

“Before the Foundation of the World”

a sermon by

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Charlotte, North Carolina

May 17, 2009

**Text: “... just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love.”
(Ephesians 1:4)**

Recently I came upon an article in the Atlantic Monthly entitled “What Makes Us Happy?” by a man named Joshua Wolf Shenk. It is a study about a group of 268 promising young men who entered Harvard College in the late 1930’s. The group included John F. Kennedy, who became President of the United States and Ben Bradlee, later to become the Editor of the Washington Post. The group tended to be bright, polished, affluent and ambitious. They had the benefit of attending one of the most outstanding universities in this nation. For 72 years the lives of these 268 men have been studied carefully with the intention of discovering what it is that makes a person happy.

The results of this study are quite remarkable. Some of these individuals were quite successful. Four became members of the United States Senate. One served as a member of a President’s cabinet and one, John Kennedy, became President of the United States.

But underneath the shining successes were darker hues. Almost a third of the group ended up with mental illnesses. Many suffered from alcoholism. Some of the most promising ended up as the least successful and some of the least promising ended as the most successful.

The study showed that there are some things that predict happiness in later years: education, a stable marriage, not smoking, not abusing alcohol, exercise and a healthy weight – all these were factors. Another key to happiness is healthy relationships. But at the end, the author is quick to acknowledge that there are no easy answers and no magic formulas.

I.

This morning I have read from Paul’s letter to the church to Ephesus. Although there are those who have questioned whether in fact the Apostle Paul was the author of this epistle, there are certainly themes in this book that are consistent with Paul’s other writings.

One of the unique aspects of this letter is found in the opening verses of the Book of Ephesians. Paul begins this letter in typical fashion with a greeting to the saints in Ephesus.

He then makes a remarkable statement about God, whom he says “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.” (Ephesians 1:4)

This spring I taught a course on Wednesday evenings on Presbyterian beliefs. One night I spoke on a doctrine that has puzzled many people, namely the Presbyterian emphasis on the doctrine of predestination. After the class, someone said to me that they had not heard a sermon on predestination in a long time in this church, so I want to correct that this morning.

II.

The notion of predestination is way of talking about God’s calling or election of a people. At its heart, it has to do with our salvation and our eternal destiny.

It is not determinism, which believes that everything that happens to us – good or bad – has been predetermined before we were born.

It is not fatalism – the notion that “what will be will be.” Fatalism is rooted in a random view of life as a series of happenings that are determined by chance.

Predestination, on the other hand, is rooted in God’s calling of a people. It is a gift of God. It is an act of grace. It is not a human activity, nor is it in any way depending on human merit. It is an act of God. John Calvin’s understanding of predestination is closely related to Martin Luther’s emphasis on “justification by grace through faith.”

The doctrine of predestination does affirm three very important dimensions of our faith that are mentioned in this passage in Ephesians.

III.

The first is the affirmation of God’s sovereignty. Presbyterians have always placed a good deal of emphasis on the Lordship of God. In this passage, Paul speaks of God choosing us before the foundation of the world and of giving us a destiny as his adoptive children.

Predestination means that human life is rooted in the will and intention of God. God is the Lord, the all-governing creator. The origin and the faith of the believer and the church must be found first in the action of God, not in any human endeavor. Practically speaking, this means that behind everything that happens to us is the will and purpose of God. No human life is ever an accident. No human life is beyond redemption. This passage in Ephesians reminds us that even before the world was founded, God had thought of each of us, called us into being, given us individuality, and identity as a child of God, as well as a dignity that no person should dare abuse.

But we must go even further than that. God not only called every person into being, he also elected a people to a high and holy destiny. The human predicament, as Presbyterians have understood it, is that every person is a sinner. We may want to do good, but often we cannot. We

are self-centered when we should be God centered. We have all sinned and come short of the glory of God.

Several years ago I heard Craig Barnes speak in a sermon about a saying that is making the rounds these days: "It's not about you." There is something in this saying that resonates with me. There are times in the church when I want to say to people "It's not about you." In a meeting when someone drones on and on I want to stand up and say "It's not about you." In preparation for weddings when brides and grooms sometimes come up with some of the most outrageous ideas about weddings I want to say, "It's not about you."

In the Presbyterian Church we have to remind others and ourselves that the church does not exist for our personal enjoyment. It is not about us. It is about God.

