where it seems the hand of God was at work guiding the basket with the infant Moses to safety past crocodiles, hippopotamuses, fishermen, and warships, through the treacherous waters of the Nile. But is it helpful to view this story, other stories in the Bible, and even the story of our lives, as if the actions of the characters or events that occurred were all orchestrated as a part of God's plan.



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Theologians have a term for this—they call it “providence.” Providence is the word for God’s intervention in the universe and history—particularly God’s care for Creation and for humanity. Augustine said the universe is under the continuous control and unifying governance of God. Many scholars make a distinction between “general providence,” which is God’s governance of Creation and the laws of nature and “special providence,” which is God’s intervention in human affairs. We don’t often realize it, but we do theology every day whenever we say, “Thank God,” or “That was God’s will,” or in the words of one contemporary theologian Drake, when we say something is “God’s plan.” In the song Drake won a Grammy for in 2019, he says all the bad things people are wishing on him will not come true because of God’s plan for his life. You didn’t know Drake was a theologian, did you?

Growing up in as an evangelical, I was repeatedly told “God is in control” and “God has a plan for my life,” and these statements caused me to have anxiety about whether I was “living in God’s will” or “following God’s plan for my life.” But as I grew older, life—as it has the habit of doing—quickly disabused me of the idea that God has a specific plan for my life. Seminary, marriage, infertility, adoption, divorce, and ministry have the power to disabuse you of a lot of things, especially the idea that there is a plan.

I eventually gave up on the idea that God is a grand micromanager intervening in every aspect of my existence—like whether I get a parking space or the Panthers win. I think we can all agree God has nothing to do the Panthers winning. But when we see glacial floods in Alaska ripping houses into the river, or massive wildfires devastating the island of Maui, or wars in Ukraine, Myanmar, Ethiopia, or Sudan, or that deaths by suicide were at the highest rate ever recorded last year—it’s hard to believe God is in control of the universe or regularly intervening in human lives. It requires a great act of faith to believe God is actively involved in the world.

There’s nothing worse than going through loss, grief, tragedy, or death and having somebody says one of those well-intentioned theological horrors, “Everything happens for a reason,” or “It’s God’s will,” or “If you just pray harder,” or “God needed another angel,” or “It’s all part of God’s plan.” If anyone ever says something like this to you in a difficult time, you have my pastoral permission to tell them to “Get lost!” Life is more complicated. Faith is more complicated. God is more complicated.



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There are mysteries beyond our comprehension; things about life and God we cannot begin fathom. Yet, a lot of people want a theology that is neat and tidy and to protect God from all the bad things going on in our lives and our world. But God doesn't need our protection and the world is full of paradoxes, complexities, and enigmas that cannot be easily resolved with a cookie cutter theology. Don't tell me things are part of God's will that have nothing to do with God! Colonialism, genocide, slavery, imperialism, and the holocaust weren't part of God's plan. Patriarchy, racism, bigotry, homophobia, xenophobia, agism and ableism weren't part of God's plan. These are the consequences of human activity, not God's. The true mystery of providence is that God did not intervene to stop these horrors. When the Mauthausen concentration camp was liberated in 1945, soldiers found these words written on the walls by those who were imprisoned, "If there is a god, he must ask for my forgiveness."ⁱ

Life caused me to give up on simple views of God's providence and I must admit I've been feeling pretty good about jettisoning any anxiety about God's will or plan for my life. I've had a lot of education, read a lot of theology, been preaching for twenty years, and I thought I had my theology in order and a good grip on the mystery of providence. But then I found myself sitting next to a woman at a conference, having a pleasant conversation when out of nowhere she asked me, "Do you believe it was God's plan for you to adopt your daughter?" Her question shattered me. I replied, "Oh no, I don't believe in a God of simple cause and effect?" But it was baloney. The truth is for years I believed God ordained for me to adopt Lucy—that it was part of God's divine plan for my life and for hers. I thought I'd moved on from shallow versions of providential theology, but it was still there.

