

The Architect's Election

Hebrews 11:8-12

"This We Believe" Sermon Series

The Second Truth: God Calls Us to Be a Holy People

I'm going to go ahead and say something out loud for the first time in my life, thanks in large part to Stephen Plunkett's book, [This We Believe](#), the book which inspired this present sermon series. Ready to hear it? Until recently, I thought it sounded pretty darned crazy and ridiculously out of date and in no way theologically en vogue for the year two thousand and eight. But here it is, I'm ready now to profess that which I am sort of suddenly comfortable saying –

I believe in predestination.

There, I said it. Feels good to get that off my chest! If you are wondering why I was anxious about announcing this to myself and even more so to you all, it's because this doctrine of the church is not one most people I know are comfortable with. In fact, these days it's usually outright dismissed. Case in point -- just this week I told a colleague in ministry that this was the topic I was planning on covering today and he said, "You must have run into the down side of sermon series." To which, of course, I quickly replied, "It's only week two!"

For as much as predestination is no longer a particularly popular doctrine among mainline denominational Protestants, it is a concept that many folks continue to assume is perfectly in synch with Presbyterianism. That's because our branch of the faith is deeply rooted in the teachings of the 16th century Church reformer John Calvin. Calvin is pretty much considered the father of all Presbyterian doctrine, and especially this one concerning predestination. The most commonly presented interpretation of what he taught goes something like this –

God has foreordained, that is, God our Creator has determined since before the very beginning of all time, that only some of us will enter into eternal, heavenly bliss. This is a mysteriously selected group destined for salvation. Everyone else, as it goes, has been destined for eternal separation from God. In short, God has already decided who is in the heavenly club and who is not, and it matters not a whit who we are, what we profess and how we live our lives.

Inspiring, huh? Um, no, not really. Strictly interpreted, there is no way for any of us to know if we are in or out of God's saving grace. Hardly a hopeful message! Now I read a good deal of Calvin while in seminary (haven't read much of anything he wrote, I confess, over my past ten years though!). Overall, I'm very much behind his thinking and biblical proclamation. Especially his teachings on how the church should govern

itself. But this doctrine, as it is commonly interpreted, has never sat right with me. It pretty much paints a portrait of God, in Plunkett's disturbing description, as a "capricious Heavenly Tyrant who arbitrarily doles out blessings and curses." (Chapter 2)

So why in heaven's wondrous name am I able to stand here today and profess my belief in predestination? Has some train in my mind jumped a track, some set of marbles slipped out my ear and spilled on the page and the pulpit? How can I, especially as a survivor of a dysfunctional, abusive family system, possibly believe that some of us reasonably unrotten eggs in the family basket might nonetheless be doomed in the end? Well, again, a healthy bounty of gratitude goes to Pastor Plunkett's careful, faithful consideration of the subject. He prefers the synonymous term "election" to the more commonly tossed around term of "predestination." And in discussing God's "electing" grace, he clearly finds the Book of Hebrews description of God as "architect and builder" very helpful. As do I, especially since the Book of Hebrews is my favorite book in the Bible.

An architect and builder, it sure seems to me, must develop and depend upon a very tenable plan for having a solid foundation upon which to create a durable structure. The author of Hebrews describes God as having the dual roles of designer and constructor of the "heavenly city," the "place" of pure harmony with God and one another where our hearts are truly longing to be once we pass from this earthly plain. It certainly makes good sense to me that God didn't outsource this project!

It's all a matter, as we discussed in last week's sermon, of God being charge, of God's sovereignty. So is it true enough that whoever is ultimately in or out this heavenly city is always and only the initiative of the architect and builder. Wrestling to completely comprehend or contradict this won't help us much in our faith journey, though. We can't peek at any files on God's desk. What is much more helpful, though still a tough truth to swallow, is accepting that this means none of us is a master of our own destiny. When all is said and done, when it's all dust to dust and ashes to ashes, we do not belong to ourselves and to this world. We belong, instead, in life and in death, to God our Creator.

