

Pastor Joe Polzin  
 Ephesians 1:3-14  
 “The Wonderful Mystery of Predestination”  
 Year B – Second Sunday after Christmas  
 January 3, 2021

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

Today, the Second Sunday after Christmas, reminds us that this is still the season of Christmas and that Christmas is a season full of wonderful mysteries of the faith. Mysteries such as the incarnation of Jesus Christ. That the eternal Son of God became flesh and dwelled among us. That the Creator became a creature. That the infinite became finite.

Another mystery of Christmas is that Jesus willingly humbled himself in order to accomplish God’s plan of salvation. That not only was the majestic and holy God going to humble himself by becoming one of us, but that he came as a virtual nobody. He came in the form of a servant (Phil. 2:6-7), not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many (Matt. 20:28). He was born of a virgin, laid in a manger, visited by shepherds, raised by a carpenter, and died the death of a criminal. These are mysteries we can ponder not only for the entire Christmas season, but truly for all eternity.

Well, today, in our Epistle Reading, the Apostle Paul introduces us to another mystery. The mystery of God’s eternal will for us. He writes, “In [Jesus Christ] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us *the mystery of his will*, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time” (1:7-10).

The mystery, Paul says, was what God’s will for us was. But beginning with Christ’s birth and ending with his death, resurrection, and ascension, it is now in the fullness of time revealed to us. And when we hear what that will is, as Paul describes it, it should make us stop in our tracks.

Paul says in verse 4 that God “chose us in [Christ] *before the foundation of the world.*” And in verse 5 he says, “In love he *predestined* us for adoptions as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will.” And then in verse 11, Paul says, “In [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.”

Now, let me ask you, when was the last time you took a trip down the path exploring the topic of predestination? Because that’s what Paul is doing, and that’s what we’re about to do, as well. And I’ll say this right up front, as I was preparing this sermon, I did so with great humility and trepidation, because when you begin talking about things like God’s gracious election and predestination, you are wading into some pretty deep theological waters.

But I knew that this was such an important part of our Christian faith that seems to hardly ever get talked about, so it would be a shame to let God’s beautiful words in Ephesians chapter 1 go by without talking about it. And I won’t be able to cover everything in one sermon, but hopefully you’ll walk away today marveling with me at yet another example of a wonderful mystery we get to ponder in this season of Christmas.

The first thing we need to understand, of course, is what predestination is and how the Bible talks about it. When God through Paul says that he “chose us in Christ before the

foundation of the world,” what does that actually mean? Now, in Christianity, there are three basic schools of thought.

The first is classic Calvinism [TULIP Calvinism], where many Reformed denominations land today, which teach that God elects, or chooses, both those who are saved and those who are not saved. This is called double predestination. That God not only foresees but he also predestines all those who go to heaven as well as all those who go to hell, and we as human beings don't really have any say in it.

Now, in this line of thinking, we wouldn't necessarily know which one we are, and that's the problem with double predestination. How do you know if you're actually saved? A classic Calvinist will tell you to look to the fruit of your own faith to determine if God has worked faith in you, but there again is the problem. To be assured of your salvation, you must look to yourself. Your own works. Your eyes come off of Christ and the onus is on you to assure yourself that you're actually one of the elect.

But in Scripture, the Bible never talks about God predestining people to hell. It only ever talks about God electing people to salvation. And Scripture is absolutely clear that the promise of the Gospel is universal. It isn't only offered to some, it's offered to all. “For God so loved the world,” John 3:16 reminds us; or, “His blood is the atoning sacrifice for... *the whole world*,” 1 John says (1:7; 2:2); or, as 1 Timothy says (2:4), God “desires *all people* to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”

The second school of thought regarding predestination comes from the historical reaction to Calvinism, which is called Arminianism. It's where many Baptists, Methodists, and Evangelical Christians land today. It's named after James Arminius, who wasn't satisfied with this concept of double predestination.

In distinction, Arminius taught that God's election, his predestination, is based upon his foreknowledge of what he knows a person will eventually choose in their life. That a person is capable of either choosing God's gift of salvation or resisting it, and God knows where they are going to end up. Therefore, when Scripture talks about predestination, it is an election ultimately based upon the *person's* own choice either for or against God.

But here again is a problem. If your salvation is based upon whether or not you made the proper choice, how can you ever be assured that you made the choice well enough? Or that tomorrow you won't make a different choice? You see, although Arminianism is a reaction against classic Calvinism, it ends up with the very same problem. It points people to themselves in order to assure them of their salvation.

But in Scripture, the Bible is very clear, that without God's gracious intervention, the human will is unable to make a choice for God. The “inclination of the human heart is evil from youth,” Genesis says (8:21); or, as Romans says, “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God” (3:10-11); Or, as Ephesians later says, “Even when we were dead in our trespasses, God made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved... it is not your own doing” (2:5, 8). Even our Epistle Reading today makes it clear that God is the one who makes the choices, not us.

So, what are we to think, then, if double predestination and Arminianism are both insufficient ways to consider this wonderful mystery of faith we call predestination? What do we, as Lutherans, believe? Well, as with many of our Lutheran doctrines, we stick closely to what Scripture says, and instead of trying to over-resolve a mystery one way or the other, we are comfortable holding multiple truths from God's Word in tension with one another.

After all, isn't this what we do when we say that God is both one God and yet three persons? Or that Christ is both God from eternity and well as a man, born of a woman? Or that in the Lord's Supper, we are given both bread and wine as well as Christ's true body and blood? We don't attempt to resolve these mysteries, we simply confess that what Scripture says is true, and we believe it.

