

“Predestined?”

Jeremiah 29:10-14; Ephesians 3:14-21

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Jeremiah 29:10-14

For thus says the Lord: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

Ephesians 3:14-21

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

A hypothetical situation to throw at you. Let's say you're stuck on an elevator. Maybe you're at a hotel or at work, and you are stuck on an elevator. And, hypothetically, let's say that you're not alone. There's one other person on this elevator, stuck with you.

At first, it's sort of a novel thing, really. “Wow, huh? We're really stuck in an elevator,” you say to each other. Sure that you'll get out soon, neither of you panic. But then your cell phones don't work, and let's just say that the emergency phone line in the box on the elevator seems to be broken. No one seems to hear you when you yell or bang on the doors, and, unlike the ones in the movies, this elevator doesn't appear to be equipped with a trap door in the ceiling for you to climb through.

So you're stuck on this elevator for the time being. And so naturally, you begin to talk—to have a conversation with this person with whom you are sharing this experience. You chat about your families, your work, your lives, generally speaking. It's actually a pleasant conversation, as conversations go. But then, hypothetically, let's say the two of you are stuck on this elevator for, oh, say an hour. The cell phones come out again—still no signal. And the small talk makes its way to deeper things, spurred mainly by the question, “Why? Why are we stuck on this elevator today?” Beyond the obvious, mechanical failures of this particular elevator, “Why?” For the two of you with no cell phone power and nothing but time to kill, it becomes somewhat of an existential question: “Why, in the grand scheme of the universe, have we been stuck on this

elevator today?” The subject of religion comes up, and here’s where it gets interesting. You see, you happen to mention that you worship at First Presbyterian Church in Racine Wisconsin.

“Oh,” says the other person, “you’re a Presbyterian? Well Presbyterians, they believe in predestination, don’t they? I suppose you think we’re both predestined to be here right now, right?”

Suddenly you are no longer stuck on an elevator. You are now trapped on an elevator. If only you’d brought your copy of Calvin’s Institutes with you.

Isn’t that funny—that one of the things that non-Presbyterians tend to equate with Presbyterianism is something that most Presbyterians feel anxious talking about? *Predestination*. Of course, part of the issue of us is that many of us aren’t *really* sure what predestination is to begin with.

There’s an old joke—What did the Calvinist say after he fell down the stairs? “Whew! I’m glad that’s over with!”

We have this sense that if you believe in predestination, then you believe that *everything* that happens was predestined to be. Falling down the stairs, getting stuck on an elevator, being late for work, losing your car keys... since the dawn of time, it was all predestined to take place. Little things, big things... Winning the lottery, having a child, finding your car keys, falling in love... all predestined to be.

And, of course, if you say that you believe in predestination, then someone should rightfully ask you why it is you do anything at all? “Why don’t you just sit on your couch, eat potato chips, and watch TV all day, every day? After all, you could argue that it was predestined!” Or more to the point, “Why would you struggle to make this world a better place? Why bother? According to you, any problems we have in this world are predestined to begin with, and since you actually believe in predestination, you can say that you *would* do something about them, if only you were predestined to care more.”

Essentially, the subject of predestination forces the question “*Why?*” Why do bad things happen to good people? Why do good things happen to bad people? Why do we suffer? Why do some appear to not suffer? And, while we’re at it, *Why are we even here in the first place, and just how much control do we have in our lives?* Does God have some master plan in mind for us? But beyond that, is God making it all happen? Are we puppets on strings? Or do we have any say? Can we fail and make God’s plans fall apart? Or can we succeed and make God’s plans even better?

I have to tell you now that as I wrote this sermon, I realized that I was writing more questions than answers. I hope you’re ok with that. I know there are some out there who think that church is a place you go to get answers, but I happen to think that church ought to be a place where you go to get questions, too. And we’re definitely doing that today.

Pat read this passage from Jeremiah a while ago: “For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.” What does this statement seem to suggest? That somewhere in God’s office, God has the schematics for our lives? A year-by-year flow chart with all the milestones listed? Just what is this *plan* God has? How specific is it? Are we talking general outline? Or is this a second-by-second itinerary?

Two questions seem to run side by side in this conversation. The first is, “How does God affect the world?” The second is, “How do we as human beings affect the world?” When things happen in the world—good or bad, monumental or insignificant—“What is God’s part in making them happen, and what is our part?”

One of the reasons I say that the church ought to be a place where we come to get the questions is that I believe that our questions can be unraveled to reveal things that are true about ourselves. And under all of these questions that I’ve posed here today, I think there’s a question that lies at our heart—at the heart of what it means to be human. And that question is this: *Why am I here and what am I to do?*

Why am I here and what am I to do? I suppose that’s two questions, really. But if you ask one, then don’t you have to ask the other? If you wonder why you’re here, then by default, you must wonder what you are to do. Or, as one of my favorite poets, Mary Oliver, writes, you must wonder “What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”

Now you want to hear something crazy? This is a stewardship sermon. Now I know what you’re thinking. Don’t we do stewardship sermons in the fall? Right before we’re asked to make our financial pledge for the coming year? And it’s generally true—as Presbyterians, we’re used to hearing about one “money sermon” a year. Which is ironic, because Jesus talked about money more than most other things. I guess he knew that when you talk about people’s money, you talk about their priorities—their hopes, their fears, their commitments... And this is a stewardship sermon, but to talk with you about stewardship, I have to talk with you about predestination.

