

# When There is No Plan B

March 29, 2015

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell

In my last semester of my senior year at seminary I joined most of my classmates in the search for God's call to a local church. As the process unfolded a church up in Western Pennsylvania had invited me to come out to interview with them. So they booked Amanda and me on an early Saturday morning flight so that we could be with them before lunch for an interview. I was excited about meeting these people and about the possibilities of ministering with them. We certainly wanted to make a good impression. When Saturday morning came around I woke up and I realized something strange. And what I realized was that I had not awakened to the sound of my alarm clock. The second thing I realized is that it sure seemed very light out for 5:30 in the morning. The third thing I realized was that it wasn't 5:30 in the morning and that it was 7:30 in the morning. And the fourth thing I realized was that our plane was due to take off in a half hour. And the fifth thing I realized was that the airport was an hour away.

Having realized all these things I awakened my dear wife with somewhat of a start --- and I said, "Amanda, we missed our flight. We slept through our alarm and missed our flight." "What are we going to do?" she asked. "Go to plan B!" I exclaimed. "OK," she said, "Plan B!" And then she said, "What's Plan B?" To which I said, "I have no idea." You will not be surprised to learn that I did not turn out to be Plan A for that church in Western Pennsylvania.

I want to talk to you today about when there is no plan B. I want to talk to you about when plan A is all of what you've got.

Most of us know the story of Palm Sunday --- the story of Jesus' triumphant ride into Jerusalem --- is a story that actually begins several chapters earlier in the Gospels. We typically think that the Palm Sunday begins when Jesus gets onto a donkey at the top of the Mount of Olives and begins his descent into Jerusalem. But actually the story begins weeks, maybe months earlier, when Jesus is gathered with his disciples way up in the most northern regions of Israel. And it is there that Jesus tells his disciples that it is now time for him to make his way to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. And he tells his disciples that when he goes to Jerusalem he is going to suffer at the hands of the rulers --- and he will be put to death. And on the third day he will be raised. Now you may remember from a few weeks ago the story of Peter when he hears this and he says, "No way. Not going to happen." He has just confessed that Jesus is the Messiah --- but his plan for a Messiah is not for him to suffer and die on a cross. His plan is something else. Jesus has a plan A. Peter has a plan B. Peter says, "I don't like Plan A --- so let's figure out a plan B." And Jesus says, in rather graphic language, "Get thee behind me Satan. There is no plan B. There is only a plan A. Messiahship means going to the cross."

So that is where the Palm Sunday story begins --- it begins with Jesus a long ways away from Jerusalem ... turning his sights toward Jerusalem and accepting for his life one plan, and only one plan, and that plan means the cross.

So it should be no surprise to us that when Palm Sunday does roll around --- Jesus has a plan. He already has in place a couple of animals that will be in the parade down the Mount of Olives and into Jerusalem. He knows the symbolism involved for him to ride into Jerusalem on a donkey --- he is the King who comes in peace. And he knows what he is going to do when he gets there --- he is going to upset things a bit. He is going to overturn a few tables and chairs in the temple. He is going to unmistakably suggest that the temple should be about some different practices than money changing and bird selling. He is going to reestablish his house as a house of prayer. And all of this is just going to get him into trouble and it will lead to the cross. Messiahship is going to lead through the cross. And the reason it is going to lead through the cross is because that is how the world gets saved. That is God's

plan. To reconcile the world to himself. To take upon himself the sins of the world. That while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. That is plan A --- the world being redeemed. It is his mission. It is his purpose. God in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them. There is no plan B --- it has always been about plan A.

Not that there did not come a moment when Jesus would have preferred plan B! Four days from now we will sit with him at table and in the Garden a day away from his crucifixion. We will hear him pray. We will hear him say to his Father in heaven -- Let this cup pass from me. It's just another way of saying: Lord, I know about plan A ---but could there be a plan B? And his Father in heaven says, "No, there is only one plan. Plan A. And Plan A is to reconcile the world to God through the cross."

And Jesus stays with the plan.

So I want to talk to you about what happens when there is no plan B. Now I know of course that life is filled with lots of plan B's. Lots of Plan C's and D's too. We live in the fastest changing moment of history ever. Things are changing all the time. And they say the key to success in our time is the ability to be flexible. The ability to move from one plan to the next. From A to B to C and maybe even back to A. Rigidity does not work in the new global economy. What you think you're doing now you are likely not to be doing five years from now. So there may be many of us who are looking at life and seeing all kinds of paths and options and plans to possibly pursue --- and if there is anything from which we suffer ... it is choosing among too many options, too many plans.

But you know when life gets filled with so many choices -- so many choices, so many plans -- what we can lose sight of is the one big choice, the one big plan. A life filled with many choices, many plans can get to be a little like a pinball. A pinball inside a pinball machine. Bouncing from one thing to the next. A calendar full of stuff but with no rudder, no point on the horizon toward which to sail.

