



PROGRAM TRANSCRIPT

Program #5311

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WELCOME

Lillian Daniel: Welcome to “30 Good Minutes!” We’re happy you’ve joined us for this half-hour of reflection on faith. I’m Lillian Daniel.

Lydia Talbot: And I’m Lydia Talbot. Our guest today, whom you’ll meet in a moment, is Stephen Shoemaker, Senior Minister of Myers Park Baptist Church in Charlotte, North Carolina. He’ll be talking with us about what can happen when our carefully planned lives are suddenly changed.

Lillian Daniel: We also welcome back Otis Moss III, Senior Minister of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago. He has a story about how one person’s unexpected circumstances turned into an unexpected blessing.

Lydia Talbot: We begin with a profile of Manya Brachear, religion reporter for the Chicago Tribune. Manya’s reporting in the newspaper and on her popular blog, “The Seeker,” have garnered awards for her wonderful ability to shed light on the most interesting stories in religion. Let’s watch.

SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Manya Brachear: My family was Jewish, but my parents did not practice Judaism at all. And they didn’t raise their daughters Jewish either. There was an occasional Passover, Hanukkah celebration, but we were a very secular family, which was an interesting experience growing up in Waco, Texas where, yeah, if you didn’t go to church on Sunday you’re eternal fate was in question.

I kind of grew up resenting that point of view. It really turned me off to religion. I mean my parents weren’t raising me in any particular faith. This was the point of view I was getting from people of faith so I really didn’t want anything to do with faith at all growing up. I did believe in God. That I think was something that I always had from a very young age.

I wanted to be a journalist. I had always done well in English, had always been a bit of a writer. And so I thought, “Easy A! I’ll take the Journalism I class.” And I fell in love with the profession. So when I graduated from high school and went on to college, that was my goal. I was going to get a journalism degree and be a journalist and cover anything but religion. Then I went to Columbia University in New York. My mentor, Ari Goldman, was head of the religion and journalism program there. He was a modern Orthodox Jew and had a lot to teach me about

my personal faith. He had learned how to balance the two, how to balance his career as well as his own personal faith and cover religion in a very objective—as objective as you can be—way.

When I was working at the daily newspaper in Raleigh, North Carolina, which was my first daily newspaper gig out of college, I was covering education. They had assigned me a religion story and you can imagine I was a little tentative, didn't necessarily want to take it on but did. And was sold the moment I started reporting the story. It was on small Vineyard congregation, an evangelical congregation in Raleigh that had been worshipping in a middle school gymnasium. I felt like I was in a very privileged position to be listening to them talk about their ministry. In that very story I learned to appreciate Christianity, I learned to appreciate their mission, and I learned to appreciate what, all those years, my friends were trying to tell me.

As a journalist you seek out the truth, you seek out honesty. You want honest answers. So as a religion writer you're not just getting the truth with a lower case "t," you're getting the Truth with a capital "T," what these people believe to be the truth. And that's a very privileged position to be in, to be on the receiving end of that.

There are some hard-core, old school journalists who don't vote because they think that that shows an obvious bias and you can't report on politics. I disagree. I think that you should exercise your rights as a citizen. You should have your own thoughts, your own feelings, your own perspective, but be able to set them aside in order to do your job as a journalist. That's the challenge and the miracle of journalism. And I think that applies to religion, as well.

SPEAKER INTRODUCTION

Lillian Daniel: Our thanks to Manya Brachear for sharing her own story. You can find out more about Manya and find a link to her blog by visiting our web site at 30goodminutes.org.

Now, let me tell you about today's speaker. Dr. Stephen Shoemaker is Senior Minister of Myers Park Baptist Church in Charlotte, North Carolina. He's the author of "Being Christian in an Almost Chosen Nation," and has been described by Garrison Keillor as "a gifted preacher whose gift lies in telling stories of the faith." We're very happy to welcome Dr. Stephen Shoemaker to "30 Good Minutes." Welcome, Stephen.

MESSAGE

Stephen Shoemaker: Thank you, Lillian.

What happens when plans change? You have life all planned; then something happens, something that turns your world upside-down, alters it unalterably: a business failure, a bankruptcy, a lost job, a divorce, a health crisis, a death, a retirement account cut into a fraction of itself. We hope God can use our action. Can we believe that God can also use those moments when we are acted upon? This sermon is about what happens or can happen when plans change.

Harry Emerson Fosdick gave historical examples: James McNeil Whistler wanted to be a career soldier, but he failed at West Point because he flunked chemistry. But now we have Whistler's paintings.

