

**You Asked for It: Predestination—Can I Change the
Blueprint?** A Sermon by Louise Westfall

Fairmount Presbyterian Church

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Text: Ephesians 1:3-14

I was intrigued by the topic for today's sermon in our all-request summer series; partly because in 25 years of ministry, I've never preached on it, and partly because it runs the risk of being one of those "ivory tower" subjects of interest primarily to professional theologians and possibly some loyal Calvinists in Grand Rapids, Michigan. On one level who cares about something many contemporary adults would consign to the obscure religious dogma pound? (and come to think of it, who let the dogmas out???) On the other hand, it's a concept widely associated with Presbyterian theology, and specifically with our Reformed forebear John Calvin. Essentially, the doctrine of predestination holds that all historical events happen because of a previously established plan or decision of God. [*The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, p. 869] Since God rules over all, nothing can happen against God's will and everything happens because God ordained and caused it. In particular, predestination (the word itself literally means "to mark out beforehand") refers to God's decision to save the elect, the chosen ones who were "marked out beforehand" for this eternal destiny. But it follows logically if there are elect, then are there not also the "un-elect;" people who are predestined for damnation? Within this framework of a "double decree" the elect are predestined for heaven and all others for hell.

For this theological perspective, Calvin relied—as he consistently did—on the reading and interpretation of Scripture. The Hebrew Scriptures of the Old Testament describe the covenant people with whom God deliberately chose to have a specific relationship ("I will be your God, and you will be my people.").

The New Testament affirms this covenant relationship established by God, but rejects the notion of biological lineage as its basis, declaring instead that God freely chooses people based on God's perfect wisdom and love. Jesus never used the word "predestination" but spoke intimately of God as the Father who knows the created order down to the number of hairs on the head of the beloved.

The early church institutionalized this understanding by speaking of God's saving grace promised "to you and to your children, and to those who are far off, to everyone whom God has called"—words we invoke at baptism as a reminder that we trust the Holy Spirit to draw into the Christian community God's chosen people. The morning scripture lesson is from the letter to the Ephesian churches, and is perhaps the strongest expression of predestination we find in the Bible. As we read it, look and listen for what is accented here. Where is the impetus for human redemption? Who is "chosen" and for what purpose? Consider God's word to the church in the reading from the letter to the Ephesians in the first chapter at the 3rd verse. [Ephesians 1:3-14]

In the movie *Groundhog Day*, Bill Murray is cast as an obnoxious weatherman covering the annual emergence of "Punxatawney Phil" from his burrow. While there, he finds himself trapped in a kind of time warp, doomed to relive the same day over and over again, punctuated by the digital alarm going off at 7:04 am to the sound of Sonny and Cher's *I Got You Babe*. At first his new life is interesting as he defies the space and time continuum by walking in front of trucks, predicting the score of games yet to be played, and trying to impress others with what appears to be his uncanny knowledge of the future. But all too quickly his life becomes a virtual prison, utterly predictable and mind-numbingly boring. Only love—and a recognition of his personal accountability to live responsibly—frees him from this rigid, unchanging destiny.

The film portrays a version of a pre-determined existence, one in which human freedom is illusion because all is fixed and change is impossible. Envisioned this way, predestination removes human responsibility from the equation because God controls everything. If my fate is already decided, why bother to do justice; to do anything? The validity of nearly every task upon which the church embarks—worship, proclamation, mission—is called into question. If God has already chosen people for one or another final destination, what purpose is served by these enterprises?

Even more disturbing in my estimation is the assumption behind God's sovereignty—that God is free to do anything God pleases. So, for example, God can decide either to love or not to love, to forgive or extract punishment for people's sin, to save or damn. And in fact, Calvin acknowledged that "whatever happens in the universe is governed by God's incomprehensible plans" [*Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion* I.17.2]. To Calvin's way of thinking, God demonstrated both God's power and incomprehensibility by choosing some for well-being and salvation in this life and the next, and to reject, exclude, and condemn all the rest. Though Calvin himself avoided too closely identifying the elect people of God with any group, his adherents fell into this all too quickly. The tragic consequences of this range from supreme arrogance by faith communities certain that they are among the elect while speculating who might be among the damned, the splintering of the Christian church into hundreds of denominations, to outright oppression of individuals or groups different from them. Taken to its logical extreme, predestination could represent a fatalistic determinism that makes God responsible for the evil as well as the good that happens in the world; that suggests the proper role of Christians is to accept anything that happens to them as "the will of God."

Calvin hardly needs defending—his contribution to Reformed theology is monumental---but I hasten to add that predestination was *not* the defining theme of his worldview.