IV.

The second critical dimension to our faith is the emphasis on God's grace. By grace we mean God's love for us that we cannot and do not merit. God's love for us is a gift that is given through Jesus Christ. That is what Paul means when he writes, "He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will." (Ephesians 1:5) Paul then speaks of the redemption we receive through the death of Christ and the forgiveness and eternal life that result for the sacrifice of God.

The notion of God's grace and sovereignty is one of the most comforting expressions of the gospel that we find in Scripture. Many of us try to earn our salvation. Certainly that was the case with the great Reformer Martin Luther. Luther was obsessed with the fact of how a sinful person could stand in the presence of a just God. Luther availed himself of all the resources of the medieval church. He entered the monastery. He fasted for weeks at a time. He confessed every sin he could possibly imagine he had committed. But at the end, Luther was still haunted by the possibility that he had failed. It was only when Luther turned to Scripture that he heard the liberating words "the just shall live by faith."

In the Presbyterian Church, we have insisted that salvation is not something that any of us can earn. No matter how good we try to be, no matter how many works of righteousness we perform, it is never enough. None of us can earn God's love.

That is why we need to hear this word of good news that says to each of us that our salvation is a gift of God. It is given to us through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Every attempt on our part to earn God's love will fail. No matter how many committees we serve on in the church, no matter how many times we come to church, no matter how much money we give to the church – it is not enough.

Many of us like to think that we choose Christ. But even that is not our doing. It is the spirit of God that moves in us that allows us to say "Yes" to God's gift of salvation. The only thing that any of us can bring to God is our own sinfulness. The rest is up to God.

V.

The third dimension to the notion of predestination is that God "calls" or "elects" a people not for privilege, but for service. John Calvin was convinced that the way God had chosen

to accomplish his purposes on earth was through individuals that were chosen to be part of his church. For Calvin, faith precedes works and not vice versa. We serve God not to earn God's acceptance, but we serve out of gratitude for the salvation God has given us in Jesus Christ.

Several weeks ago I read an article in the *New York Times* about an American named Howard Conklin Baskerville. Most Americans would not recognize his name, but strangely enough, most of the people who live in Iran would. A native of Nebraska, Baskerville graduated from Princeton Theological Seminary and moved to Iran as a Presbyterian missionary in 1907. He was 23 years old. A year before his arrival, the king of Iran had bowed to popular demand and had provided for the people to have a constitutional monarchy. Tabriz, the city where Baskerville worked as a school teacher, was the center of this movement supporting a constitution.

But before all of this could take place the Shah of Iran died and was succeeded by his son who was determined to stamp out this constitutional revolt. Under the oppressive leadership of the new king, the constitution was suspended and a number of politicians, journalists, and constitutionalists were hanged.

Surrounded by royalist troops, the people of Tabriz fought back. And instead of choosing the safety of the American consulate, Baskerville joined the outgunned and outnumbered citizens of Tabriz. As he put it, "The only difference between me and these people is my place of birth, and this is not a big difference."

On April 19, 1909, Baskerville was killed while commanding a group of town loyalists. He was 24 years old when a bullet tore through his heart.

Although the relationship between our nation and Iran is greatly strained today, Baskerville is still revered and honored by the people of Iran. In 2005, the President of Iran honored Baskerville with a statue built in his honor in Tabriz, a reminder to us that it is often cheaper and better to send missionaries than to have to send B-2's and F-35's.

To have affirmed, as we have this morning, the sovereignty and grace of God, as well as God's plan for our lives, speaks to the real issue of what gives our lives fulfillment and meaning.

John Calvin, one of the great Reformers of the Sixteenth Century, spoke of the "doctrine of predestination" as a source of great comfort, and I believe that to be true. It assures us of our salvation not through what we have achieved but through what God has done for us in Jesus Christ and our trust in that promise. Moreover, if God is both gracious and sovereign, we can trust him to deal with many of the puzzling questions that are raised by this issue. It allows us a certain freedom to deal with people of other religions. It frees us from preoccupation with who is saved and who is not. In short, it makes salvation the business of God and not our business, and gives us the freedom to live our lives in gratitude and service to the God who has given us the greatest gift possible – the gift of his son Jesus.

And that is our great hope – in life and in death.

Amen!