

“The ‘P’ Word”
Romans 8:18-30/Mark 4:1-9
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By Rev. Dr. Glenn Hink

I. Introduction

I really didn't have much of a choice. We are a Presbyterian Church with a history of a particular theological tradition. And we happen to be in Romans 8 in our preaching series. And to cap it off.....it happens to be Reformation Sunday today. So, we need to think a little about the great Presbyterian 'P' word; Predestination. Yep.....predestination.

Predestination can make us feel a little squirmy. It feels hard, cold, stern and judgmental. It feels like an old word, an out-dated word, a word from another day.....a word that's gone the way of percolated coffee, three channels on the television, and a simple tax code. Predestination, it's usually connected to Presbyterian history, but it doesn't seem to connect to modern life and modern belief about God.

But what I'd like us to do this morning is to set aside what we know, or what we think we know, about predestination, and listen to our text from Romans 8. I think we may find that predestination has a lot more for us than what we think, because it's really about hope.

II. Text and Brief Exegesis

On Reformation Sunday, with a Reformed theological text, I'd like to do a very Reformed thing; I'd like to do a teaching, or didactic, sermon. So what I'll do is read some of the text, make some brief comments on it, and then repeat the process. Remember Romans is about God's grace, salvation and faith. This specific text from Romans 8 addresses grace, salvation, faith and the future.

A. Read Romans 8:18-25.

As the 20th C dawned 100 years ago there was a great Christian hope. As mainline Christians looked forward they dared to call the century before them “the Christian century.” They were certain that Christian faith would reform and shape the culture into a great society. They were certain that Christian social action would right the wrongs, and end the sufferings. Charles Sheldon's book, In His Steps (1897), which advocated Christian social action, “walking in Jesus' steps,” (and was the forerunner to the “What Would Jesus Do” bracelets of our day), was a best seller.

The 20th C, however, was anything but a Christian century for Americans. There were the trenches and mustard gas of WWI. There was the grinding desperation of the

Great Depression, and another world war, WWII. There were nuclear weapons tests, the Cuban missile crisis and the Cold War. Segregation and racism finally gave way to the struggle of civil rights. The 60's and early 70's were shaped by the war in Viet Nam, a generational rebellion, and an emerging drug culture. And Michael Douglas as Gordon Gekko in the movie "Wall Street" dared to speak the truth lived by many when he said, "Greed is good." So as the century drew to a close, and mainline churches became increasingly marginalized, no one was saying "a Christian century" any more.

As a result the Christian "good news or gospel," began to go a different direction for many people. The culture was a mess, so salvation became more about "me" than the whole creation. The culture was a mess, so salvation became more about an "escape" (going to heaven), than the transformation of the world around us. The culture was a mess, so salvation was more about the future coming of Jesus, than the current presence of Jesus. It was hard to connect salvation and real life around us, so there was a type of "giving up and looking elsewhere." As a result salvation became more about "going to heaven when I die, or when Jesus returns, whatever happens first," and less about God's redemptive plan in Jesus Christ for all creation.

But in this text from Romans 8 we see there is no "giving up" or "getting out of here" with Paul. Rather, he recognizes the real suffering in life; it's part of the created order. And then he does a surprising thing.....he recognizes the suffering and groaning of all creation. We are part of the whole created order which longingly awaits the glory of the new creation. The good news of God's salvation is about the transformation of all creation....including human beings...but not only human beings.

This hope for the future is greater than the challenges and sufferings of our day. It is bigger and deeper and better than "going to heaven when I die." It is about the redemption and transformation of all creation into the new heaven and earth. It is the well-known "Parable of the Sower" (Mark 4:1-9) writ large; small, seemingly futile beginnings and sowing, come to produce fruit beyond any and all expectations in the end. In the meantime, we hope, and have the presence of God's Holy Spirit with us.

