

Ephesians 1:3-10
Predestined by grace.

Ruskin Falls, January 27, 2019
Pulaski Heights Presbyterian Church
3rd Sunday after Epiphany

TEXT (*English translation: NRSV*)

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

(1)

The 16th century Protestant Reformation was fueled by recognition that the church was having a hard time being honest about God's grace. It was fueled by protest against what many – most famously at first: Martin Luther – saw as a church that had come to proclaim salvation as the reward for good works rather than as the freely given gift of God's grace. The Protestant protest was this: While forgiveness and, so, salvation, come to us by way of God's unconditional grace and precisely not as a divine reward for something we ourselves have brought forth or done, church leaders had created the false impression that there *are* things that one *can* or even *must* do – things the church regards as "good works," such as: performing certain rituals, giving money to the church, giving alms to the poor, and leading a moral life – through which forgiveness and, so, salvation, can be purchased, earned, deserved, or otherwise acquired from God. The Protestant protest was that salvation is in no way a divine reward, but always and only God's unconditionally gracious gift. Salvation, the Protestants insisted, has nothing to do with God rewarding us for first having done something to "get right with God;" rather: salvation has only to do with God's sovereignly free self-determination to be for us the God of our salvation and, so, in all the mystery of God's ways, to "make us right with God."

That said, however, this, too, must be noted: Even Protestants, back then and still today, found and find it hard to accept that salvation comes purely and simply as God's graciously free gift.

To be sure, we Protestants denounce something called "works righteousness." We insist that there are no works, no deeds, no rituals, no activities we can perform, to "make us right with God" and put God in the position of needing to reward us with salvation. Salvation is in no way conditioned by our works; it comes about purely as a matter of God's unconditional grace.

However, despite our insistence that God's grace is unconditional, even we Protestants tend to link salvation with whether or not a person has true faith, or has right beliefs, or has undergone certain identifiably Christian spiritual experiences. There is a Protestant tendency to claim that, apart from such faith, apart from such beliefs, apart from such spirituality, salvation will not come your way. To be saved, the claim runs, you need to have faith, you need to believe the right things, you need to get the spirit.

That, however, makes human works a condition of salvation, for it amounts to saying this: While salvation does *not* come as God's reward for things done *outwardly* (such as performing certain rituals, giving money to the church, giving alms to the poor, and leading a moral life), salvation *does* come as God's reward for things brought about *inwardly* (such as right-with-God faith, beliefs, and spirituality). To say this, however, is to be less than honest about God's grace! For if grace really means a *gift* and not a *reward*, if grace truly means *unconditional* and not a *condition* to be met, if grace genuinely means what God does *freely* and under *no outside*

compulsion at all, then to say that we are saved by God's grace is to say that salvation comes about *independently* of anything we could ever think, feel, say, or do, outwardly or inwardly, physically or otherwise. To say that we are saved by God's grace is to say that salvation has only to do with God's sovereignly free self-determination to be for us the God of our salvation.

(2)

I want now to talk about something that was at the center of the *Presbyterian* wing of the Protestant Reformation. I want to talk about *divine election*.

Divine election has nothing to do with casting votes regarding God. Rather, it has to do with God's deciding, choosing, selecting, determining, what *God* shall do. It's like when I elect to go for a walk rather than staying inside, or when I elect to vacation at the lake rather than on the beach. Divine election has to do with God's deciding, God's choosing, God's selecting, God's determining to do something. More specifically, it has to do with God's electing to *will* in a certain way in the matter of our *salvation*. Divine election has to do with God's decision to *will* a particular course of action regarding our eternal destiny. The traditional Presbyterian term for this is *predestination*. And what I want to say is this: no teaching of the church takes God's grace more seriously *as grace* – no teaching of the church affirms more emphatically that God's favor is an *absolutely free* gift – no teaching of the church regards grace more *purely* as free grace – than does the teaching that goes by the name *predestination*.