But sometimes there just have to be no other plan but plan A.

This month marks the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of one of America's greatest speeches – the second Inaugural address of one Abraham Lincoln. Abraham Lincoln whose election came at perhaps the most critical moment in American history with the nation splitting in two. And Lincoln took office with one plan – Plan A – the abolition of slavery and the preservation of the Union. Plan A. No Plan B. Four years of Civil War – embarrassing setbacks for the Union, over a half million dead – but still Plan A. And as Lincoln prepared for his second term he spoke to the country and said, “With malice toward none, and with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up that nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow and his orphan – to do all which we may achieve and cherish a just, and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.”

Plan A - because there is no Plan B.

A hundred years later to the month a group of American citizens assembled on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama prepared to march to Montgomery to press for the freedom to vote. On their first attempt – they were met with the brutal and punishing force of state and local government. Bloodied and broken and bruised they retreated. But there was no Plan B. There was only Plan A. Two more times they took to the bridge and on their third approach the police stepped aside and they marched to Montgomery.

Plan A - because there is no Plan B.

Several years ago I got a call in the early morning from the hospital. A young high school student in our church, a hockey player at the local high school, had taken a header into the board the night before and was lying in a coma in Intensive Care. His parents on a cruise ship in the Caribbean. What do you do when you are on a cruise ship on the Caribbean with your son on life support a thousand miles away? There is only one Plan – Plan A. You are going to get home. You don't take no for an answer when the captain of the ship says there is nothing we can do. You move heaven and earth – so that you can get to your

boy. And move heaven and earth they did and inside of 24 hours including flying through an ice storm – you get to your boy’s bedside. In time to see him open his eyes and to get well.

So maybe we can understand the will of this Nazarene rabbi who knows he is more than the Nazarene rabbi. Jesus of Nazareth, God in flesh desperate to reconcile the world to himself – to draw all of creation to himself – maybe we can understand the heart of Jesus as he makes his descent down the Mount of Olives – there is no plan B. There are no 563 cable channels. There are no exit ramps to friendlier destinations. There is no escape route out the back door. There is only this – because only this really matters. This is what matters to God. God in Christ reconciling the world to himself.

And so what Palm Sunday begs to ask us – we who gather along the parade route – what Palm Sunday asks us is, what does really matter? To see the Savior mounted on the donkey making his entry into the city that wants nothing to do with him, but enter he must - it’s what he can’t keep himself from doing – the question is what really matters to you? What can you not keep yourself from doing? What are the non-negotiables? The rudder of the ship? The point on the horizon? What’s the Plan A?

You remember the Jack Palance character, Curly, in the movie *City Slickers* --- when Mitch Robbins, played by Billy Crystal, the stressed out baby boomer executive who’s going through his little mid-life crisis -- he is riding with crusty old Curly on a cattle drive out in the west somewhere wondering out loud what the meaning of life is. And the old cattle hand lifts up his finger and says, “You know what the secret to life is? Robbins says no. “One thing,” Curly says. “Yeah,” says Robbins, “what is it?” “One thing.” “OK, so what is it?” “One thing.” Finally after being asked several times the Western sage says, “That’s the point. That’s what you have to figure out – the one thing.”

And that’s what the Nazarene would wonder with us – what is the one thing. The non-negotiable -- the Plan A that will not leave room for a Plan B. Because if there is anything Jesus understands is that the cheering crowd of Palm Sunday will soon turn to the jeering crowd on Good Friday. Pinballs like you and me bounced around by the craziness of life and

the whims of the moment. It's just too easy to get distracted. To get set off course. To lose our bearing. And to find ourselves far down the alphabet at Plan W before we even realize that we've lost our Plan A. But the world needs one who will not be deterred. One who will make his way from the cheers to the jeers. Because some things are not negotiable.

Life magazine several years ago asked a wide range of people if they would try to explain the meaning of life. And they asked an eleven-year-old boy, Jason Gaes, who had been diagnosed with cancer, what he thought the meaning of life is. And this is the amazing thing he said:

"When my friend Kim died of cancer, I asked my Mom ... if God was going to make Kim die when she was only 6, why did he make her born at all? But my mom said, even though she was only 6 she changed people's lives. What that means is like her brother or sister could be the scientist that discovers the cure for cancer and they decided to do that because of Kim. And like me too. I used to wonder why did God pick on me and give me cancer. Maybe it was because he wanted me to be a dr. who takes care of kids with cancer so that when they say, "Dr. Jason, I get so scared" ... or ... "You don't know how weird it is to be the only bald kid in your whole school." I can say, "Oh yes I do. I had cancer and look at all my hair now."

Sounds like a Plan A to me.