

Sermon Text for September 3, 2017

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Psalm 139:13-18, Romans 8:29-30

“Do we have to talk about predestination?”

There is something about a sermon once it leaves the speakers mouth that it can fairly quickly take on a life of its own. Last Sunday we heard the greatest promise in all of Scripture, and no sooner had it been uttered, that it was immediately put to the test. I have to confess that throughout this whole week as we have followed from a distance the devastation that Hurricane Harvey wreaked a voice came from within me that asked the question: what good can come of that? People are still far away from home and each one of us feels a sense of promise that is there, but the reality is still raw, but the promise lingers and does not disappear. We know that God is working, actively working, even in the brokenness of the situation.

You see, either you make the promises of Scripture a way of life, either you can look to them and rely upon them or you will find yourself afloat with nothing to hang on to while the tempests of life batter you. Paul's writings today in Romans take us away from the promises to the Christian sufferers to the promises to Christians of our time. We go from the real practical application of our faith to a term that pastor's try to avoid mentioning like the plague. It would have been so easy for me to skip over these next two verses in Romans and go on, no one would have notice. But Paul uses the word predestined to describe who we are as Christians. Presbyterians have been accused of making this word up, but here you can see it clear as day before you written by the Apostle Paul in our Scripture for today. We don't even have a monopoly on it.

Paul tells us that instead of seeing predestination as something to fear, rejoice and celebrate it because God has called us and set us apart as Christians called to a specific duty, and not to be complacent in our position as children of God.

READ SCRIPTURE

We had a great time at our annual church picnic. We had a great crowd, great food, there was bingo and the team of McComsey and Hess won the cornhole tournament but the Allisons, and specifically Jackson Allison who carried his father into the finals stole the show. Some would say they were predestined to win.

Most people understand predestination as the belief that God holds all the cards and that we have no free will and no say in how our life will be played out. Since God knows all things, what difference does it make what you do? Might as well do what Solomon says, eat drink and be merry. Nobody is allowed to leave at this point in the sermon. There is more to it. But even psalm 139 would tend to make you think along those lines. Listen again to verse 16: In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed. There is a definite approach that God certainly knows and hence controls all things down to how many days, hours and minutes we are going to live.

I had a chance to do some leisurely reading this week so I picked up Jonathan Edwards and read his famous sermon, probably the most famous sermon ever preached, called: Sinners in the hands of an angry God. He says, much like psalm 139 states that we are all on the brink of eternity. Each one of us without even realizing it is walking tip toe along a ridge that can send us plunging head down to the abyss and only by God's grace are we held up. Implying that when God's grace is removed, that is when we tumble to our last day. Hideous, scary thoughts, but effective in scaring the love of Jesus into someone. When our day comes, and God knows when that day is, it comes suddenly and we have not control over it.

But we have come a long way from Jonathan Edwards and we certainly do believe that within God's plan and within the predestined course of history we certainly do have free will. Verse 17 of psalm 139 states: How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them. We cannot understand how it all works and we have to be content understanding that we do not know all that God knows, for if we did, we would be God. The fact remains that we do have free will even within the plans of God. Look at history and it will tell you as much.

You see predestination does not refer to a limitation on our freedom, nor a random decision by God to limit salvation. Predestination does not point to an angry and harsh God who says at the beginning of time, you're in and you're out and there is nothing you can do about it. Rather, Paul's understanding of predestination is the fact that God knows the end to which creation will come. God knows that he will win and that all of creation will be redeemed through his son Jesus Christ. God predestined victory. That is what he refers to in Romans.

The verses in Romans point to hope and glory as opposed to damnation and fear. We are used to quite the opposite. But did you hear a single word of judgment in these verses, the clearest verses on predestination in the Scriptures? Rather, it is filled with hope. You see the Greek for predestination is prognosis, or to tell what lies ahead of time, to know what is happening ahead. Listen to the glory that is predicted. **READ** Read all the verses. There is nothing negative.

Quite the opposite. We are reminded that each one of us is made in the image of God and that when Christ comes again that image will be rediscovered. That was God's plan for all of humanity since the beginning of time to be made in God's image. Even before we were born we were made in God's image.

There is more good news about what God has in store for us, as brothers and sisters in Christ we have a big brother, a first born named Jesus Christ. Each one of us is going to be judged when we fall off that impending cliff according to what Christ did for us. We will all ride on his coat tails. Thank God for that! The glory of predestination is simply that the future is not ultimately in our hands, but in God's hands. What was that? I thought I heard something fall. I did, it was that burden, that weight you have been carrying trying to do it all yourself because you feel like it is all up to you, it's not. It doesn't depend on us, but on God. All things work for good not because of us, often in spite of us, but because of God.

Within this glory of predestination one could go a couple of different ways. One could say, well since it's not up to me I'm going to float in the pool all day and not do a thing. I call that the Dustin Hoffman approach. Paul doesn't let us be complacent. This next verse has been crucial over history in forming what Max Weber called the Protestant work ethic. Those whom he predestined, he also called. This term called has a specific meaning of someone who is required to go out and do something specific for God. We are all called to a specific task upon this earth. With this being Labor Day weekend we ought to understand that our calling always involves work. It always involves our hands and our minds being productive.

This is true from the youngest to the oldest. Every single person here is called to a specific task in order to advance the kingdom of God, that predestined time when we can celebrate. Each one of us is called. This past week the person came into church who was responsible to spray the church for insects. We spoke for a while when he was in my office and he said something like: God sure has called you to an important work. I

looked at him and said, you know what is unique about being a Presbyterian? We believe that God has called each of us to important work, no matter who you are. It doesn't matter if you are a pastor or an insect killer. It doesn't matter if you are a lawyer or a waitress. It doesn't matter if you are a single mom or a dad with a wife and 3 kids. Each person is called and has a job to do.

You cannot feel called to come to church. That is not an end. Church is a means by which you can fill up in order to do your call. Every single person here ought to be involved in some ministry, in some program of the church because we have all been called. How are you involved in the life of the church? What work are you performing to ensure that God is being glorified through your life in this church? There are so many ways to do that now that the new year is starting up.

I don't know about you, but I want to count myself in that number when the saints come marching in, and I am sure that you do too. Amen.