

**“God’s Will – Our Destiny”
Ephesians 1:1-12**

I should have known inviting you to submit topics for sermons would have liabilities. Someone asked that I preach a sermon on the will of God. Another asked that I preach on the Presbyterian view of predestination. I decided that since the two themes complemented each other I would combine them into one sermon. How much time do you have? “Why, O Lord, do I do what I do?”

I’m a bit like the inebriated man who stood before a cactus patch, stripped off all his clothes and then jumped into the cactus. Some witnesses were horrified and helped him to get up and out. Looking at his scratched and bloodied body they asked, “why did you do that?” “Because it seemed like a good idea at the time.”

I wonder if St. Paul felt as if he had fallen into a cactus patch. In his letter to the Romans, he wrote several chapters of very heavy theology but he had the good sense to get out by singing a doxology: **“O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! ‘For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?’”**ⁱ

Better to stick with what we know. What do we know? Karl Barth, one of the most verbose theologians of the 20th century, who said the most profound theological thought is this – “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so!”

But since you asked, here is the Presbyterian view, straight from the Book of Confessions and the *Westminster Confession of Faith*.

“By the decree of God, for the manifestation of his glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and others fore-ordained to everlasting death. These angels and men, thus predestinated and fore-ordained, are particularly and unchangeably designed; and their number is so certain and definite that it cannot be either increased or diminished.”ⁱⁱ

Those words were adopted in 1647. They made many uncomfortable, especially Presbyterians in the United States. In 1903, the following “declaratory statement” was appended to the Confession to “disavow certain inferences” that might be drawn: “Concerning those who are saved in Christ, the doctrine of God’s eternal decree is held in harmony with the doctrine of his love to all mankind, his gift of his Son to be the propitiation for the sins of the whole world, and his readiness to bestow his saving grace on all who seek it; that concerning those who perish, the doctrine of God’s eternal decree is held in harmony with the doctrine that God desires not the death of any sinner, but has provided in Christ a salvation sufficient for all, adapted to all, and freely offered in the gospel to all; that men are fully responsible for their treatment of God’s gracious offer; that his decree hinders no man from accepting that offer; and that no man is

condemned except on the ground of his sin.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Which is it? Is our salvation something over which we have no control, or are we held responsible for deciding for our against Jesus Christ? Is it predestination or free will? At this point, my “computer” freezes up and requires me to reboot.

Why do we get into this quagmire? Because the scriptures sometimes pull us in opposite directions. They call us to make a choice. **“I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live,”** preached Moses.^{iv} **“Whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven,”** taught Jesus.^v

I have said “yes” to Jesus many times. I have made many choices that have brought me to this point in my life. I’m sure you have also. In looking back, however, I know that it all hasn’t depended on me. I can also see how circumstances and events over which I had no control have guided me. My actual experience is much closer to what Jesus said: **“You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last...”**^{vi}

I sought the Lord and afterward I knew
He moved my soul to seek him seeking me,
It was not I that found, O Savior, true,
No, I was found of Thee.^{vii}

The congregation in which I grew up sang that hymn many times. The words are inscribed on my heart. They witness to the undeniable experience of God’s grace. Predestination takes seriously the sovereignty of God’s grace. **“In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.”**^{viii} God has been on the hunt for us long before we realized that we would be forever thirsty without God.

Predestination takes seriously the doctrine of justification by faith. **“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast.”**^{ix} Not even our best choices save us. Only God’s actions are saving ones.

At heart, predestination is good news, not bad news. We heard these words in today’s scripture: **“Long before [God] laid down earth’s foundations, he had us in mind, had settled on us as the focus of his love, to be made whole and holy by his love.”**^x

What about those who say “No” to Jesus, or those who have never heard his name? Why would God choose some and not others? Isn’t that unfair? Are they forever lost? Those are legitimate, though burdensome, questions. That’s where the sledding gets rough. We’d all be happier campers if we’d mind our own business more than we try to mind God’s. I rest in this thought that we heard in today’s scripture: **“With all wisdom and insight, [God] has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven**

and things on earth.”^{xi} The burden of our questions is eased when the Bible says, **“God desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”^{xii}** I also take particular delight in this thought: **“...neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”^{xiii}** Nothing – not even my sin, not even my bad choices, not even my lack of faith or my faithlessness.