You see, in general, we’ve got this predestination thing all wrong. We tend to think that if you believe in predestination, then you must believe that everything that happens in this world—big or small—happens because God preordained it to happen. It’s nobody’s fault, really—it was just predestined.

I think John Calvin would take issue with that. Now I’ve been referring to John Calvin in this sermon, and for those of you who don’t know, Calvin is, in many ways, one of the fathers of our church. Back in the 16th Century, he was one of those who broke away from the Roman Catholic Church, and began to forge new understandings of what it means to be a Christian in this world. And one of Calvin’s doctrines was that of predestination. And what Calvin meant by it was this: If you are a child of God, then know this: only God can destine you to be so. Put another way: God doesn’t love you because of who you are; rather, you are who you are because God loves you. Put another way: you, as a mortal human being, are powerless against the grace, love, and mercy of God.

That's what predestination is.

Let me give you an example. My daughter, Sylvia, is five years old. She thinks I'm wonderful. She really does! And I love her like crazy. But I know something. I know that one day, Sylvia will reject me. She will come up to me someday and say to me, "I have had it with you!" Maybe it's because I won't let her borrow the car, or maybe it's something much more serious. And she might say to me something like, "That's it! I am not your daughter anymore!" And I may say back to her, "Good luck with that. Because you are my daughter. And you are powerless to make yourself anything less than my daughter."

Likewise, Sylvia may come up to me someday and say something like this: "Dad, I love you. And you know what, Dad? I love you so much that today I am going to make you love me even more than you did yesterday. In effect, I am going to be more your daughter today than I ever have been before." Ok – she'll probably never say that exactly. But if she did, my response would be similar. "Good luck with that. Because you are my daughter. And you are powerless to make yourself more my daughter, even if you tried."

That's predestination. God's love for us in Jesus Christ is so powerful, we as human beings are powerless against it! You couldn't escape God's love, even if you tried! Go ahead and try! Run from God, reject God, curse God! You are powerless to undo what God has done for you. You are powerless to undo *who* God is for you. You can't make yourself "less God's child" anymore than you can make yourself "more God's child." Why? Because God has predestined you to be God's child—you can't claim credit for that one. And because God has *predestined* you, I'm sorry, but you cannot *destine* yourself! It's not up to you. It's up to God!

Now I haven't forgotten. This is a stewardship sermon. And I'm getting there. But I have to say one more thing about this predestination business. Because here's the next question: If predestination is true—if we can't make ourselves *more* God's children anymore than we can make ourselves *less* God's children. (Right? If we can't earn God's love anymore than we can disown God's love...) *Then why church?* Right? What in the world are any of us doing here at First Presbyterian Church? Or St. Lukes? Or Greater Mount Eagle Baptist? Or any church? What are we doing at church if, at the end of the day, we're basically powerless to reject or ensure God's love for us in our lives?

Risky question for a pastor to ask, isn't it? Why go to church? We might have a pretty thin crowd next week!

Let me tell you why I'm here. I'm not here to make sure God loves me. In fact, I know that if I walked away from church and never came back, God would go on loving me. So this isn't about that. I'm here because in Jesus Christ, God has said to me, "This is *how* I love you." I love you so much that I have been with you. And I've suffered with you and for you. I am faithful to you, even unto death—even death on a cross. And my love for you is something that can never be put to death.

And so why church? Well, the truth is, in light of God's love, what else can I do? What else can I do but, with my whole life, respond to God's love for me in Jesus Christ?

Going back to Sylvia, someday she is going to recognize that one of the central truths in her life is the fact that her parents loved her. I might be dead and gone by then, that's true. But that won't change the fact that Sylvia will be *who she is* in part because of the ways in which my love shaped her self-understanding. And so, she might say to herself, "Today I am who I am, in part, because my father loved me. Therefore I will live my life, in part, in light of that love. It will be part of what defines me as a human being, and ultimately, it will help shape the way I live."

Why church? Because God's love for us in Jesus Christ is the central, defining love of our lives. It's the love that Paul writes about in Ephesians when he prays that they will have the power to comprehend its "breadth and length and height and depth"—a love, according to Paul, that "surpasses knowledge." And in light of that love, Church isn't required, really—but why wouldn't we choose to live our lives in light of what God has done for us—in light of who God is for us?

Now *that* is a *stewardship question*! Living our lives completely in light of who God is for us. That's about stewardship! Sure, there are some who say that stewardship is about money and how much—how much we save, how much we give... But stewardship is about money only in the sense that how we spend our money is but *one reflection* of how we live our lives. And actually, it's a pretty good one, which may be why Jesus talked about money so much!

But beyond our personal finance, stewardship is actually about this broad conversation of predestination—a conversation which often reduced to predestination *versus free will*. That's usually how it begins: "Do you believe in predestination or free will?"

Well here's an idea. Next time you hear that question, here's how you can respond. "Do you believe in predestination or free will?" "Yes! I believe in predestination—that God's love for me is something so amazing, I am powerless to make it more or less true in my life. I can't make God love me anymore than I can make God stop loving me. God simply loves me!

And yes. I believe in free will. I believe that in light of God's love for me, I have the free will to live in light of that love, or not. But in light of that love, how else can I live? And so, my life is something that I *will to happen* in response to God's love for me.

Amen.