

July 12, 2009 II Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19
Psalm 24
Ephesians 1:3-14

Sermon Title: Chosen, Predestined, Redeemed

Paul's understanding of God's will is captured in these three words. If you have ever had difficulty understanding the doctrine of predestination, perhaps it is because you have tried to understand the word and not the total concept that lies behind the word. Paul lets us know that you and I are predestined to be God's children within the context of being chosen and redeemed by God.

Call to Worship

Leader: The earth is the Lord's and everything in it.
The world, and all who live in it.

Choir: For God founded it upon the seas
And established it upon the waters.

People: Who may ascend the hill of the Lord?
Who may stand in God's holy place?

Leader: He who has clean hands and a pure heart;
Who does not lift up his soul to an idol
Or swear by what is false.

People: He will receive blessing from the Lord
And vindication from God his Savior.

Choir: Such is the generation of those who seek him.
Who seek your face, O God of Jacob.

Leader: Lift up your heads, O you gates;
Be lifted up, you ancient doors.
That the King of Glory may come in.

People: Who is this King of Glory?

Choir: The Lord strong and mighty,
The Lord mighty in battle.

Leader: Lift up your heads, O you gates;
Lift them up, you ancient doors.
That the King of glory may come in.

People: Who is he, this King of glory?

Choir: The Lord Almighty -
God is the King of Glory

Hymns: #257 Give Praise To The Lord
#263 Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise
#327 O Word of God Incarnate

Prayer of Confession:

O God, we are no better than our ancestors in the faith who tried to justify themselves through their good works. We compare ourselves with obvious sinners, and congratulate ourselves on our virtues. We exaggerate our own faithfulness while discounting the kind deeds of others. By what we do and what we neglect we fail to live as your children. We pray, O God, for your pardon. Amen. (from: Refreshing Rains of the Living Word)

July 12, 2009 II Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19

Children's Message: Shouting and Dancing Before the Ark of The Covenant

What's an Ark?

Does anyone know what the word ARK mean?

What stories in the Bible talk about an Ark?

Well, there are two basic stories about an Ark in the Bible. The first is the story of Noah's Ark. What was Noah's Ark?

And the second use of the word Ark has to do with the Ark of The Covenant. Does anyone know what the Ark of the Covenant is?

Well, the Ark of the Covenant was a box. Not a really big box like Noah's Ark. Instead of putting animals into the Ark of the Covenant, the people of God put the Ten Commandments in that box, that Ark.

What are the Ten Commandments?

1. You shall have no other Gods before me.
2. You shall not worship idols
3. You shall not take my name in vain
4. Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy
5. Honor your Father and Mother
6. You shall not murder
7. You shall not commit adultery
8. You shall not steal
9. You shall not bear false testimony
10. You shall not covet

These rules for living were so important to God's people that they put them in a box, an Ark, and carried that box with them everywhere they went. And when they set up the big tent for worship, they set the Ark in the middle of the tent. These ten rules for living were so important to the People of God that they committed them to memory. And they kept these words close to their hearts and constantly on their lips. So, they did not have to open up the box to read what was written there. These words were written on their hearts.

I wonder if there is anyone here who has these words written on their hearts. Can you recite from memory these ten basic rules for living? When you read them in Exodus 20 they are much longer than how I have them listed here. So, I want to throw out a challenge to all you children. When you get home, look up Exodus 20:1-17. I challenge you to memorize the ten commandments just like they are written in the Bible. Not the short version, but the long version.... All 17 verses. And for every child who commits them to memory, there will be a New Bible and a beautiful T-shirt. This is totally voluntary and you won't have to stand up before the congregation and recite them. Just come in to my office and recite them to me.

What are we going to do? Learn the Ten Commandments that were held in the Ark of the Covenant.... And then we can do some dancing and singing around the Ark, just like they did in the days of Samuel.

Ephesians 1:3-14

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Paul's understanding of God's will is captured in these three words. If you have ever had difficulty understanding the doctrine of predestination, perhaps it is because you have tried to understand the word and not the total concept that lies behind the word. Paul lets us know that you and I are predestined to be God's children within the context of being chosen and redeemed by God.

Well, I promised you that if you would suggest some ideas for sermons, I would do my best to deal with the suggestions and this morning we have our first topic. Does it surprise anyone that it revolves around the issue of Predestination? If you are a Presbyterian, you have been exposed to that word. And for many Presbyterians it contains a lot of questions and foreboding.

Somewhere in our upbringing as Presbyterians (or if we weren't raised Presbyterians in our exposure to new member classes when we became Presbyterians) we got a dose of that word. It sort of fits together with our denominational name: Presbyterians and Predestination. Two big "P" words. Go together like a horse and carriage. Like Love and Marriage.... Oh Well....

And I'd wager a guess that when you tell folks that you are a Presbyterian, you get something like this:

"Oh great, then you can explain to me what Predestination is all about!" Or

"You're Presbyterian? Do you really think that God Predestines some to go to Heaven and some to go to Hell? How can you believe in a God who would do that to some people? How can you

know which group you are in, because if you're already predestined to go to Hell, then why try to live a good life?"