Providence was how I made sense of struggle and disappointment. It was how I found meaning through infertility and adoption. Providence was the story I created to give sacred meaning and divine significance to how my family came to be. But it was far too simple a story. And when I interrogated my view of providence, I realized that if it was God's plan for me to adopt Lucy, then it was God's plan for Lucy's birth mother to find herself in a situation so desperate she felt it necessary to give up her child. And if it was God's plan for me to adopt Lucy, then it was God's plan for Lucy to experience trauma and loss. Adoption, I have learned, is the only trauma the world expects you to be grateful for. If it was God's plan for me to adopt Lucy, then it was God's plan for Lucy to be raised by white parents simply to fulfill our need to have a family. What kind of God does that? What kind of God forces a person to desperation so another can have a child? What kind of God puts a child through loss and trauma so people can create a family? I realized I had to rethink some things.



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As I was coming to grips with the fact that providence still determined the way I thought about my most intimate relationships, I heard a friend of mine say one of the examples of adoption in the Bible is Moses. And it made me think about Moses' mother, Jochebed. Was it God's plan for her to give up her child? That's how I've read this story in the past, but I cannot do that anymore. Viewing her decision through the lens of providence takes all of the pain, loss, and trauma—it takes the humanity out of it. What kind of God would put a mother in such a desperate situation or demand such a thing for the sake of liberation? It was not God's plan for Pharoah to order a horrific genocide against the Hebrew people. It was not God's plan for Jochebed to find herself in such a dangerous time she had to hide her newborn child then put him in a papyrus basket and place him in the river.

When we look back on her decision through the rose-colored goggles of shallow providence, knowing that Moses survived, she became his nurse, and he would help deliver his people from slavery, we miss the power and pain of Jochebed's decision. We imagine it was easy, or that Jochebed did it with faith that this was God's will for her life and for Moses. No, she didn't know any of that when she put him in that basket. All she knew was that her son wouldn't survive with her, so she made a decision, and it must have ripped her heart out to send Moses in a basket down the Nile with no idea what would happen.

The poet laureate of California is an adopted Korean American named Lee Herrick, and I recently heard him recite a poem he wrote about his birthmother. He said, "I've been told Mothers don't forget the body. I can't remember your face, the shape or story, or how you held me the day I was born, so I wrote one thousand poems to survive. I want to sing with you in an open field, a simple room, or a quiet bar. I want to hear your opinions about angels. Truth is, angels drink, too—soju spilled on the halo, white wings sticky with gin, as if any mother could forget the music that left her. You should hear how loudly I sing now. I've become a ballad of wild dreams and coping mechanisms. I can breathe now through any fire. I imagine I got this from him or you, my earthly inheritance: your arms, your sigh, your heavy song. I know all the lyrics. I know all the blood. I know why angels howl into the moonlight."ⁱⁱ



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How should we think of God's providence in light of trauma, loss, destruction, tragedy, and death? Theologian Kate Bowler, who was diagnosed at age 40 with a form of terminal cancer writes, "Life isn't fair. I can't reconcile the way the world is jolted by events that are wonderful and terrible, gorgeous, and tragic. Except that I am beginning to believe these opposites do not cancel each other out.

I see a middle-aged woman in the waiting room of the cancer clinic, her arms wrapped around the frail frame of her son. She squeezes him tightly, oblivious to the way he looks down at her sheepishly. He laughs after a minute, a hostage to her impervious love. Joy persists somehow and I soak it in. The horror of cancer has made everything seem like it is painted in bright colors. I think the same thoughts again and again. Life is so beautiful. Life is so hard. And God is here. We are loved and that is enough. There will be no lasting proof that God exists. There will be no formula for how to live. [There will be no discernable plan]. But love offered me a small bit of certainty, and I clung to it. When the feelings recede like the tides, love will leave an imprint and we will all somehow be marked by the presence of an unbidden God."ⁱⁱⁱ

Empire is not God's plan. Genocide is not God's plan. Slavery is not God's plan. Mother's giving up their children is not God's plan. Desperation is not God's plan. Trauma is not God's plan. Loss is not God's plan. Suffering is not God's plan. No, love is God's plan. Life is God's plan. Liberation is God's plan. God's plan does not create suffering just to find some way to redeem it. Instead, God draws near to the desperate with a preferential care for the poor, vulnerable, and oppressed. God doesn't preordain a perfect storyline. God just shows up in the midst of our desperation and helps weave a new story. God didn't plan for me to adopt Lucy, but when all of us who were involved made the decision, God showed up in it and responded to it. God didn't plan for Pharoah's genocide, but God responded with liberation. God did not plan for Jochebed to put her child in the river, but God responded by drawing him out. As it says in Genesis 50, what the world plans for evil, God turns to good. God did not plan for the crucifixion, but God responded with resurrection. God does not plan for oppression, but God responds with liberation.