I also think we'd be happier if we had a larger understanding of salvation than getting into heaven when we die. Salvation is just as much about whether we live, really live, before we die. In the Biblical story, to be elected, or to be chosen, is not about entering a position of privilege as much as it is a position of service. It's not about getting into heaven when we die but learning to live in the kingdom of God and being in mission with God's kingdom building efforts. God's people have never been the be-all and end-all of God's saving activity. The Lord says through the prophet, **“That's not a big enough job for my servant – just to recover the tribes of Jacob, merely to round up the strays of Israel. I'm setting you up as a light for the nations so that my salvation becomes global!”^{xiv}**

Let's not argue about who gets into heaven and who doesn't. Let's be about our business as Christ's ambassadors, proclaiming in word and deed the love of God we meet in Jesus, the God who is on the hunt for each and every person and who will not give up until he finds us!^{xv}

Like it or not, the doctrine of Predestination is associated with being a Presbyterian, even though it was taught by St. Augustine who lived 1100 years or so before anyone ever heard the word Presbyterian, much less was able to spell it. We just can't get away from it. Perhaps the reason we dislike it so much is the way we “spin” the doctrine.

Robbin Roberts, one of the hosts of *Good Morning America*, is a life-long Presbyterian. A few years ago she spoke before the General Assembly of our church and reflected on her upbringing. “I remember the thing that stuck with me about being a Presbyterian was predestination, about believing that everything happens for a reason; and that was very comforting for me.” With all due respect to Ms. Roberts, her understanding of predestination, while a very common understanding, resembles fatalism more than it does the conviction that God has a predisposition towards loving his creation and all his children

I know a woman who 15 years ago was suddenly widowed when her 70-year-old husband suffered a massive heart attack. Some months afterwards when I thought a little theologizing would not jeopardize her grief work, I suggested to her that I didn't believe God “took” her husband from her for whatever divine purpose God had in mind. Life happens, right? And a part of life is disease and death. “Oh, no,” she vigorously responded, “I find more comfort in the idea my husband's death was God's will, even though I don't understand why. That helps me more than the idea that life is so out of control that things happen for no purpose.”

Who am I to say how God works or doesn't work in our lives, but that woman sends me letters regularly. I received one last week. Every letter is virtually the same and they all reveal a woman who is lonely, bitter and very angry at everyone, especially the church. Why? I'm no better at psychology than I am at theology, but I can't help but think the reason she is so bitter and angry is because the God who wants to be the source of consolation and hope for new life was regarded, instead, as the source of her grief.

If everything that happens is God's will, that means every time someone is shot in Philadelphia, every time a soldier dies in Iraq, every terrorist attack, every instance of child abuse or domestic violence, every disease, our faltering economy, the crash of a Boeing 777 at Heathrow Airport – it all must have God's stamp of approval or else it wouldn't happen. Right? Hogwash! If you believe that every that happens is God's will, why do you look both ways before you cross the street? Why go to the doctor? Why do anything?

Fatalism turns God into a puppeteer and I find no comfort in thinking of myself as a puppet on a string. I do find comfort in knowing that God wants to have a personal relationship with me. How do you have a personal relationship with a puppet? Oh, I remember my childhood – Buffalo Bob Smith had somewhat of a relationship with Howdy Doody, but I don't think that's what God had in mind.

God created us with the capacity to receive God's love us and for us to love God in return. So God gave us freedom, without which we cannot love. Indeed, God is very generous with his freedom. The Garden of Eden was filled with a zillion variety of trees that bore delicious fruit. We were told we could **"freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die."**^{xvi} In other words, we could do anything we wanted to do except try to become God ourselves. We made a bad choice, not by God's decree, but by our stupidity. We tasted and we died – we lost the essence of our humanity, to love God and to find joy in tending the Garden as good stewards. But that's not the end of the story. That's why we're here today.

People often struggle with the question, "what does God want me to do with my life?" I don't think it's all that difficult to find the answer. People asked Jesus the same question: **"What can we do in order to do what God wants us to do?" Jesus answered, "What God wants you to do is to believe in the one he sent."**^{xvii} That's what God wants each one of us to do – to believe Jesus, which means to give our hearts to him. That's God's will for us. I think God leaves the details up to us as to how we live out our calling as disciples. What are your talents and interests? What gives you enjoyment? Where do you see beauty? What are the circumstances of your life? There's no blueprint superimposed upon us, but there is a master plan, that our lives reflect the light and love of our Master. After all is said and done, Jesus Christ is God's will for us and our destiny.

Endnotes

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- i. Romans 11:33-34
 - ii. Book of Confessions, 6.016 - 6.017
 - iii. Book of Confessions, 6.192
 - iv. Deuteronomy 30:19
 - v. Matthew 10:33
 - vi. John 15:16
 - vii. Anonymous hymn writer
 - viii. 1 John 4:10
 - ix. Ephesians 2:8-9
 - x. Ephesians 1:4, *The Message*
 - xi. Ephesians 1:9-10,
 - xii. 1 Timothy 2:4
 - xiii. Romans 8:38-39
 - xiv. Isaiah 49:6 *The Message*
 - xv. See Luke 15:1-10
 - xvi. Genesis 2:16-17
 - xvii. John 6:28-29 *Good News Bible*