(3)

Listen again to what we just heard in the letter to the Ephesians: God's will for human life has been announced to us in Jesus. Indeed, Jesus was sent by God to carry out and to reveal the mystery of God's will. And God's will is good news. The good news is this: the day is coming, when we and all things are going to be gathered up in oneness in Christ. The day is coming, when we all shall find ourselves at peace with God and with one another!

For the time being, of course, such unity seems a foreign concept. Life in the present is life filled with bitter disunity and strife. Individuals, groups, and nations are constantly raising up against each other walls of disharmony and violence, walls of prejudice and hatred, walls of envy and resentment, walls of fear and insecurity, walls of smugness and arrogance, walls of pain and despair, walls of indifference and neglect, walls of domination and cruelty, walls of greed and distrust – walls of what the Bible calls *sin*. Sin is life divided up in ungodly ways.

However, precisely amidst all these dividing walls, and precisely amidst all the sorrow and woe that hangs from those walls, there is *good news* – the good news of what God, in Jesus Christ, has elected to do – the good news that, in joining God's love to humanity in Jesus Christ, God has made known that it is our *destiny* to live in *loving communion* with God and one another. In joining God's love to humanity in Jesus Christ, God has made *God's love our* eternal destiny. That doesn't mean that we are particularly loveable right now; but it does mean that we were created to be loved by God, and that we are destined never to be separated from that love. In joining God's love to humanity in Jesus Christ, God has chosen you and me and all humanity to know, enjoy, share, and never be cut off from, God's love.

That means this: Our finding favor with God has absolutely nothing to do with whether or not we impress God as persons who deserve that favor. God decided our relationship with God before we were even born. Before there was a world, there was God's election of grace. Before there was a world, God chose us in Christ to be blessed, indeed destined us in Christ to one day be gathered up in oneness and peace.

With the term, "*predestination*," Presbyterian tradition affirms this theological point: We really cannot, in any way whatsoever, deserve or earn salvation from God; salvation truly is an utterly free and unmerited gift; before we were even born, God elected, God chose, God determined

Godself to be the God of our salvation; and you and I are powerless to change that.

(4)

Before going further, I want to clear up a common *misunderstanding* of predestination.

Predestination is not *determinism*. Predestination does not mean we have no choice in what we do or in what happens to us in the world. Predestination does not mean that every step we take was pre-programmed to happen. The gospel notion of predestination does not mean that all that happens in this world was *fore-ordained* by God to happen just the way it did. Rather, predestination is about God's already having made a decision regarding your and my *eternal relationship* with God. It's about God's having *predetermined* our relationship with God. Predestination means that, independently of what we're like right now and how we've lived, God already has made a decision regarding our eternal relationship with God. Predestination means that you and I do not in any way affect God's decision regarding our salvation, since it's a decision God made, as Ephesians puts it, before the foundation of the world.

One can put it this way: predestination is as unbending a statement as there can be, that salvation is a matter not of *reward* but of *grace*. For, if salvation is a matter of predestination, if salvation is something God decided before the foundation of the world, then it is in no way whatsoever something we had any role in accomplishing. It is purely, sheerly, absolutely a matter of God's free grace. If God is waiting for us to think, feel, say, or do the right thing before saving us, then salvation is *not* a matter of grace, but involves effort on our part. If, on the other hand, God *isn't* waiting on anything from us – if God decided before the foundation of the world to be the God of our salvation – then salvation really is purely a matter of grace.

Listen again to the good news declared in the letter to the Ephesians: Before God created human beings, God "chose us in Christ." Before you and I were born, already *in God* was the decision, the determination, to create and bless humanity in Jesus Christ, adopting us as God's own beloved children, ready to forgive whatever about us needs forgiving, ready to redeem whatever about us needs redeeming, in order to join us, in the end, in God's eternal peace. You and I had and have no influence over that divine decision regarding our ultimate relationship with God. We cannot change God's self-determination to be the God of our salvation.

With the notion of *predestination*, we are trying to be true to precisely that recognition of God's election of grace – God's self-determination, before all time, to be, without regard for human merit, worth, or lack thereof, the God of our salvation. With the notion of *predestination*, we are trying to be faithful to this gospel truth: salvation from God is a *perfectly pure gift of God's grace* and in no way a measured response to something we ourselves thought, felt, said, or did.