Why does this matter? Why does our belief about salvation and the end of things matter? It matters because what we believe about the end shapes our choices about now. Or if you want the good Presbyterian theological terms, our eschatology (belief about last things) shapes our ethics. I worked hard to learn Hebrew in seminary because I believed that one day it might be helpful as a pastor and preacher. I plant a small vegetable garden in the spring because I believe it will grow and produce beans, peppers and tomatoes better than the store. I have the oil and filters changed in my car regularly because I believe I can get 200,000 miles on it. What we believe about the future shapes our choices now.

If I believe salvation is only about “going to heaven,” then it’s primarily about me and my future. But if I believe that salvation is about God’s redemption of all of creation, and all people, then I’m working for justice, then I’m sharing the gospel, then I’m caring for people, then I’m doing mission, then I’m caring for the earth.....then I’m following Jesus.

Now the rest of the text in Romans with that ‘P’ word.....

B. Read Romans 8:26-30

Let’s start by making clear what predestination is not. It is not “pre-determinism.” God is not a master puppeteer pulling all the strings. We have free will. God’s love for us requires that we have freedom. God’s great hope is that we will choose to love God and neighbor. But we are free. Love can only happen in the context of freedom. And predestination is not God destining some to heaven and some to hell; called “double predestination.” I understand that to be an extreme and errant form of predestination that claims to know more about the mystery and purposes of God than anyone can know.

Rather predestination is a hope and an assurance. It is a belief that our future with God is secure because it is in God’s hands, and not ours. If the future redemption of creation was in our hands we’d only “muck it up,” as we do so many other things. It’s only because God is active in creation, guiding it to God’s “pre-destined” future, that we can believe our redemption is sure.

Predestination is not some type of empty-headed naiveté. Rather when we are knocked down by suffering and evil, we stand up again believing that in the end God’s redemption will be the last word, and so we choose to live with faith, hope and love. It is the belief that all things will finally be resolved into good. In spite of the mess of the 20th C, and the challenges of our lives now, it is an optimism about the future that in the end “God’s love wins.”

God has acted in Christ for the salvation of all. Predestination is God’s knowledge and purpose to bring all of the creation to that final salvation. It is the “pre-destiny” of creation firmly set by God.

The ‘P’ word, predestination, is about hope.....hope and assurance in God. And that would be a good thing in our uncertain world today.

IV. Final Reflection

In the northeast corner of the state of Washington the Columbia River crosses over from Canada. It is where I grew up. The Columbia River there is wide, deep and wild. It flows briskly. Logs are still floated down it to lumber mills. House boats struggle to come up it. We water skied on it, but we always had to watch for stray logs and whirl pools. People fished on it for walleyes, rainbows, and 100 year old sturgeon. It would never freeze over in the winter because it flowed too fast, but chunks of ice as big as cars could be seen coming down from Canada. Down river hundreds of miles the river would turn the turbines at the Grand Coulee Dam. And behind the dam was the great Lake Roosevelt reservoir, supplying water to orchards in the middle of the state. In the end the Columbia River flows into the Pacific Ocean, supplying more water to that ocean than any other river in North or South America. And it seemed to me as I walked along the river as a kid, and watched the sticks that I threw in get pulled down the river in the current, that though the river might be used for a number of things, it had one, great destination; the ocean. And in the end, all things in the Columbia River were part of the great flow toward that destination.

I think that predestination is, maybe, like that. Now, where we live, creation and life are wild and unpredictable. Crazy things happen, both joyful and tragic. There are eddies, hazards and backwaters. Some things can float of the surface, and some are dangerous. But in the end, all things are part of a great flow of the river toward a great destination; God's salvation for all creation. Predestination is the assurance and hope that this destination is in the sure plans of God, and it is good.

Early 20th C novelist Thomas Wolfe was not a traditional person of Christian faith. However, as he sensed the coming end of his life, he wrote these words of hope toward the end of his last book, entitled You Can't Go Home Again:

"To lose the earth you know, for greater knowing; to lose the life you have, for greater life; to leave the friends you loved , for greater loving; to find a land more kind than home, more large than earth.....whereon the pillars of this earth are founded, toward which conscience of the world is tending...a wind is rising, and the rivers flow."

The great flow of all things to a destination that is deeper, wider and richer....God's good end....that is predestination.