As I've already laid out for you today, God's Word clearly states that we have no ability to choose God. Therefore, we cannot accept Arminianism. And yet, God's Word also clearly states that he has graciously offered his Son's sacrifice as a gift to the entire world, not just the few elect. Therefore, we cannot accept Calvinism.

Instead, we as Lutherans make a distinction between God's foreknowledge—that he knows everything that's going to happen, both good and evil, because he is God—but that his foreknowledge is not to be confused with his predestination, with his gracious election of believers. In other words, while God may know who will ultimately believe in him and who will ultimately reject him, that doesn't mean his foreknowledge causes such a result.

Lutherans believe in what we call single predestination. That God elected all people to receive by faith the gift of his Son Jesus Christ, the atoning sacrifice Christ made on the cross for the forgiveness of all sins, and eternal life by believing in him. But we also believe that God's grace is resistible. God allows our human will to refuse his mercy, to reject his grace, to turn away from his salvation. Therefore, if we are saved, it is clearly by God's own doing, and he gets 100% of the credit. But if we are condemned, it is because of our own choice, and it is 100% our responsibility.

Now, many questions come up at this point, and I'd like to respond to at least two of the big ones. The first question is, what is the actual difference between single predestination and Arminianism? After all, isn't there still an element of choice involved in both?

Well, the difference, and why this distinction truly matters, is where one looks for the assurance of their salvation. Again, a Christian focused on what choice they made either for or against God will be constantly looking to their own will, to their own actions, to their own good works for the assurance that they indeed made the right choice.

In contrast, a Lutheran knows they could never make that choice on their own. Therefore, we will always look only to Christ and the gracious choice he made for us. How do you know you're saved? Well, it's not because of anything you've done, rather it's because of what Christ has done for you. You have been washed clean by his blood in your Baptism. You have received his Word into your ears and into your heart, as you're doing right now. You have received his body and blood upon your lips in the Lord's Supper.

Jesus has died for your sins and risen again to give you eternal life. And he will come again one day to raise you from the dead and welcome you into his new creation. And even now, he continually comes to you and connects you to his death and resurrection by the means of grace, by his Word and Sacraments. You are saved because of all that Christ has done and continues to do for you. You are saved because it was the will of God to choose you in Christ, not only before you were born, but before the very foundation of the world. How do you know you're saved? Don't look to yourself. Look only to Christ.

The second big question that typically comes up at this point is called in Latin the "crux theologorum," the cross of theology; it is the ultimate question: why are some saved and not others? Why do some receive by faith the mercy and grace of God when they hear his Word and receive his Sacraments, and why do others reject all of it and turn away?

And this is where we must humbly admit that we cannot know the answer to that question. We know many things, such as that all human beings are sinful and undeserving of God's grace. That none of us deserve the mercy and grace of God, and yet he so insistently and faithfully provides it to us so that we may be saved. But as to why some receive this gift in joy while others do not we cannot say. To try to say more than what Scripture says, which does not provide us this answer, would be a mistake and can only lead us into error. It's an attempt to plumb the depths of God's mind and wisdom and understanding, which we obviously cannot know.

Instead, God has provided us the only sufficient answer to which we must continually return and cling on to, and that's the answer of Jesus Christ, his Son. It's the answer the Apostle Paul is providing us in Ephesians chapter 1, that while you may not be given the answer as to why God in his wisdom allows some to reject his grace while others receive it, you do know with 100% certainty what God has done for you. And this is a critical point. Whenever predestination is mentioned or talked about in the Bible, it is always in reference to God's salvation, never to his condemnation of sinners.

And that gives us an important clue as to how we are to understand the doctrine of predestination. It can be horribly misused by someone to give them false assurance, saying, "Well, I know I'm one of the elect, so I can live however I want now." Or it can be misused by someone else looking to their own works, saying, "The only way I can know I'm one of the elect is by my good works, so I better get busy." Or, it can also be misused causing someone deep despair, saying, "I'll never know if I'm one of the elect; I'll never how God feels about me."

But again, predestination is never used in any of those ways. It is only ever given as a message of the purest Gospel in Scripture. It's meant to draw our attention away from trying to find assurance of our salvation in our works of the Law, or in our own reason, or in our own will, and instead it assures us that not only has God chosen us to be saved, but that this was God's plan in Christ all along. That God is so very much in control, that nothing in heaven or on earth can thwart his plan for you. That he chose you not only before you could ever choose him, but that he chose you before the world was even made. *That's* the comfort of the doctrine of predestination. And that's the *only* way Scripture and our own Lutheran Confessions guide us to talk about it.

Now, I'll be the first to admit, today, we just took a difficult theological journey. A necessary one, and an important one for our faith, but a difficult journey nonetheless. But in conclusion today, I'd like to leave you with the way Paul talks about predestination in his letter to the Ephesians.

You see, he is writing to the Ephesians and praises God and gives him glory for revealing the mystery of his will for us in Jesus Christ. This mystery of predestination is a proclamation of good news for you. The good news that was revealed to us at Christmas, and will continue to be revealed in Epiphany. That the Son of God came and lived, died, and rose again for you, and he has given this gift to all nations and to all people. That he has given this gift to you just as he planned it. And nothing will ever be able to separate you from the love that the God of the universe has for you in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Is predestination a mystery of the faith? Absolutely. But it's one of those wonderful mysteries we get to ponder now in this season of Christmas, and ponder for all eternity, as we look forward to our forever life with him. In Jesus' name. **Amen.**

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. **Amen.**