

July 14, 2024

Eighth Sunday After Pentecost

“The Destination is Always Christ”

Ephesians 1:3-14, Mark 6:14-29

*“In love he (God) predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.”* Later St. Paul says, *“In Him (Christ) we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory.”*

Predestined (or Predestination) is a word that kind of makes me cringe when it comes up just because it often causes folks to ask the pastor a lot of questions he can't answer well. Predestination or election is that God knew—or some say determined—before creation itself who would be saved and who would not. Naturally the top question people want answered is, “Am I predestined for salvation or not?” Sometimes I wonder if that question isn't prompted by our sinful nature. I mean, do we ask because if we are predestined for salvation then we are surely saved and can go ahead and sin as much as we want...and if we aren't what difference does it make so we can sin as much as we want!

But note how here in Ephesians and the two other times “predestined” is mentioned in the Bible in Romans 8, it is all about God doing and not so focused on us being. Paul isn't trying to explain how predestination works. He is just saying that God does it as a gift of God in Christ Jesus. We are not called to faith in predestination. We are called to faith in Christ. Thus I really have no problem telling people not to sweat the predestination questions, simply believe in God's promise of redemption fulfilled in total by Christ crucified and risen...and there is your predestination.

But still, some people, Christian people even, don't like that answer. They want to somehow get that definite checkmark in the predestined box. They want a proof that is reasonable to them. They want certainty they stand under God's favor. And that is very worrisome. If what we've been given in Christ isn't enough for a person, if one demands some further assurance, I fear for their faith. The object of our faith is Jesus and not predestination or anything else, and Jesus is enough. So I want to make that point.

Moving on, I find John the Baptist and intriguing fellow. Miraculously conceived in Elizabeth's womb when she was well past the age of childbearing and somewhat proclaiming Christ even before birth by leaping in the womb when the conceived Jesus comes near in Mary's belly, and then grows up into a bizarre wilderness prophet proclaiming the coming Messiah boldly right in the face of the Jewish leadership. He is so bold that he gets imprisoned for calling out King Herod's adultery. Yet while in prison even he seems to have some doubts. He sends some of his followers to check with Jesus, *“Are you the one to come, or shall we look for another?”* Jesus points John to the works He is doing and says, *“Blessed is the one who is not offended by me.”*

So I really have to wonder where John's mind was at, where John's faith was at, when those guards suddenly burst into his prison cell the night of Herod's party and hauled him toward the executioner's block. Do you think John was contemplating if and how he was predestined for salvation? Do you think he was saying, “Well I must be predestined; after all, I'm a prophet”? Do you think he was asking for some further proof of God's salvation? Or was he simply desperately praying, “Lord, have mercy”?

God does do predestination in Christ Jesus—that cannot be denied. St. Paul is not at all unclear about that and it is reason for rejoicing to the praise of God's glory. By grace through faith in Christ Jesus we do have the certain hope of salvation and the assurance of the means of grace—God's Word and Sacraments. We, as St. Paul says, *“were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee*

*of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it.*” We need not, and should not, seek anything more to assure us we are saved.

That said, we also must guard against using such predestination as an excuse for taking our salvation for granted. I think that all of us indeed do this to some extent or another. Let’s face it, we seek to live lives of comfort and leisure while at the same time keeping pretty busy with all sorts of activities and demands placed upon us. Knowing we are saved in Christ, it can be pretty tempting to tick off that “predestined” box and say “done” and move on, right? We’ve received the message, believed the message and, like John the Baptist, trust the message. But unlike John, we are tempted to say “been there, done that” and happily frolic into the rest of our life thinking that’s all she wrote.

And you’re not immune from this just because you go to church on Sunday. Worship can simply morph into a weekly ticking off of the “predestined” box. The Christian’s life can become a rejoicing that God is so good...and my earthly life is so good. It’s all good. And quite frankly, for most of us in a lot of ways that is true. But when you take that for granted you also kind of are ignoring another truth of life here.

It’s broken by sin...and in that, not so good. “Predestined” does not mean “good to go.” “Predestined” means “I stand blessed by God’s grace” and that calls for a reaction. That reaction is repentance, a continual rejection right now of all in one’s self that is opposed to the holiness to which God has destined you in Christ! It is something you cannot take for granted because we know Satan, the world, and our own sinful nature work to get us to nullify what God has accomplished by getting us to turn our back on it.

Our predestination unto salvation in Christ is most assuredly something for which we continually give praise and glory to God. But we should be very wary when it comes to considering how we apply it to ourselves. It is never about us. It is always about God. And that is right and good because the brokenness and evil of the world continually burst into our lives, and shouting “I’m predestined” at it does us no good.

Our continued sins of thought, word, and deed and of our failing to show love to neighbor as we should constantly assail us. Do we dare simply say, “I’m predestined” or “I’m baptized” and shrug them off? Surely not! When the specter of death bursts in like those guards into John’s cell, do we just shrug and take it for granted that everything is fine because we’re predestined? Of course not.

We don’t even think about predestination. We run to Jesus who has defeated sin, defeated evil, defeated Satan, defeated death itself. Our cry is always, “Lord, have mercy” because we know He does, He has and He always will. We do not take our Lord for granted because, seeing Him rightly as God’s love incarnate for us, it’s impossible to take His glory for granted! It just is.

So I just want to summarize my points because talking about predestination is always kind of weird and confusing.

- Don’t seek predestination as if it’s some special assurance to be had. You have the promises of God fulfilled in Christ Jesus. He is the sure foundation, and predestination is His Gospel gift.
- Resist the temptation to treat this gift lightly. It is guaranteed by the Holy Spirit, but taking it for granted is following Satan and sin’s leading to turn your back on it.
- Instead, always earnestly seek this gift, the gift being Christ Himself, in lowly, humble repentance, coming before your Savior as a beggar; “Lord, have mercy.”

Know that you can be absolutely certain of your salvation because it is nothing about you and your “predestination.” It is all about Jesus, what He has accomplished and the wonderful gifts that He so freely gives.

Amen.