Ecclesiastes 3:9-15, John 6:60-71

“A difficult teaching”

For some of us we had a romantic candlelight evening without power a few nights back. But yesterday morning I came to find out about barns being torn off the ground and roofs coming off and livestock killed, kids and parents trapped under a collapsed gazebo. A bomb goes off in Beirut in the Christian section of town and all we hear is about the prominent Lebanese official who was killed, and not the Christians of that region who are now terrified that they will be targeted as a result. They were just in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Yesterday I presided over a funeral for a 41 year old woman who had a 17 year old and a 15 year old son. The oldest boy couldn’t take his eyes off of me during the service, just trying to hear something that might make sense of what he was going through. I couldn’t just simply say that the death of his mom was meant to be, or that it was part of God’s plan. At that moment, while I fully believe that God is in control, those types of clichés don’t really work. Do we believe that God is powerful enough and cares enough about everything that all of these negative events fold into a plan beyond our understanding? Absolutely. This difficult teaching that we are going to see today is called predestination. Mark Twain who was raised a Presbyterian showed up to get his honorary degree from Oxford University in a tuxedo instead of the customary cap and gown. At the time he said: “I feel as out of place here as Presbyterian in hell.” He was alluding the this difficult teaching of predestination wrongly interpreted that we think we are saved just because we are predestined to salvation.

Before we get to Scripture I like to describe the understanding of predestination as each of us goes through life hearing events in our lives as notes that are played. Some are beautiful and melodic notes such as births and marriages, others are discordant notes that are jarring and dissonant such as deaths, broken relationships. These are the notes that the Stephen Ministers are trained to walk alongside with us and bring us back to the score. We have no idea how these notes go together. Sometimes when we look back over our life we can see the melody that is created, but we don’t see it in the present nor the future. God holds the sheet music, he holds the score, he knows how all these individual notes in our lives are able to be put together to make the most beautiful music that will eventually lead to his glory. We can choose to go off the score, play whatever notes we want to play. We can choose to not pay attention to the conductor, the one who holds all off the music, but he is always trying to bring us back.

Predestination is one of those central tenets of our Presbyterian Christian faith and one of the main reasons why I am Presbyterian. But it has been terribly misrepresented and people have talked badly about it so let’s clear it up today in our Ecclesiastes and John Scriptures.

**READ**

I looked online for some predestination jokes and I was shocked by the angry discussions and the woeful misunderstanding of its theology. The only good one I could find was: How many Presbyterians does it take to change a lightbulb? None, because they believe that God had predestined for it to go out. Ecclesiastes gives us a great starting point to understand this hard teaching. Ecclesiastes is thought to be the words of Solomon, King David’s son who wasa able to see the hand of God in his Father’s life and in his own life. The verses before our reading are ones you know: for everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven. A time to be born, a time to die, a time for war, and a time for peace.

Verse 11 in our reading tells us that it is God himself that makes everything suitable for its time. We don’t know why these things happen when they do, but our Scripture tells us that God does and we don’t have to. Over and over in these verses we read how God does, or is the one who makes things happen. Vs. 10, God has given to everyone, vs. 11 God has done, vs. 13, God’s gift, vs. 14 god does 2 times and the reason why God does is so that all can stand in awe of him.

The cornerstone chapter and verses for Predestination is found in Romans 9 that repeats this theme of God doing and God having every right to do it. Paul states in Romans 9: who are you, a human being, to argue with God? Then again he states: Has the potter no right over the clay? This understanding of predestination revolves around the term providence of God where we believe that God has all things under control. It allows us to hear and believe. Romans 8:28 puts it this way when Paul tells us that “All things work for good for those who believe.”

The misinterpretation of predestination takes us away from the providence or control of God to complain about the fact that we don’t have a say. That’s what we read in the German theologians who objected to this theology of predestination that they see it as God not leaving us with any choice. This humanistic objection only points to the constant theme of our sin which is that we always want to put ourselves in the place of God. It is always one of our greatest temptations.

Speaking about complaining, let’s go to our John Scripture. We find ourselves after a long teaching by Jesus where he tells the crowd following him that he is able to provide for them eternal life. This rabbi of theirs was willing to make this audacious claim. As a result his disciples say: this teaching is difficult. In the Greek he uses the term skleros to mean difficult. But it actually means hard, but hard in a sense that this will inevitably lead to something negative. MS, multiple sclerosis uses this same term to describe the hardening of the synapses that leads eventually to death. This teaching of Jesus was so hard that it was bound to lead people away.

