

SERMON: PRE-DESTINED

TEXT: Ephesians 1:3-14

Predestination. It's a word that among some groups is synonymous with Presbyterianism. But most of us couldn't explain what it means if our salvation depended on it. It's a complicated idea, and I'm not the only pastor I know who tries to avoid the subject. Whenever anyone asks me about it, I'm tempted to brush it off. "Listen, don't worry about it; nobody believes that stuff anymore." However, there are Bible passages that force us to think about it. And it was either this topic or the dramatic soap opera ending with the head of John the Baptist on a platter.

Paul has much happier things to write about. He begins his letter to the Ephesians by reminding them of the blessings they have from God through Christ, *and* that they have been chosen. "[God] chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love." Think about this for a minute. This is huge. *Before* we were even born – *before* any human being was ever born – *before* the creation – *before* the foundation of the world, God – Chose – Us.

Most of us here can remember a time in school when the teacher chose two children to be team captains and they would take turns choosing who would be on their team. I wasn't usually chosen first, and I also wasn't chosen last, but I always felt bad for the kid who was last. How humiliating! It must have been devastating! Especially if the rest of the kids on that team groaned when they got stuck with this person that nobody wanted. If only I had known enough at the time to be able to share the message: "Before the foundation of the world, God Chose You."

Not only are we chosen, but we are "destined for adoption as God's children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will...." Destined for adoption as God's children, to be a part of God's family, to be a brother or sister to Jesus. And again, God has done this *before* the fact. This act precedes our existence and precedes our faith.

I can just imagine one of God's right-hand angels whispering in God's ear, "Uh, Sir, they haven't even been born yet. You don't know how they're gonna turn out." But it doesn't matter to God. It's the "good pleasure of God's will to the praise of God's glorious grace that God freely bestowed on us in the Beloved." All are PRE-DESTINED to be part of the family.

But wait, there's more. This passage reads like the list of gifts the parents receive at the ultimate baby shower where all the gifts are from God for the child as yet unborn. "In [Christ] we have *redemption* through his blood, the *forgiveness* of our trespasses, according to the *riches of his grace* that he lavished on us. 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. In Christ we have also obtained an *inheritance*, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ might live for the praise of his glory."

Now, if you're familiar with John Calvin's interpretation of election or predestination, you know that he paints a picture not quite as lovely and bright as Paul's depiction here. Calvin agreed with the idea that God knew and decided even before we were born who would be saved and would spend eternity with God. But Calvin sees God as the one team captain who chooses both teams. God also decides who will win and who will lose. If it was predestined that some would be saved, then it must also be predestined who would *not* be saved. This is called "double predestination."

Think of it this way: God has a blueprint on each of us before we are born, and the blueprint includes everything about us – eye color, skin color, personality, skills and talents. But before these blueprints get sent on to the production department, God randomly stamps each one with a word: “saved” or “unsaved”, “heaven” or “hell”, “accepted” or “rejected.”

Nice and easy for those who get the green light. Not so nice for those who get left behind. And the kicker is that you can’t do anything about it during your lifetime. No matter how good you are, if you’re not among the *elect*, you’re out of luck. Do not pass go; do not collect \$200. Sounds pretty harsh, and it doesn’t sit well with us.

However, we must also understand that Calvin was using this argument to refute the Roman Catholic idea that a person could earn one’s way into heaven with good works, or even purchase one’s entrance with a healthy financial contribution. Perhaps in trying to make his point, Calvin took it to the extreme, leaving no room for doubt that salvation *cannot be earned*. Salvation is God’s decision, it is God’s free gift to us, and it has nothing to do with our deeds or our offerings.

When I was in seminary I had a part-time job as a receptionist in an assisted living facility. One Sunday evening, a woman was pushing the library cart, offering books to people that were sitting in the lounge area. I overheard one of the loungers comment on her hard work. Another piped up and said, “You can’t get to heaven by good works.” The first woman responded, “No, but it can’t hurt!”

Actually, the good works are part of our response to God’s grace. With gratitude and praise, we are called to give something back.

A couple of years ago, I saw a video clip about a study that was being done. High school or college age orchestra students were auditioning to earn a place in a higher level orchestra class. Their initial auditions did not really show a true picture of their talent because of the anxiety they were feeling. The students were then asked to audition a second time, but before they played they were informed that they had been accepted into the orchestra and their grade for the class was an A. The idea behind this experiment was to see if the students would perform at a much higher level with the assurance of acceptance and the promise of an A. That’s exactly what

happened. Their anxiety was gone, but was replaced with a strong desire to be worthy of the gift they'd been given and to perform at the level expected.

You see, while Paul asserts that we have been chosen by God, we need to read on to find out why. “[God] chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world *to be holy and blameless before [God] in love.*” A few verses later, Paul writes, “In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, *so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory.*”

Of course, we all know people who will be lazy, who will take the free gift and run with it, with no of gratitude or giving back. And, let's be honest, sometimes we are the lazy ones. Sometimes we get comfortable, too comfortable to respond as we should. Sometimes, we feel like we've earned the gift and we don't need to give anything back.

Even though all have been chosen, PRE-DESTINED, adopted, forgiven, and offered an inheritance, not all will accept the gift. In the end,

we do have some choice in the matter, for God also created us with free will. While we cannot earn or buy our way into heaven, we can either accept or reject the gift of salvation. Imagine a train on its way to heaven. There are enough tickets for everyone. But not everyone will choose to get on board.

This makes a case for evangelism. It's possible that not everyone knows of blessings, the riches of grace that await them. Not everyone knows that they have been chosen; they've always felt left out of the family and unworthy of adoption. Not everyone knows that the train even exists; they have not heard the call to get on board.

We who know that we have been chosen, are called to respond and to fulfill our God-given purpose. May we live holy and blameless lives, may we live for the praise of God's glory, and may we spread the news that there is room in God's family for all... to the glory of God!

AMEN.