It's almost as if that is all Presbyterians are about: Predestination. When in reality Presbyterians, in accord with the reformed theology of John Calvin and many other 16th Century reformers, are about so much more than Predestination. But Predestination seems to have captured most people's imaginations.

The March 12, 2009 issue of Time Magazine lists Calvinism as one of the top 10 ideas currently sweeping the world. Think about it now, on the 500th anniversary of the birthday of John Calvin, we are seeing a resurgence of Calvinistic Theology among the young people of the world. As David Van Biema writes in his article "***The New Calvinism***" (TIME, March 12, 2009), "A lot of young people grew up in a culture of brokenness, divorce, drugs or sexual temptation." Biema is quoting Collin Hansen, author of the book, ***Young, Restless, Reformed: A Journalist's Journey with the New Calvinists***. Albert Mohler, President of Southern Baptist Seminary says, "These young adults have plenty of friends, what they need is a God." And Calvinistic Theology offers them a God who is all powerful, in control, all knowing, everywhere. You remember the big terms for these things: Omniscient, Omnipotent, Omnipresent.

And when John Calvin began to study the writings of Paul, that is what he discovered. Christopher Meehan sums it up in his book ***Pursued by God: the Amazing Life and Lasting Influence of John Calvin***. "Calvinism is back! John Calvin's 16th century reply to medieval Catholicism's buy-your-way-out-of-purgatory excesses is Evangelicalism's latest success story, complete with an utterly sovereign and micromanaging deity, sinful and puny humanity, and the combination's logical consequence, predestination: belief that before time's dawn, God decided who

he would save (or not), unaffected by any subsequent human action or decision.”

Now, I hope I haven't got you all fuzzied up in your minds. Calvin discovered in the writings of Paul a fundamental strain of theology that gives God all the credit and nothing to human kind. In other words, if we find ourselves among the congregation of The Saints....that would be all of us gathered here this morning, it would be because God in God's infinite Grace willed for us to be here. Now, of course, we had to do something. We had to get out of bed, eat breakfast, get dressed and get in our cars and drive to Church. But those actions are extensions of our “free will”. God does not force us to come to Church.

God presents us with the opportunity to gather with the Saints for worship and praise of God's Name. But you and I have the freedom to stay at home, or go to the lake, or go to a different Church. However, God knows before hand what our choices will be, and in that knowing, Predestines us to be where our Free Will leads us. But our free will cannot trump God's will for our lives.

So often Predestination is defined as a chess game where God is moving the pieces across the board and knows ahead of time what our moves will be. Therefore God knows the outcome of the game, even before we begin to play. But God does not instruct us which piece to move, nor in which direction. Can we beat God at Chess..... not really, because even if we achieve a checkmate, it would be because God's will allowed it.

Paul speaks in Ephesians in hyperbole, that is, an extravagant exaggeration. Paul wants to make the point that our salvation has **NOTHING** to do with what we do.... We cannot earn it.... It is a total gift from God. Therefore Paul writes: God chose us, in Christ, before creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love God predestined us to be adopted as God's Children through Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:4-5)

We already know that the scriptures teach that Christ was with God before Creation, and that along with the Holy Spirit, the triune God created all that exists, ordered all the universe and all other universes that Scientists have been discovering since the invention of the telescope. Is there a conflict between Science and Religion? Of course not! Science is simply the way that the human mind discovers and orders all that God has ordained so that we can understand it in our finite human terms. We keep pushing back the limits of knowledge, discovering new truths, and uncovering wonderful relationships, but every time we make an advance in scientific knowledge, hundreds of new unanswered questions are unleashed.

So, Paul says that it is God's will for all who follow Christ that we should be holy and blameless. Are we holy and blameless. I'm not! I'm still a sinner.... Perhaps a sinner in transition to becoming blameless. But I'm not there yet, just ask my wife. It is God's will that I should strive toward that state of blamelessness and therefore God provides a way that "blamelessness" can be achieved apart from my pitiful attempts....That way is Christ. In Christ, God sets us free..... free from the fruitless struggle to be perfect. Now, because of Christ, I will want to do good, praise God, be a brother to others, and share love with others, and feel other's pain, and all the countless fruits of the faith that emanate from coming to know Christ.

And at the end of the day, I look back on the path that my life took and say. God had a hand in what happened. And if we are true Calvinists we will say that God predestined us to end up where we are. God did not force us. God left us to our free will and allowed us to make bad decisions. And yes, sometimes God allows us to stumble and fall.... But never from Grace. Because once God claims us as His own, God never lets us go. We can fall away

from the fellowship of the Saints. We can tumble down the slippery slope of self indulgence. We can flounder on the rocks of personal popularity. But once we have accepted the Grace of Christ into our lives, we are God's.

