

## "Drawn by God"

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First Presbyterian Church  
Sunday, September 2, 2012

**Old Testament Lesson - Psalm 130**

**New Testament Lesson – John 6:35, 41-47**

In his article "The Wilderness Word of God,"<sup>1</sup> George E. Ross tells of visiting a church member in the hospital. "The word from the doctor was not good," says Ross. "The days ahead for him are hidden in a cloud, but in that cloud there is a glory, and already he is living in it." Ross could tell this because of a note that was pinned to the church member's pillow by the night nurse while he slept. "I did not want to wake you," she had written, "but I want to thank you for our talk last night. It meant more to me than I can tell you." The talk was about her life, her sorrows, and some of the tragedies that had come her way, and of her many, many years away from God. ... (The church member) Out of his faith and through his waves of pain, spoke simply of the Lord he knows and trusts and loves." And this led Ross to believe that "in the wilderness of that night ... at (the hospital, the Word of God came." The question is, was it truly heard? Did the night nurse come to know God in the words that were shared with her? Based on the note she pinned to the pillow, it would seem so. But in the end, God only knows if she was really drawn to believe after spending years away from God.

In our New Testament lesson, we heard these familiar words from Jesus: "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." And while we may be drawn to such life-giving words, the crowd gathered around Jesus that day began to complain. They said, 'Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I have come down from heaven?' And notice how Jesus responds? Although the crowd questions His identity, Jesus doesn't answer their questions and concerns directly. Instead, he explains why it is that they are complaining in the first place; They can't relate to what he's saying. He says, "No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day." In other words, Jesus says to the crowd – those who John refers to loosely as "the Jews" – he says, those who are drawn by God will have salvation and those who are not, will not.

So does this mean that some are predestined for salvation and others are not? Some say 'yes' and some say 'no'.

Last week in our Sunday School Forum, our speaker, Leigh Gillis, from Heartland Presbytery, mentioned that many people confuse predestination with fate. Some believe that God has already laid out everything that will

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<sup>1</sup> December 8, 1985.

happen in a person's life. Ad whether you believe in fate or not, the Rev. Gillis explained that fate is not what is meant by predestination. But Presbyterians are often linked to a similar understanding of predestination, the concept of "double predestination." Double\_Predetermination means that God has chosen in advance some for salvation and others for damnation, and there's nothing we can do about it. Is that true? Yes, no? Not sure? Well, let's see what Jesus has to say about it. When Jesus said that "no one can come to me unless drawn by God the Father who sent me," the question of predestination actually hinges on the words "*drawn by God.*" Do those words mean that God calls some to Jesus Christ and thus to salvation? And that others – those who are not drawn by God and thus can not come to Jesus – that those others are not called by God, or worse yet, are refused access to the salvation of Jesus Christ? You probably have an answer for that; whether that's true or not. Each of us believes in our heart of hearts something about whether God calls all people to salvation, or whether God calls some and not others.

The newly revised Presbyterian Book of Order – which details our beliefs as Presbyterians – begins with this assertion: "The good news of the Gospel is that the triune God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – creates, redeems, sustains, rules, and transforms all things and all people." Redeems all people. So what are we to make of Jesus' statement that those who are not drawn by God cannot come to Christ, and thus receive salvation? When our Book of Order – and perhaps own our heart of hearts – tells us that "God ... redeems ... all people," how then does the redemption of all people fit with our understanding of predestination? The concept of predestination was developed by John Calvin, who laid the foundation of the Reformed Tradition that gave rise to Presbyterianism. And Calvin says "All events are governed by God's secret plan," "nothing happens except what is knowingly and willingly decreed by God."<sup>2</sup> Seems pretty simple, doesn't it? If you believe in God, it's because God decreed it, and it seems if you don't believe, than God decreed that too. But our faith is not that simple.

Another theologian, Karl Barth, responded to Calvin's concept of predestination by saying, yes, "the activity of God is 'as (supreme and absolute) as Calvinist teaching describes it,' but (God's power) must always be understood in the light of God's revelation in Christ."<sup>3</sup>

In other words, it can't be that whatever happens was ordained by God, because bad, evil, and sinful things do in fact happen, and yet Christ shows us that God is supreme goodness. Which kind of leaves us stuck between heaven and hell, doesn't it? And in fact, that's often where we are – between the heaven of God's will for our lives and the hell of our own choosing. But the good news is that we're not alone there. God is always with us.