He never mentions the doctrine in his summary of essential Christian teachings, and it does not occupy a dominant place in his systematic theology found in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. He deals with it in a section called "The Way in Which We Receive the Grace of Christ," because that's what he believed was the proper context for speaking of predestination. Believe it or not, Calvin intended predestination to be a source of comfort and confidence for God's people, assuring them of salvation and eternal life. His conviction was born not of arrogance, but from profound humility that salvation comes only by the grace of God, and not through any human behaviors, choice, or beliefs. He taught that humankind is utterly dependent upon God, insisting that all the initiative for our salvation comes from God alone. The Ephesians text we read earlier makes a similar claim: it is God who creates, God who predestines, God who wills, God who reveals, and God who accomplishes God's own plan established before the foundation of the world. In a culture like ours which places priority value on independence and autonomy, Calvin's perspective offers a helpful corrective. We are not the author of our salvation; our being "pretty good people" has nothing whatever to do with our eternal destiny. It is, instead, all grace, all good from a loving God.

And therein lies the heart of Christian faith. God's rule is not exercised as God's freedom to do anything God pleases. It is rather God's freedom always, with everyone, in all things and events, to love. [*Always Being Reformed: Faith for a Fragmented World*, by Shirley C. Guthrie, pp 52-60] God is love, and therefore not free to love some people but not others, or sometimes to love and at other times not to love. God loves all people, always. Now, God is also a just God, who judges sinful people. But God's justice is not an alternative to, but is an expression of God's love.

Similarly, God's omnipotence does not mean that everything that happens is God's will. I don't believe God destroys a Dominican village by flooding, or causes cancer or accidents.

I don't believe God wills any form of sin, evil, injustice, or suffering, but rather works to overcome them.

Bottom line? God's rule, God's power, God's plan is based upon God's desire to be in relationship with God's people. We learn this first of all from Scripture. From the establishment of the covenant, the proclamation of the prophets, and most particularly in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has been about restoring relationship with the lost and scattered people of earth.

A truly loving divine/human relationship is not exercised through coercive power or an unalterable, predetermined plan. Love is only good if it is freely given, not demanded. As Christians we believe this divine love reached its pinnacle in the gift of Jesus Christ through whom God shared the human condition. God came to us as one of us, in solidarity with our finite lives and vulnerability. God came *for* us, for people who are victims of our own and other's sinfulness, for the purpose of redemption and reconciliation.

The Church's limited understanding of predestination underwent significant modification in the 20th century through consideration by Swiss theologian Karl Barth, and North Americans Reinhold and Richard Niebuhr. They expressed God's rule by focusing on Christ's identification with sinful humanity. The predestining God we see in Christ is one who, instead of rejecting humanity (or some portion of humanity), bears the pain of rejection to reveal the gracious heart of God who chooses *all* humanity. Contemporary liberation theology and feminist theology have contributed to the discussion by describing the dynamic tension between human struggle and divine hope. Sustained by a vision that God's just and loving plan will be accomplished, they have helped the church hear God's call to participate in the building a realm on earth as it is in heaven.

Whew! We're almost done, but I want to return to one of the concerns raised at the beginning of this sermon. A seminary preaching professor I admired said often that every sentence of a sermon should be subjected to the "so what?" test. A sermon is not a lecture for the edification of the congregation. Why bother with this centuries-old doctrine that frankly has many problems? Predestination: so what? Try this: theology matters. And here's why: whether we are conscious of it or not, the beliefs we hold about God, about Christ, about the Holy Spirit influence the way we live, the way we relate to God and to one another. What we believe about God's providence and rule over the world and its people will directly affect our understanding of our responsibility toward that world and its people. It will shape our worldview; it will influence our response to human suffering; it will determine whether in the final analysis we look to the future with fear or with faith.

Friends, take heart that God has a plan. We have freedom to choose and to change our personal part in that plan. What we do and say matter. But the predeterminative part of that is that God will not stop loving and working until God has redeemed the whole world; until at last righteousness and peace kiss and all creation lives for the praise of God's glory. Perhaps you will be surprised that I'm going to let Calvin have the last word today, in his assessment that to believe in a the sovereign power of God means "gratitude for the favorable outcome of things, patience in adversity, and also incredible freedom from worry about the future" [*Institutes* 1.17.7].

MAY THE GOD OF PEACE SANCTIFY US ENTIRELY; AND MAY OUR SPIRIT AND SOUL AND BODY BE KEPT SOUND AND BLAMLESS AT THE COMING OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST. THE ONE WHO CALLS US IS FAITHFUL AND WILL DO IT! AMEN.

Rev. Louise Westfall, D.Min., Pastor