

“Before the Foundation of the World”

Ephesians 1: 1-14

Proper 10B, Boise, 2021

The lectionary we use for our readings on Sundays schedules “course readings” for both the Epistle and the Gospel. That is to say, the readings are sequential over particular stretches of the year, taking us through books of Scripture with selected passages. This Christian year, we have been going through St Mark on the Gospel track. We went through about a third of The Acts of the Apostles in Eastertide. And today on the Epistle track, we begin St Paul’s Epistle to the Ephesians. I will now, in my sermons, hop off the Gospel track and onto the Epistle track for a tour through Ephesians, which has only six chapters. When we have done, at the end of August, I will hop back onto the Gospel track and resume preaching on Mark.

There is one other thing you should know before I begin, if you don’t know it already. The passage read for the Gospel usually sets the theme for the day. So in our first reading today, from Amos, we have this statement made by the prophet to the king of Israel:

I was no prophet, nor a prophet’s son, but I was a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore figs. But the LORD took me from following the flock, and the LORD said to me, “Go, prophesy to my people Israel” [Amos 7: 14-15].

And that sets us up for the Gospel, which the deacon reads later, in which Jesus, the Divine Son, sends out His disciples on their first mission. If I were to preach on this “sending” theme, set by the Gospel, I would schedule a hymn about answering the call to be His disciple, a call Our Lord makes to each of us.

But right now I am not doing that. The Epistle track gives us a course of readings from Ephesians, which is independent from the course readings we are doing on the Gospel track from Mark. Unlike the OT reading from Amos, the opening passage of the Epistle to the Ephesians has not been selected to

support or lead up to the Gospel. The passage leads only to the next one we read from Ephesians next Sunday. That's the way course reading works. So, by all means, pay attention to the subject of the Gospel and the support given to it by the OT reading and sometimes also the Psalm. You don't need a sermon to feel the impact of God's Word. If you concentrate, you will feel it. But my sermons the next several weeks will have the aim of helping you understand the Apostle's Letter to the Ephesians, which is not coordinated with the other readings.

First, a few general remarks about the Epistle. St Paul wrote it during his captivity in Rome to a congregation he had spent three years with, in the Greek-speaking city of Ephesus, on the coast of modern-day Turkey. You can visit its ruins today. The letter is unusual for its author in that it was not written to advise its recipients in working through some difficulty in the congregation or in solving particular problems. It is the only writing of Paul's that gives a general presentation of his teaching, a teaching oriented mainly to Gentile audiences. We may consider the letter, then, a condensed summary of Pauline theology. It is intended to answer the question, in a comprehensive though concise way, What is the Gospel, the Good News about God's Son, Jesus the Messiah? Why do you need it? How can it make your life better?

Big questions and important answers — but, as many of you have discovered, Paul is not easy to read. In the Greek text, the passage we read this morning, after we passed the initial greeting, consists of one very long sentence with clause piled upon clause. Our modern English translation mercifully breaks up that sentence into three shorter ones, yet they are still long by today's standards. The long Greek sentence begins as a thanksgiving: "Blessed be the God and Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in heavenly places, even as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world." Here in this Epistle, the Apostle takes the long view of salvation, linking what has been done for us at specific moments in time — the

Incarnation, Crucifixion, etc. — with God’s eternal Being. We are used to hearing about salvation eschatologically, what it will achieve for us at the end of our course in this life, or at the Last Judgment which Christ will administer, following His Second Coming. But Paul extends God’s saving action in the other direction also. He traces redemption back to the beginning of time — no, to before “the foundation of the world,” which is to say, into God’s eternity.

“In love [God] predestined us for adoption to Himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of His will.” — Yes, predestination — the word makes us nervous. But, as you can see in this and another passage in Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, it is not a doctrine that Presbyterians made up. Paul is an apostle, and so his teaching carries apostolic authority. His letters are part of the canonical NT, and so whatever doctrine is contained in them is to be received by the faithful as having the backing of Divine authority. If St Paul says that those who are part of a renewed and expanded Israel were given that destiny by Him “before the foundation of the world,” then that’s the teaching we go with. Thomas Aquinas taught the doctrine three centuries before John Calvin, and John Wesley the Arminian did as well two centuries after him. All three of them had no choice but to teach it, if they were going to make good on their claim to base their theology on Divine revelation. If something is taught in Scripture, then of course the Church must accept and teach it to its members.

But how Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin, and John Wesley explain Divine predestination and how it fits with everything else God does — that’s where we get the differences. The meaning of the word itself is clear, to set the destiny of, but the conclusions theologians have drawn from it have caused endless debate. Because each generation of believers inherits that debate begun long ago, our first instinct is to turn Paul’s teaching on the subject into a philosophical problem, even though the Apostle himself gives no hint of such. Where is his discussion, either here or in Romans, on determinism versus free will? You won’t find it. The discussion is completely absent not only in Paul’s Epistles but also in the whole of

Scripture. So might I humbly suggest that, even though the debate is one we might profitably have, it's not the best place to begin.

Paul was a Jew. His thinking was shaped by the OT Scriptures, not by Greek philosophy. The story told by the OT is mainly one of how God chose one nation to represent Him on earth and use as His instrument to redeem mankind after the Fall. Now the reason God chose Israel for that purpose is nowhere given in the OT. The only thing you'll get is that Israel was not given that honor because she deserved it more than any of the other nations. Abraham was not more righteous than the other idolaters of his day when God approached him in Mesopotamia. Furthermore, the narrative makes us well aware of his failings even after his answering the call. It is an utter mystery, then, why God chose to separate Abraham and his descendants from their idolatrous neighbors, and give them special knowledge of Himself as the Maker of Heaven and earth. God's choice of Israel among the hundreds of nations He might have chosen is wholly unexplained. It is something that Scripture simply asserts to be true. Yet the very lack of an explanation makes clear that Israel did not choose Yahweh to be her God; God chose Israel to be His people. And if it was His choice, why would He not know He was to make it "before the foundation of the world"? Why would it not already be His choice before creating and before watching the creatures made in His image turn away from Him? Now the OT does not actually say all that. Much of what I just said is implied, but perhaps you can now understand where St Paul the Christian rabbi is coming from when he explains how God broadened that election of Israel to include Gentiles after the Messiah appeared.

It seems a broadening only to us, of course, if the whole plan of redemption rests ultimately in God's eternity, the plan to save all who will accept salvation through Israel's Messiah. Yet the decision by God to include among His chosen some Gentiles after the death and Resurrection of Christ does not make the selection any less mysterious. Paul is clear that what is true for Israel in the OT is also true for non-Jews who later join Israel's believing remnant by professing faith

in Jesus Christ and receiving baptism. We did not choose God or His Son; They chose us, and the choice had nothing to do with merit. In fact, our inclusion in God's people with all the benefits that follow it most decidedly is undeserved. Why the gift has been bestowed on us and not on the other undeserving is, like God's election of Israel in the OT, an unexplained mystery. There doubtless is a reason, for God does not act in whimsical fashion, but the reason has not been disclosed. Paul has no revelation on the subject to communicate to us, and so he leaves it at that.

Well, that hardly exhausts the subject, given all the questions that have been asked and debates that occurred about it. I have only suggested how one might begin to make sense of it, considering the OT background and Paul's rabbinical training. Let us then end today with the same praise with which the Apostle begins the body of his Epistle. Our redemption is secure, not least because the redemptive action of God comes from His eternal Being. What He intended for Biblical Israel and us Gentiles who have joined her through faith in His Son will never change. "In love He predestined us for adoption to Himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of His will."

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