Yet don't we put untold amounts of time and energy throughout our years trying to contradict this reality? Trying to be God instead of belong to God? As Pastor Plunkett points out, "God's bone of contention with Adam and Eve" was precisely that they desired to be masters of their own destinies, to grab hold of the knowledge of good and evil no matter the what. It makes sense to me that we wouldn't act any differently, we who are the spiritual heirs of the rebellion they began against God's intended

harmony with the holy city.

This is especially so since our American culture is flooded with ideas and products that try to convince us every single day that we do indeed own ourselves, that we can certainly master our destinies. The messages we get in a consumer society such as ours consistently scream about the foolishness of pausing, praying, waiting on the God that knitted us together in our mother's wombs. It's more than happy to offer costly books and products and seminars for us to buy on the topic of how to self-appoint ourselves to salvation. Consequently, people are at war with themselves on a daily basis when it comes to trusting God's good, saving intentions. No small wonder, then, that it's unacceptable to believe that the outcome of eternity for any of us really is a matter of God's discernment.

So, okay, let's say we clearly and faithfully see the fallacy of believing that we are the masters of our own destinies. Does this help us get comfortable believing the perception of predestination most commonly presented?

It helps, according to Plunkett and other scholars, to revisit John Calvin. Did he intend for his teachings on predestination to make everyone all gloomy and fatalistic? To spend their lives spouting "Oh, what's the use?" To the contrary, a fresher interpretation suggests he did not intend it to be something we should fret about and try to figure out, as if one more thing for us to try and control in a world that demands we be on top of things. Calvin actually intended it to be a comforting, liberating part of our belief system and daily lives. He intended it to encourage us to live in joyful, trusting dependence on God's will as revealed in the Scriptures. By pronouncing that we are no longer burdened with the legalistic pressures of figuring out what we need to do to save ourselves, Calvin wanted us to just strive to serve the Lord, to be the holy people the Architect of All has been calling us to be since the beginning of time.

Now I make many, many decisions day in and day out. I constantly strive to live a life faithful to the teachings and example of Jesus Christ. I've done well for myself against odds we all face. But as important as everything I've done or tried to do that is good and faithful, it is of secondary importance to the fact that God has already decided, that is, "elected" to *love me in Jesus Christ and call me into service*. And the same is true for every one of God's children! Salvation in Christ is what has been foreordained, and this is freely and unconditionally extended to everyone. The Architect of All has built this as the durable foundation of this otherwise fallen, wounded world. To be holy people of the holy city, then, means to believe and behave as people set apart in service to this Good News of the true and trustworthy driving force behind human destiny.

Was my decision to study and serve the Lord with my life decided at the beginning of time? Again, I don't have access to any of God's files. Yet I know with all my heart that through the years I have felt consistently compelled to do so by a love so much greater than any love I've known on earth. This is why I agree quite strongly with Plunkett's statement that "it helps to understand election not as a static, impersonal decree of God arbitrarily forced upon us, but in terms of a relationship created and sustained by love." (chapter 2). So we *have* been set apart, selected, elected together in love to humbly and joyfully serve one another as instruments of Christ, the One who fully forgives us our sin and reconciles our relationship with God. This is the unrelenting, gracious witness of the Bible, and proclaiming it does not produce even a whiff of hellfire and brimstone.

Very importantly, we must understand that this is a message of inclusion, not exclusion. Anyone who presumes to know, on the grounds of their interpretation of the doctrine of predestination, who has been admitted to the heavenly city and who has not, just doesn't get the good news of God's electing grace in Jesus Christ. They just don't get that God, the Architect and Builder of the heavenly city, has revealed an amazing truth in Jesus that God is for us and not against us, that God alone has the permit, as it says in Ephesians 1:10, "to gather up all things to Him."

I trust God is revealing to you, in small but powerful ways, that you'll continue to get to this great gathering up with me, to live into our all-inclusive, long determined destinies to be loved by God in Jesus Christ and sent into the world as joyful servants of this amazing grace. Amen.