

Predestined?
Exodus 3:1-12
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¹Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ²There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. ³Then Moses said, 'I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.' ⁴When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, 'Moses, Moses!' And he said, 'Here I am.' ⁵Then he said, 'Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.' ⁶He said further, 'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. ⁷Then the Lord said, 'I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, ⁸and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. ⁹The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. ¹⁰So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.' ¹¹But Moses said to God, 'Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?' ¹²He said, 'I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.'

The word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

A few years ago, our Youth Group theme was "Questions of Faith". At the beginning of the school year, we invited youth to submit questions that they had about the Christian faith. We then organized those questions into lessons throughout the year. Do you have any guesses as to what the most popular question submitted was?...

WHY DO BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE?

Often, in our culture, this question might be linked to Christian doctrines like God's Providence, God's Sovereignty, and Predestination. Was she predestined to become ill? Was he predestined to meet the love of his life in a college biology class? Were they predestined to get into this sorority or that fraternity? Was she predestined to struggle with mental health issues? Was he predestined to die young? Were they predestined to struggle with fertility? Was he predestined to die before her? Questions like this are normal. They're natural. They're human. They're honest. But I'm not sure that they actually have to do with Predestination as a Christian Doctrine. According to Mirriam-Webster's dictionary, predestine is a transitive verb that means "to destine, decree, determine, appoint, or settle beforehand." Predestination is a noun that refers to "the doctrine that God in consequence of his foreknowledge of all events infallibly guides those who are destined for salvation." Shirly Guthrie, one of the great 20th century theologians, offer this definition – "Who, in short, does God choose to save – or not save? This is the question the doctrine of predestination seeks to answer." I would put it this way – our future is in God's hands.

I have a long history with the doctrine of Predestination. It probably doesn't surprise many of you that I was (well, I AM) a church nerd. As a middle schooler, I had a letter, written to me by the Director of Christian Education at my church, pinned to the bulletin board in my room. What was the letter about? It was three pages of dear Eunice Youngblood's answers to all my questions about the biblical book of Revelation. In high school, I had a well-thumbed copy of the book Being a Presbyterian in the Bible Belt on my bedside table at all times. After college, I attended Columbia Seminary where, every fall, there was an Elect v. Reprobate flag football game. And it was a big deal. On the large field in front of the main building, tailgating before, team uniforms, etc. Also in seminary, I took a special seminar on Election (aka predestination). It was held at the home of my theology professor every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon, and we read lots of John Calvin and enjoyed coffee and desserts by the fire in the sitting room while we discussed this important and vexing doctrine of the Presbyterian faith.

John Calvin. French. Pastor. Reformer. Born 8 years before the start of the Reformation in 1517. Father of Presbyterianism. Perhaps best known for his writings on Predestination. Here are a few things Calvin had to say about this doctrine.

"First, then, let them remember that when they inquire into predestination they are penetrating the sacred precincts of divine wisdom."

“Whoever, then, heaps odium upon the doctrine of predestination openly reproaches God.”

“When we attribute foreknowledge to God, we mean that all things always were, and perpetually remain, under his eyes, so that to his knowledge there is nothing future or past, but all things are present.”

“This plan was founded upon God’s freely given mercy, without regard to human worth.”

“Christ, then, is the mirror wherein we must, and without self-deception, contemplate our own election.”

I’ll admit, these are some of the GOOD things Calvin had to say about the doctrine. Some of the things I think he may have gotten right. Calvin, like Augustine years before him, was a proponent of Predestination to help believers better understand how to live a life of faith and how to better understand the nature of the Triune God. But he specifically espoused Double Predestination – that God, in his free will, has elected some to eternal life and some to eternal damnation...the elect and the reprobate, the chosen and unchosen, the sheep and goats. I didn’t choose to share any of his quotes regarding this with you today. I do think some of Calvin’s sixteenth century theological views can grate against our 21st century lived experience. However, his views were grounded in Scripture, as should ours be, too. Here, are some of the helpful takeaways we can glean from Calvin, the Father of Presbyterianism.

- God is God and we are not. There are some things we will never fully understand.
- God is not constrained by human notions of time or a human calendar. God is all knowing, all seeing, ever present.
- God is free in God’s love toward us. Meaning God loves us freely and not out of any obligation.
- God’s love for us and grace toward us has nothing to do with our merit, our worthiness, the things we have done or left undone.
- Jesus is God’s gift to us. It is in Jesus that we become elect.

You may not realize it, but we’ve already proclaimed a few things that the Bible has to say about Predestination with our Call to Worship this morning.