A couple of years ago on Palm Sunday, the pastor of the Snow Creek Christian Church, Nancy Copin, held a community worship service for all the churches in the community. Baptists, Disciples of Christ, Brethern, Methodists all attend and an offering for Grace Ministry in Martinsville was taken. Over \$900 was collected to help those who need food and utility support. The Pastor was given the money and promptly turned it over to the treasurer. There was a visitor there that night who saw the pastor receive the money, but did not see her turn it over to the treasurer. On the night after Palm Sunday this visitor knocked on Nancy's door and asked for help. She let him in. He demanded the money and when she told him that she did not have it, he beat her to death with his fists.

Those of us who knew Nancy knew that she would never have agreed to the death penalty for that man. So he now sits for the rest of his natural life in a Virginia State Prison. And one of the reasons that Nancy was against the death penalty was because she believed that the Grace of God can claim even a murderer, even her own. She believed that execution would end the possibility of that man's salvation. Did God predestine that Nancy should die such a horrible death. Of course not. That was simply decision made by a man who truly did not know the Grace of Christ in his life. He freely choose to drink and take drugs and he freely choose to go after the money taken up on Palm Sunday evening. And, he made a free decision to strike out in anger at my friend Nancy Copin. But God knew the outcome, and the outcome makes us cringe. But we cringe because of what it says about man's inhumanity toward man, not because of God's all knowing Grace. We rejoice that at her death, God received Nancy into His Glory.

And perhaps Paul's words reached completion....God chose us in Christ before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless.... In this horrible act we discover both man's inhumanity and God's perfect Grace.

You see, Predestination is not a doctrine that helps us predict the future, but a window by which we can view the events that have transpired in our lives. It is a way of looking back and seeing how God has worked in our lives, even when we did not know or even care that God was present with us. But Predestination is also a way of saying that beyond a shadow of a doubt, God is in control. And it is an affirmation that when we are left to our own decision making processes we will more than often err on the side of evil. Only God's Grace protects us from our selves. And that cannot be seen until you and I have moved beyond the moment and can look back and see where God has led us.

Predestination is an understanding of God's power in our lives. Think where you would be if, at a certain juncture in your life you had chosen another path. Where would I be if I had not gone back to college, but had joined the army when the scholarship committee recommended it. Where would you be if you had freely chosen another option in your life. Perhaps you would not have married the person you have loved for so long. Perhaps you would not have followed the profession you are now in. Perhaps you would have lived in a different city and not known this fellowship called Altavista Presbyterian Church. But looking back we all see the hand of God nudging us in one direction or another.... Not usurping our free will, but using our free will to effect His Glory.

And what are you saying if you deny the concept of God's predestined love. Paul tells us that In love God predestined us to be adopted as his sons and daughters through Jesus Christ..... in accordance with his pleasure and will to the praise of God's glorious grace.....

To deny Predestination is to deny the authority and power of God. The opposite of Predestination is the fickle finger of fate. No rhyme or reason. Life's just a toss of the dice. What will be, will be. No power is in control. God is simply an arbitrary judge that we must placate and appease. If I can buy enough indulgences, I can get to heaven. If I can be good enough, I'll make it past the pearly gates. If I don't get too many demerits, God will accept me into heaven. But Paul understood the fallacy of this approach.

In Christ we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of God's will, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ might be for the praise of Glory.

When folks challenge you and question your Calvinistic understanding of Predestination simply say to them. "Are you part of God's Kingdom? Do you count yourself as part of God's Glory? Do you think you got there all by yourself, or by your own merit? Or, can you look back and see how God's hand was leading you at some terribly frightening times in your life. See, you believe in Predestination, too. You're just too afraid to admit it. Afraid of not being in control.

Predestination: God is in control, not us.

Predestination: God's will over our will.

Predestination: God using our free will to affect His Glory.

Now, I want to tell you one more story. My sister Betty has one daughter, an elementary school teacher in a little community outside of Chicago. Lynn is married to a wonderful man and they longed for children. But God in His wisdom has not seen fit to bless them with their own biological children. So they adopted. They got a baby boy through an adoption attorney in Chicago. What a blessing this young boy has been in our family. About 18

months after getting Josh, they got a phone call from the same attorney. Did they want another child? Josh's mother was about to have a little girl and wanted to put her up for adoption. Well, it was a no brainer, and they went to the hospital to pick up little Emily. Their family was now complete. But six months later Josh was diagnosed with Non Hodgskins Lymphoma. For a year they lived at the cancer hospital. Josh took ever treatment known to man. But in the end, nothing helped. It only kept him alive. Finally the Doctors said, "We can do no more! If we only had a close match, perhaps we could do a bone marrow transplant." Lynn said, we have his half sister! The tests were done and it was an almost perfect match. Several weeks later the transplant was done and today Josh and Emily continue to bring joy and love into our family. Now, everything about this story is filled with decisions that we make as humans. A woman with two unwanted pregnancies. The choice not to abort but to put the children up for adoption. A couple unable to have children on their own, but the choice to seek adoption, not once, but twice. These are all human decisions made freely by all parties, but underneath it all lies the insurmountable will of God who predestined before all time that these sets of decisions would happen to bring about something that is glorious to behold.

And Paul writes to the Ephesian believers:

In Christ we were also chosen having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of the will of God.

Amen

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