As a result we read, in fact, that many turned and left him because this was a hard or difficult teaching. Thousands left him, and we know this because he is left with only his 12 disciples. But what was this hard teaching of Jesus? Vs. 65 Jesus states that no one can come to him unless it is granted by the Father. God the Father had already chosen you to follow me. Faith is a gift that is given by God, this is central to our understanding of predestination. For God so loved the world. God has given faith to all, but not all choose to open that gift which is faith.

Karl Barth explains it this way, he states that God has predestined, it is God’s destiny, it is His desire, that all come to know Him and He has given all of us the faith that we need to pursue him. Let’s say we all get on the train that goes from Lancaster to Philly. We know that the final destination is Philly and that it is not going to get off those tracks. We can choose to get off it if we want, but that train, if we stay on, it will lead us to Philly. The love train, people join hands.

Jesus turns to his disciples after the thousands of people had left, and asked them: do you also want to leave? Peter responds, almost as if he gets that God is in control and guarding and directing this whole process, he says: where else can we go? You are the holy one. Stay with me here now, Jesus, then says, yes I chose you to follow me. The disciples were chosen by God, they didn’t choose to follow Jesus, even if Jesus did say follow me and I will make you fishers of men.

Even Judas was chosen. This is really where the joy and the promise of predestination shine forth. Judas is mentioned by Jesus as someone that he knew all along, even before Satan enters his heart in chapter 10, that he would betray him. But he still chooses him as a disciple, I think he does this hoping beyond hope that Judas would soften his hardened heart and turn to Jesus for the words of life and salvation. Had he done that God would have changed his mind.

God predestined the destruction of the Ninneveh but the repentance of the kind and the people changed God’s mind for their salvation. Likewise God was going to destroy Jerusalem but saw David and his elders in sackcloth and ashes and changed his mind and saved Jerusalem. Can you imagine a co-worker that you know has it in for you, to the point where he is plotting your murder, yet you choose him to be a part of the team hoping that just by him spending some time with you he might think differently of it. You just want to give him a chance.

The providence of God always places us in a place where we are able to hear Jesus’ words of eternal life. The Presbyterian Church here in Strasburg has faithfully served our savior for 180 years. Our denomination, the Presbyterian Church (USA) is like our parents who from afar at times watch their grown child. At this time in our life as a church we see our parents making decisions that many of us feel are unwise in the area of human sexuality.

In a couple of weeks your session will be having a conversation about what is happening in our denomination that has caused 5 churches to leave, half a dozen already have made steps to leave, and as many are requesting to begin that journey as well. One of the greatest joys of being a missionary in Russia for this denomination was that we spent zero time discussing these issues and 100% of our time on issues of feeding the hungry, clothing the destitute, and providing shelter for those with absolutely nothing. We spent all of our time addressing real problems that Jesus constantly addressed in his teachings. This issue of human sexuality is not a salvation issue and these conversations are a waste of time in my book.

I feel like Peter wanting to cry out to our Lord, where can we go? I heard the words of eternal life in the Presbyterian Church, the fundamental teaching and the issues that Jesus addressed more than any others such as poverty and justice are still being preached and taught in this church and no one is stopping us from doing that. This denomination has survived the sin of slavery, this church has survived the battle between the fundamentalists and the modernists in the 1920’s, it has survived the destructive 60’s. I don’t want to wake up as your pastor 50 years from now saying we left over what? I would rather be a thorn in the side of an apostate denomination than disconnected vagabonds who look to pick up and run at the first sight of trouble.

We can and always will be able to do our work here for Jesus even if our parents choose to go on a different path. God’s hand is at play and right now it is not clear at all in what direction he is leading us, but we are called to stay.

You know, predestination, the fact that God has chosen for you to be his child, becomes especially real in the frailty of life. Isaiah 40:6-8 tells us that flesh is as grass, but the Word of the Lord endures forever. The Stephen Ministers are the best trained lay people in this church. They provide a presence that is none other than the presence of God accompanying them.

The Bible speaks so clearly to a providential God and its converse stubborn human will driven by our selfish desires. When we step outside of God’s plan for our life, and make no mistake we can and we do, early and often, when we play that wrong note on purpose, then we will inevitably reap the rewards and miss out on eternal life.

Predestination is a gift from God which allows us the peace of mind to know that God has chosen well before we could choose God and it provides us with an assurance of salvation that no other doctrine or theology or dogma can provide. I’ve never wondered if God loves me or if my salvation is intact which then frees me to spend every waking moment seeing him without worrying about myself, and without thinking about myself. I want the same for all of you. Turn to Jesus and unwrap that gift of faith and see how this hard teaching of predestination actually becomes an asset and a freeing reality in your life. Amen.