Phillips Brooks, the famous American preacher, wanted to be a teacher but failed miserably in the classroom. Now we have his sermons and his Christmas carol, “O Little Town of Bethlehem.”

To our day, Flannery O’Connor’s lupus required a forced return to the South to live with her mother. She was sure it would be the end, capital END, of her work as a writer, but in fact her greatest work was ahead.

Jimmy Carter’s presidency ended in a bitter and decisive defeat after one term, but look at the magnificence of his life as an ex-President of the United States.

You probably have your own stories of how detours have turned into destinations. Maybe you had your heart set on a particular college, but the admissions office said no, and you went to your second choice, which turned out to be a great place for you. Or maybe you dreamed of being a major league pitcher, but never figured out how to throw a curve ball. You wanted to be a dancer, but a weak knee became an injured knee and your plans were changed.

If you look closely, I’ll bet you can see how God has used your altered life! I do not want to be glib. The changes to your life may have been a devastating and humiliating defeat, the losses real and irrecoverable. But God can use our defeats, our losses, too. God is the ultimate Improviser, who takes our altered lives and alters them toward our highest good.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, Joseph believed in such a God. When young, he had been an insufferable, pompous favored son. His brothers hated him. One day they jumped him and were intending to kill him when a caravan en route to Egypt happened to pass by. They sold him into slavery instead.

Joseph rose from slave to prince of Egypt, the Pharaoh’s right-hand man. One day his brothers came to the palace in Egypt seeking food, for their own country was now in a terrible famine. They found themselves face-to-face with their brother whom they had sold into slavery. When Joseph told him who he was, they were terrified that he would take revenge on them. But instead, Joseph said, “Do not be afraid for am I in the place of God? No, you meant it for evil, but God meant it for good.” Or, as Everett Fox translates it: “Now you, you planned ill against me, (but) God planned-it-over for good.” [Gen. 50:19-20]

If you want to make God laugh, the saying goes, tell her your plans. “But this is what I had all planned,” we say to her.

“I know, Hon,” She says. Who would have thought God a sassy southern waitress? “I understand why you’d want such plans,” she adds, “I’d want those things for you too.”

“So what happened?” we ask.

“Life changes our plans,” she says.

“What are we going to do now?” we ask.

She answers, “Let me work with you on that, but first let me get your coffee. White or black?”

“Lots of cream and lots of sugar,” we say. To hell with the diet. “And how about that pastry over there?” we ask, pointing to the counter.

“Sure, Hon,” she says, and heads for the streusel.

Jeremiah the prophet wrote to the Hebrew people carried off into captivity in Babylon. Here is the word of God he heard and passed on to them: “I’ll bring you back home someday. It will take a while, but don’t lose hope. In the meantime, this is how to live out your hope: plant gardens, take wives and husbands, make babies, raise families, seek the welfare of the city in which you live—yes, even Babylon—for in its welfare you will find your own welfare.”

Then came the clincher: “For surely I know the plans I have for you, plans for your welfare and not your harm, to give you a future and a hope.”

And one day, they indeed came home.

Jesus ran into a huge reversal of his plans. He preached the nearness of the kingdom of God and called people to turn and enter it. He hoped everyone would hear what he had heard, see what he saw and join with him in the coming of God’s great kingdom. But that is not what happened. Far from it. Fierce opposition arose, especially among the important people, the big shots, the scholars, the religious leaders in league with Rome. They were saying no. And who were saying yes? A rag-tag group of nobodies, fishermen, women, children, outcasts, “little people.”

And how did Jesus respond to this huge, unanticipated turn of events? With thanksgiving no less, even amid his ruined plans:

“I thank you, Abba,” he prayed, “Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to babes, the *nepioi*, the little ones. Yes, Abba, for such was your gracious will, your *eudokia*, your good pleasure.”

In the face of mounting evil, God was planning-it-over for good. And Jesus trusted in this planning-it-over because he trusted in the final goodness of God, in the faithfulness at the heart of things.

Can we, dare we, trust in this? Hope in this? Believe that God is at work in every circumstance, every, for our highest good? Believe that there is an unseen hand guiding our lives and the life of the world? Not pre-determining, not forcing, but guiding. Even in the midst of defeat and painfully changed plans. This is faith at its deepest.

CONVERSATION

Lydia Talbot: If you’d like a printed transcript, audio copy or DVD of the message you just heard from Stephen Shoemaker, we’ll tell you how to place an order at the end of the program. Or you can visit our website at 30goodminutes.org to watch the video or read the text anytime.