*For those God foreknew, God predestined.
For it is by grace you have been saved through faith.
In love, God predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ.*

The verses from which this liturgy are gleaned, come from some of the books and chapters of the Bible most well associated with Predestination – Ephesians 1 and 2 and Romans 8. But we can actually see glimpses of God’s Predestination from the very beginning of the scriptural witness. Remember when God set Israel apart as a chosen nation, to reveal his love? It started with Abraham in Genesis 12 and continued with Jacob being given the name Israel. Then, individuals like Moses, from our text today were chosen for special tasks...to work toward God’s purposes in the world in relation to this chosen nation. And then we come to the New Testament where Jesus is God’s elect. God’s very Son, chosen and precious and beloved. In Jesus’ death and resurrection that election is also extended to us. There is a little bit of a sticky wicket in the very last book of the Bible. It’s where a lot of people, Calvin included, get tripped up on this doctrine. In Revelation 14, reference is made to the 144,000, standing next to the lamb “who had his name and the Father’s written on their foreheads.” Over the years, faithful people have read this and interpreted it in a very narrow way. One quite literal - out of the entire population of the human race over the history of time only 144,000 will be in heaven with God. As the book Being a Presbyterian in the Bible Belt puts it “I figure that’s two good sized football stadiums’ worth. And if you only take the two thousand years since Jesus, that’s an average of 72 people per year, not to mention the fact that the average will be decreasing for every year that time goes on.” Another interpretation is that the 144,000 is symbolic and only a certain percentage of the population will be saved. Either way, in these interpretations, some are saved and consequently some are not. But more contemporary interpretations, like that of Christopher C. Rowland, point out that a few verses later, the author of Revelation refers to these 144,000 as just the “first fruits”, meaning there is a greater harvest of the elect that is yet to be revealed. Gosh, what good news!

So why Moses? Why his call story on the day we talk about what Presbyterians believe about Predestination? Well, the first reason is simple – it’s the lectionary passage for today and I like to preach the lectionary. This also is probably a story that you’ve heard before. Maybe you’re like me and a little bit of a church nerd so you’ve heard it countless times. Either way, I hope you heeded my advice before I read it from this

pulpit and that you tried to hear it anew. I wonder what you noticed? I noticed a few new things when I read it through the lens of Predestination.

- **God freely chooses Moses.** Out of God's mysterious wisdom that speaks through a burning bush on the edge of the wilderness. God chooses Moses.
- **God's choosing of Moses had nothing to do with Moses' worth.** Remember, Moses was on the run because he murdered someone. He also didn't like public speaking...something this job God had for him to do would require. God chose him anyway.
- **God had a knowledge of Moses life.** God knew who he was, what he had done, where he would be, and what he was capable of doing with God's help.

Beyond the wilderness. Did that phrase strike anyone else in this passage? Moses "led his flock beyond the wilderness." For the first time in my life, I noticed that detail when studying this passage in preparation for today. The literal Hebrew is something like, Moses led his flock "to the edge of the wilderness." Literally, Moses is in the area AFTER the wilderness. When I think of Biblical wilderness, I think of a few things. I think of Moses and the Hebrews wandering in it for 40 years. I think of it as a place that prophets sometimes retreat to. And I think of it as a place where Jesus went after his baptism and was faced with many challenges. In biblical culture, the wilderness was known as a place where no humans resided. So, what was Moses doing there? Why was he there? Did his actions or choice or life circumstances lead him there? Was he supposed to be there? Whatever the answers to these questions are, here is what we do know. God sought Moses out. God chose Moses. God elected Moses from the edge of the wilderness. I don't know about you, but that's comforting to me. Because I've been in the wilderness before. I've been at the edge of the wilderness before and I bet you have, too. And if God chooses people there...God can choose people anywhere, any way, any time.

I like how LeAnne VanDyke summarizes the Doctrine of Predestination – "The most helpful way of approaching the doctrine of predestination is to cast its conceptual net widely: it affirms a divine plan and determination for all humanity that conforms to God's eternal will. In these terms, predestination doctrine is not so interested in the final fate of individual persons, but is a broad affirmation that the love of God, the wisdom of God, and the righteousness of God are the underlying realities of all created life, including each human person. It is God who has made us,

and we belong to God.” Similarly, Shirley Guthrie writes, “It is the summary of the good news of Jesus Christ for everybody.”

When you think about Predestination, what other images come to mind? We have Moses on the edge of the wilderness with the burning bush. And we have the 144,000 with God’s name written on their foreheads as the first fruits. And we have these powerful images of adoption through Jesus Christ. But what’s something more contemporary? What’s something we can see and feel and relate to? I like to think of God’s holding me and the whole of creation in his hands. We are held by God, we are safe, our future is secure with God. I think of a parent teaching a child to swim. Or teaching a child to ride a bike. Have you ever done that? Been the parent or the child? Do you remember the sensations? The thoughts in your mind? The outcome? Put yourself there, in the place of the child. Floating in the water, your parent’s hands holding you. The sounds of the world are blocked out. You can feel your breaths as they go in and out. The water glides over your body. You feel free, but also safe. Put yourself there, on your first bike without training wheels. Your parent holds the back and the side of the bike, and you begin to pedal. You feel the unique sensation of movement that comes with two wheels, instead of four. How your weight can move the bike. How the wind moves around your face. You’re scared, but you’re proud of yourself. You’re learning a new thing that will provide you another level of freedom in your young life. You’re nervous that you might fall, but your parent is there, assuring you that all will be well. And you are held safe. Steady and secure, on the cusp of something new. For, writes Dan Migliore, “According to the biblical witness, the electing grace of God is astonishing, but not dreadful. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Resources referenced:

Christian Doctrine by Shirley C. Guthrie, Jr.

Being a Presbyterian in the Bible Belt by Ted V. Foote and P. Alex Thornburg

Institutes of the Christian Religion Volume 2 by John Calvin

The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary Volume 12

Eerdmans’ Dictionary of the Bible

Faith Seeking Understanding by Daniel L. Migliore