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<sup>2</sup> Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, 1.16.2, 3.

<sup>3</sup> Migliore, Daniel, Faith Seeking Understanding, 108.

God accompanies us throughout life, At Princeton Seminary, I studied under a professor named Dan Migliore. In his book "Faith Seeking Understanding." Migliore writes, "God accompanies (us, and this means) that God recognizes and respects (our) free activity ... and does not play the part of a tyrant." Migliore says that instead of forcing God's will upon us, "God rules over all things by guiding creation to its goal..." which is accomplished "by God's Word and Spirit, and not by unilateral and coercive power." So if God seeks to draw all people to faith through the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what gets in the way for those who don't believe? Well, if it's not God, then it must be us, human beings, God's own children. We get in the way of God's desire for only goodness in the world and that all people would know and trust in the Lord.

Let's face it, sometimes we're just too self-absorbed to hear it when God is speaking to us, drawing us toward a deeper faith.

Consider what Tony Kornheiser writes in his article "This Home Was Made For Walkers."<sup>4</sup>

"My visit with my dad was great," writes Kornheiser. "I was there four days, bunking in his old apartment not far from the retirement home. So I was able to sit by the pool and plug into all the old, familiar conversations about the Holy Trinity of retirement – food, money and major medical.

Here is a typical conversation at the Sands Point condominium:

"Did you see where an egg omelet costs \$8.99 now? It used to cost \$2.99. It's just three eggs. (What...,) chickens have a union now?"

"I can't eat eggs. Too much cholesterol. My stocks should ... be as high as my cholesterol. I can eat Egg Beaters. But for what Egg Beaters cost, I can buy a new car." "My Sonny just bought a Lexus. I wouldn't tell you what it costs – 51 thou(sand), with the heated seats. I remember when all we got from Japan fell apart in our hands." "Is something wrong with your hands? Mine are killing me. These pills I get from the Medicare, they don't help at all. They're so big; they're like horseshoes. Who can eat pills like this?" "Okay, you convinced me. Let's eat."

In all of that back and forth – which you've got to admit sounds like any number of the dozens of conversations we have everyday – in all the self-centered back and forth of that conversation, could God even get a word in edgewise? Not likely. Except maybe about the cholesterol – God wants you to watch your cholesterol. AND, God wants you to know the grace and peace and salvation of Christ, not only you but all people; all of creation. Jesus assures us of this by repeating what "... is written in the prophets (quote), 'And they shall all be taught by God.'" To which Jesus adds, "Everyone who has heard and learned from (God) the Father comes to me." When Jesus says "everyone who has heard and learned..." – hearing and learning are active things that we must do. Jesus doesn't say "everyone to whom God has spoken and taught comes to me," as if God only speaks to and provides for certain people.

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<sup>4</sup> The Washington Post, February 13, 2000, F1.

It is our choice whether to listen to God's word and be taught by the witness of Jesus Christ. And Jesus himself underscores this when he says at the end of our reading for today, "Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life". Belief in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior is available to all people. As for those who don't believe or can't profess such faith, well, let's take that up in next week's sermon. Is it possible for people of other faiths to have salvation in Jesus Christ? What about those who reject Christ?

Let's hold those questions for now, and instead show and take this time to affirm what it is that we believe through our common faith as we prepare to come to the Table of the Lord; open to anyone, any of you here today – member, visitor, or guest – access to communion and salvation to anyone who professes in word and deed Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. But first, our thanks offering.

### **PASTORAL PRAYER**

God of all, we thank you for this place of worship and this time of prayer. We are thankful for our health, and grateful we are able to be here. And we want so much to help others to know you and experience your grace and peace, but sometimes we just do not know what to say. Help us to be focused on the life of your Son so that by his example, we might faithfully reflect your love in service to others.

Breathe on us the breath of new life; break down the walls of our resistance, O God, so that we might do what you would have us do. And when we pause in our labors, use that time of holiday and rest to instill in us enthusiasm for when we return to our tasks. Enliven our ordinary moments into occasions for worship and joy as we serve you in all that we do. And for those who find joy hard to come by, those how are ill and for those who care for them, surround them with your loving and healing presence.

Jesus, we are hungry for your presence, for the bread of life and the living water that you give. When our lack of faith prevents us from hearing your word and receiving your gifts, unblock our senses. Help us to enter into a place of peace, confidence, and wisdom – a place that comes into view as we pray the words that you taught us, saying together:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.