And now, let's talk with Stephen Shoemaker. Rev. Stephen Shoemaker, welcome to "30 Good Minutes!" It's wonderful to have you here.

Stephen Shoemaker: Thank you. Thank you very much. It's wonderful to be here.

Lydia Talbot: Your message conveys the unseen hand of God even in our worst fears, our defeats, and most painfully changed plans. I must ask you, how you personally have experienced that along the way on your own journey?

Stephen Shoemaker: Well, I think we have a sense and a hope that God is in charge of everything. I think sometimes what we don't understand is that sometimes God's will is at work in planning-it-over, not in just an intention but God's improvising in the midst of our difficulties. I think for me, sometimes depressive episodes have been a time in which I have felt my life altered, but have seen God's unseen hand guiding, planning-it-over toward my highest good and hopefully the highest good of those around me.

Lydia Talbot: Depressive moments? Say more.

Lillian Daniel: I wanted to ask about that, too. I've heard people talk about that. I mean, how do you experience God in the midst of a depression?

Lydia Talbot: What were those moments if you could share?

Stephen Shoemaker: Well, I think sometimes people go through seasons of depression in which they feel a kind of mental and emotional pain and feel a kind of hopelessness. But I think the resources of faith keep our eyes toward the future in such times as that.

Lydia Talbot: Can you give us sense as to the nature of the depression? Career? Family? Loss? What aspect of depression were you struggling with?

Stephen Shoemaker: I think that depression has many, many different kinds of etymologies or causes. I don't think usually it's just a single one. And many times the things you mentioned merge together in one kind of overwhelming sense of loss or darkness.

Lillian Daniel: Or it's a chemical imbalance.

Stephen Shoemaker: Or chemical imbalance.

Lillian Daniel: It makes all those things seem worse than they are. You talked about the Joseph story and the way he got to grow and change. It's a wonderful story because the brothers show up and they expect Joseph to be the same person he was when he was a kid. He's become different. Do you think sometimes it's the family members who prevent us from being able to grow and change because they see us as being the same?

Stephen Shoemaker: Well, I think it is interesting that he had to go away from home to do the changing. And I think also the hard circumstances of his life drove him deeper into a more profound place spiritually.

Lillian Daniel: You talked about having to leave home in order to change, but we found out when talking to you earlier that you had gone to high school in Charlotte, North Carolina and now you're a famous preacher there in a well known church. Is it strange to be back doing that in your hometown?

Stephen Shoemaker: Well, it is an odd challenge to have your mother and your twin sister in your congregation. They know you far better than you should be known as you try to preach! It has been an interesting challenge to go back to a hometown and perhaps I needed to be 50 years old before that happened because the kind of maturing that you do, the growing that you do, before you return to a home place.

Lydia Talbot: Now, your sixth book and your most recent, "On Being Christian in an Almost Chosen Nation," a reference from Abraham Lincoln. Say more about what that means.

Stephen Shoemaker: This is a wonderfully nuanced phrase of Abraham Lincoln. Both preachers and politicians weren't to assume too much about America being God's chosen people and Lincoln used this wonderful phrase that we were God's "almost chosen people." I think it gives us a kind of reverence that there is an unseen hand, there are the purposes of God being worked out not only on a personal sphere but a sphere of a nation, but we can't presume upon where the unseen hand is moving or how we can be an instrument of God's unseen hand.

Lydia Talbot: I can't help but think when you use the phrase "unseen hand of God" that what you're really sharing with us is an unconditional assurance of hope, the hope that is still there when your worst fears have been realized. Is that part of it?

Stephen Shoemaker: It is. A hope that's not bound to the circumstances of this present hour but is an overarching kind of care and guiding of God that keeps you focused on more than just the present circumstances.

Lydia Talbot: Because most of us hear the phrase "God's hand is in..." and you fill in the blank, but it's usually a positive outcome. God's hand was in the joy or God's hand was in that gift of love that you received. But you're using it in those moments, in those narrow places, where we suffer and where pain comes when plans change in a painful way.

Stephen Shoemaker: That's right. I think it's very interesting that God's hand here is a different kind of hand than just appearing in good times, but it's there to guide us, to reshape us, to drive us deeper, to help us be more compassionate, to help our lives be more meaningful to the world around us in the midst of our darkest and altered lives.

Lillian Daniel: Let's talk a little bit about this idea of America being an "almost chosen nation." Do you think part of what Lincoln was getting at in that phrase was the idea that there could be more than one chosen nation, that we wouldn't be the only one?