While the Empire was busy using the river to kill and destroy, God showed up and used that same river to save and liberate. Wherever there is evil in the world, God is always weaving another story. God does not promise to create a specific customized plan for our lives that will work out the way we hope. But God promises to show up and show out, to take up residence in our neighborhood, to put on flesh, to be with us as Emmanuel, and to abide with us even until the end of the age. And while it may look like the Empire is winning, and death and oppression is all there is, God is busy doing a new thing in and through the lives of the poor, through women like Jochebed, Miriam, and Pharoah's daughter.



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What the world intends for evil, God turns to good. When a wrong needs righting, or a truth needs preaching, or work needs doing, God shows up in history and finds a desperate woman and child to do it. Long ago, when a child was laid in a basket and then a child was laid in a manger, God showed up and found a way to inspire those children to become vessels of liberation. We don't need to spend our lives trying to understand the mystery of God's ways, all we have to do is learn how to find a way to participate in the new thing God is already doing.

Today, 73% of Americans believe that God has a plan for their lives.^{iv} But what many of those Americans don't realize is that God isn't going to send us a customized plan. That's because God's plan for each of us is the same as it was yesterday, today, and forever—God's plan is always for us to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly. God's plan is always to bring good news to the oppressed, bind up the broken-hearted, proclaim liberty to the captives, release to the prisoners, and declare the year of the jubilee. God's plan is always for us to give people their daily bread and wages, forgiveness of sins and financial debts, and bring the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. God's plan is always to feed the hungry, quench the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and visit those in prison. God's plan is always for us to love with all our heart, soul mind, and body and to love our neighbor's as ourselves.

God's plan for our lives is always the same, and there are an infinite number of ways that each of us can fulfill God's plan in our lives. There is no one plan, one will, one purpose, or one providential decree. There is simply life—messy, unpredictable, complicated, and mysterious; filled with pain, suffering, oppression, and desperation. God does not ordain the pain and suffering but promises to show up in the midst of our suffering and to help us write a different story. Life is not about providence or plans; figuring out God's will for our lives, it is about finding God in the midst of our suffering and leaning on God's strength to act, make decisions, and take responsibility for our lives. God does not create evil, injustice, death, and destruction. God responds to it. God does not plan our lives, but God shows up in them with strength for the journey—courage, conviction, and community for the struggle. The world can turn on just a few inches or a few actions, a few decisions which means every one of us has the power not only to change the course of our lives but the course of history. Life, love, and liberation is God's plan. And the good news is that God can find us in the midst of the struggle, and draw us out of the water, write a new story, and take what the world meant for evil and turn it all for good.



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ⁱ Mauthausen Prison Camp documentary <http://youtu.be/8r50t7148sA?t=19m20s>. In the 'bunker', they give lice to prisoners for experiments with pesticides, but the camp's prison serves primarily to isolate the prisoners. The camp's Gestapo wants to extort confessions and holds the prisoners in cells, to beat them bloody, to torture them: for many this cage is the last stage of life. While, usually, on the walls of the cells there are writings expressing hope, or testimonies of a wakeful spirit which rebels against bowing down, here we find the last monologue, a sign of discouragement, despair, of imminent death." My God why have you forsaken me? To bend means to lie. If there is a god, he must ask me forgiveness." These writings were found, after 1945, on the walls of the cells.

ⁱⁱ Lee Herrick, "How Music Stays in the Body," *Scar and Flower*, Word, 2019.

ⁱⁱⁱ Kate Bowler, *Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I've Loved*.

^{iv} Paul Froese and Scott Draper, "How God Sustains the American Dream" in Wave III Baylor Religion Survey, Baylor University, September 2011, accessed April 24, 2017, <http://www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/153501.pdf>.