Predestination is not about historical determinism; it's about eternal destiny. Predestination doesn't mean our every step has been fore-ordained by God; it means that, before we ever even thought about God, God determined Godself to be the God of our salvation.

(6)

One thing more.

Even when we understand that predestination is not about God predetermining all worldly events, but, rather, about God's already having decided our eternal destiny, there still is a tendency (even among Presbyterians) to suspect that this might mean that God has destined some for eternal salvation and others for eternal damnation – that God has predestined some for heaven and others for hell. This understanding of predestination, however, misses the point.

The point of the gospel is not that, before creation, God chose certain individuals to be born for salvation, while relegating others to being born to go to hell. No, the point of the gospel is that

God's purpose in this world shall be fulfilled when and only when God's *love* has gathered all things up in the unity and peace that Jesus called the kingdom of God. For God created the world so that the love that God *is*, might extend *beyond* God's own self and be allowed to spill over into beings other than God, beings who, though independent of God, were created to know, enjoy, and, to all eternity, share the love God is.

The term, *predestination*, points to God's having determined in advance to save us, without regard for our merits, our deserts, our worth. It means that God looks upon us only with love, forgiveness, and redemption, even without our first having to do something to make God look upon us in that way. Predestination means that God aims to one day gather us together in unity and peace, despite all the walls of separation we have raised and let stand in the present.

To be sure, there is much about our world, there is much about humankind, that seems so sinful, so evil, so demonic, as to belong in *hell*, beyond the reach of God's saving grace. Nevertheless (as I myself understand God's grace thus far), predestination means that, though you and I can't say *how* God does it – though we can't say *how*, in this life or in life beyond this life, God brings us into *full embrace* of our identity as persons created and loved by God as God's own children – still, Jesus Christ gives us to know that God will, in the end, lift us all into the fullness of God's embrace. And when that happens, there will be nothing left for hell. Every heart in every part of all creation shall beat in perfect time, in keeping with God's own love.

(7)

In the meantime, God does not *force* us to be the children of God we graciously lovingly were created to be. Rather, God looks to us to make our own choices and to take responsibility for them. And, so, rather than being a *coercive* force in our life, God becomes a *persuasive* force. Rather than manipulating us like puppets, God calls, God invites us, to heed God's will and way; God opens up before us godly doors and opportunities, paths that will lead us where God knows we need to be going. But God does not *force* us through those doors, into those opportunities, or along those paths. God works simply through the *persuasive* power of God's love, *commanding* us not with *coercion* but by *calling and inviting* us to heed God's will and way.

That means this: There is *work* to be done – the work of doing our part to *become* the children of God we graciously lovingly were created to be. And the main thing that gets in the way of that work is this: our own selves. We keep acting as if we know better than God what is good for us, and what our deepest needs are, and what finally will satisfy those needs. We keep acting as if we can find lasting happiness and ultimate fulfillment while walling ourselves off from our Creator's creative aim, walling ourselves off from the life of eternal love, walling ourselves off from the commands of the graciously loving God, now made known to us in Jesus Christ.

You see, when we wall ourselves off from God, when we try to live cut off from God, we, in effect, create our own hell. The good news, though, is *God's election of grace*. For grace means that God has taken ultimate responsibility for our relationship with God; grace means that, in all the mystery of God's own will and way, and without diminishing our *human* freedom and responsibility, God is taking divinely ultimate responsibility for drawing us toward and lifting us into the full embrace of who we really and truly are, namely: persons created to know, enjoy, and, to all eternity, share God's love.

The question you and I now are confronted with, is this: Are we going to take up the work that God's grace gives us to do, or are we not? Are we ready to heed the commands of our graciously loving God, or are we not?

Our sure redeemer calls. The God who gives us life and who awaits us at this life's end, has given us work to do here on earth. And the time for action, the time for readiness, is always *now!* Amen.