Stephen Shoemaker: I think certainly he was giving the impression that “chosenness” could be something more than one nation could claim. And I think Lincoln was saying that chosenness has both its responsibilities...it has responsibilities inherent with that chosenness.

Lillian Daniel: Could there be any nation that’s not chosen?

Stephen Shoemaker: You’re asking me rather than Abraham Lincoln?

Lillian Daniel: Yes, I’m asking you! This is you, Steve.

Stephen Shoemaker: I think nations need to live by a sense of their purpose, their living a purpose for the welfare and the wellbeing of their own citizens and the wellbeing of the world. In that sense, every nation should aspire to have a kind of chosenness. Not a chosenness as a kind of set apartness or superiority, but a chosenness of purpose to a greater good. I think what Lincoln emphasized was that there is purpose guiding us but we cannot presume upon that purpose. I think it’s easy sometimes to take our chosenness and presume upon it. Lincoln warned us against that. I think it’s also possible to give up any notion that we could be used by the transcendent for a higher purpose. So in both of those dimensions I think we have a lot to learn from President Lincoln.

Lydia Talbot: I must jump in here with the kind of gratitude that I suspect many of our viewers may feel having heard your usage of inclusive language in your earlier message, referring to God with the pronoun “she” and “her.” How did that evolve for you personally? Where did you absorb that and how do folks feel at the Myers Park Baptist Church in Charlotte, North Carolina?

Stephen Shoemaker: I think growing up with a lot of intelligent, highly spirited, as well as spiritual, women had a lot to do with that, both in the family and in my theological education. I think our church has a sense of God’s transcendence that does transcend our own human kind of words for God. So I think there is, as Tillich would say, that God beyond God that we’re all striving to meet. But they also recognize we’ve got to have a more generous set of names for God and descriptions for God in order to preserve the mystery of God. I think we’re getting more and more used to imagining God in feminine as well as masculine ways.

Lillian Daniel: I love the fact that in your remarks today you made God a waitress with a Southern accent who brought you your coffee with extra cream and sugar! I think part of it is the mystery of God, and then we want something to cling on to. How do you prevent that image from becoming the one that people always have for God?

Stephen Shoemaker: I think you talk very deliberately so that mystery is preserved in multiplicity in terms of our descriptions of God and names for God, and that you consciously and conscientiously work on many descriptions of God so that one image does not become a graven image for God.

Lydia Talbot: And so that all embracing male/female, father/mother image has great meaning personally for you?

Stephen Shoemaker: Yes, very much so.

Lydia Talbot: We're so happy you've shared that with us. Thank you, Stephen Shoemaker.

REFLECTION INTRODUCTION

Lydia Talbot: We turn now to Otis Moss III, Senior Pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago. He has a final thought for us about changing plans.

REFLECTION

Otis Moss: I would encourage any student of history to take a look at Taylor Branch's book, "Parting the Waters," There is chapter in there entitled "The Forerunner," that talks about an amazing and incredible preacher by the name of Vernon Johns. Vernon Johns pastored in Montgomery, Alabama, an incredibly prophetic figure. He would place outside of the church the name of the upcoming sermon. One sermon, if you can imagine the 1940s, was, "Is it OK to Lynch Negroes in Alabama?" Another one was, "Is Heaven Segregated?"

The local police force would drive around the church, always trying to figure out what is Vernon Johns going to preach. He would stand in the pulpit every week and give a statement about how God did not intend people to live in segregation. He was brought down to the police force one time and told that specifically he needed to let them know what he was preaching. He said, "Well, I'll tell you, first after I take an offering!"

And then it seemed something really unique happened, as a result of his unique preaching. They put him out of the church. They said, "You're too controversial. We need to find someone who is not as controversial as you." So Vernon Johns was put out and the deacon ministry decided they were going to call a young man from Boston, who had just received his PhD, that they could control. That young man was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. It's very interesting how God works. Find out about Vernon Johns and you'll see how God is working constantly in our lives.

CLOSING

Lydia Talbot: Thank you, Otis. And our thanks again to Stephen Shoemaker, Manya Brachear and you for being with us today on "30 Good Minutes." I'm Lydia Talbot.

Lillian Daniel: And I'm Lillian Daniel. Before we go, I encourage you to visit our website at 30GoodMinutes.org, where you'll find an extensive collection of reflections and stories, on video and in print, to enrich your spiritual life. Now, from all of us at "30 Good Minutes," may peace be with you in the week ahead.