

Chosen by God by Rev. Murray Richmond

SECOND READING EPHESIANS 1:3-14

GOSPEL JOHN 1:(1-9) 10-18

Happy New year!

How many of you made New Year's resolutions this year? I still do, but I find that as I get older, my resolutions become...smaller and more manageable as the years go by. I used to make resolutions that would change my life. Now most of them are designed to just change my mornings.

You know what the problem is with New Year's resolutions—the year before we make them! If I were truly starting off fresh, I could easily lose that 40 pounds that I would like to lose this year. The problem is, I am not starting off fresh. I have a whole year behind me of eating ice cream in the evenings, and snacks during the day. Did I say a year? I have decades of bad behavior behind, and we all know the best indicator of future performance is past behavior!

Sometimes I wish I could go back to the very beginning...well maybe not that far back, but at least to those days when I started having a snack every evening, back when I could afford to do that, when it did not matter all that much, and explain to my past self, that my future self is REALLY going to regret this behavior!

But I can't and I have to live with who I am as well as who I was. And I cannot change who I was, but I have to deal with that to change who I am.

That is true in the life of the church. If First Church was going to make New Year's Resolutions this year, what do you think they should be? What could we as a church be doing this year that we were not doing last year? Or what should we stop doing?

Again the church has the same problem we have as individuals. Who we are is based on who we were. And we cannot escape that.

But we are not imprisoned by that either. It is not like our past determines who we will be tomorrow. Our future is not predestined by our past. Our future is predestined by God. Now that I have gone and used the P word, Predestination, I might as well spell out what I mean by

that—or more correctly, what the Bible means by it. It shows up in our readings this morning—twice in the Ephesians passage.

In verse four Paul says we were chosen by God, in Christ, before the foundation of the world, and in verse five he says we were predestined. The word chosen, by the way, means predestined.

What is Predestination? When I was studying at Duke, which is a Methodist school, I got asked a lot about that, because supposedly Presbyterians either invented Predestination, or believe in it more than other denominations. And there is a lot of confusion over that subject. This morning I want to set a few things straight, and maybe bust some myths that might be out there about Predestination.

First, Presbyterians did not invent it. It is a biblical idea. The concept is found through the Old Testament, most notably in the fact that God chose one people to be the People of God, but it is also found in the New Testament, most directly in Paul's letters.

Second, it does not mean that God directs every moment of your life. There was a Presbyterian who fell down the stairs, and thanked God he got that over with. That is not what predestination is all about. It does not mean that our entire future is controlled by God, and we are just along for the ride. It does not mean that everything that happens to you is caused by God, and it does not mean that every detail in your future is planned out, and directed by God, and you have no real choice in the matter. That is not predestination; that is something called determinism—where your future is determined by God or biology or your genes, or your environment.

As Christians we believe in free will. We have choices, real choices, and while no one can totally control their future, we believe we can make choices that affect our future.

So what is predestination?

Well, it comes from the Greek word *eklectos*, which is related to our English word “elect.” That is why predestination is called the doctrine of Election. What it simply means is that God has chosen us. Now Paul tells us, in the verses we heard this morning, that God chose us “before the foundation of the world.” Before you were born, you were chosen by God. Before your parents, or grandparents, or great-grandparents were born, you were chosen by God. Before there were human beings on this planet, you were chosen by God. Before this planet existed, you were chosen by God.

There are some Christians who like to ask if you have accepted Jesus Christ as your savior. I have had people come to my house and knock on my door to ask if I have accepted Jesus Christ as my savior.

If Presbyterians were to go door to door, and you know what you get if you cross a Presbyterian with a Jehovah's witness? Someone who is not afraid to knock on doors, but has no idea what to say when the door is open.

But, if we were to go door to door, we would not ask people if they accepted Jesus as their savior. We would ask, "Did you know that God accepted you before you were born?" For us, it is not all about US choosing God. It is about GOD choosing us. We were created and born in the love of God.

That is what predestination is, at least according to Paul. Now there are two ways to look at it. The first is that God has chosen us as individuals. In other words, before the foundation of the world, God knew MY name, and God knew YOUR name. And God chose Murray, and Angelee and Tom and Dick and Jane—but God did not choose Harry and Sally. There has been, in the history of our church a thing called Double Predestination. That is where God has chosen some to be experience salvation for the Greater Glory of God—but God has chosen some for eternal damnation, again for the Greater Glory of God. Some are saved, some are not, and it is all up to God.

When a Presbyterian minister is first ordained, they are examined by their Presbytery. Usually those are pretty friendly examinations, but not always, and there is the story of young man whose examination was very brutal. He was asked very hard questions, and every answer he gave was challenged by people in the Presbytery, and finally, toward the end, an older gentleman got up, and asked, "Son, are you willing to be damned for the Greater Glory of God."

The candidate could not resist himself, and answered, "Sir, I am willing for this entire Presbytery to be damned for the Greater Glory of God."

But there are some real problems with Double Predestination, the least of which is that we have no say in our own salvation. We might be saved or we might be damned, and only God knows which we are and why. That goes against the grain of a whole lot of other things that are in the Bible. It means we are just puppets in God's hands, and that is not really what a loving God is all about.

So there is another way to look at it. We were chosen by God, in Christ, before the foundation of the world, Paul tells us. Now John tells us, In the Beginning was the Word, the Word being Christ. 1In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2He was in the beginning with God. 3All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being 4in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. 5The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

Now at the beginning, Christ is not a human yet, But that is why Christ exists as a part of the Trinity—to become human. That is one of the basic Christian Doctrines, that Christ is part of the Trinity, that Christ is in fact part of God. Now, I am not going to try to explain the Trinity—that comes in May. But for now, we have God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit, all existing before anything else. And that is when we were chosen, by God, in Christ, and here's the punch line—to be adopted as God's children.

We just celebrated Christmas, and what we celebrated was the Son of God came down to earth as human being.

That is important all by itself. God does not look down on us. God came to us. Imagine if, after my interview with the church, the committee asks me when I am moving down, and my response is, "Move? Why would I move from Alaska to Medford? I can skype my sermons, and do pastoral work over the phone and by email. I don't need to move here to be your minister!"

That would be ridiculous! I do need to be with you, among you, to be your minister. I cannot do that work by long distance, and neither can God.

But Christmas means more than that. By becoming human, Jesus takes on all humanity. Because Jesus is human, we share with him his humanity, and because Jesus is God, we also share in his divinity. We become children of God.

Now what is the cash value of this? What does this mean for us, here, today.

First, we all have one thing in common. We were all chosen by God, in Christ. Not just the people in this room, but all people. And that binds us together. All people. We are all part of the family of God, not because we chose to be, but because God chose us. We did not chose Jesus—Jesus chose us.

We are going to celebrate Communion here this morning, and that is a sign that we are all one people of God. That is one thing communion means.

Second, we share in the Divinity of Jesus, just as he shares in our humanity. It means we are capable of love. Not as big as God's love—we are not God—but God's love is in us. We are capable of being creative—not as creative as God, but still, we can be creative. I loved the Christmas decorations we had up, because is the creativity of God at work in different people here in the church. I love the music, because it is the creativity of God at work here through people. We are capable of being Good People, because God is Good. We were chosen to be Holy and Blameless. Now we struggle with that because we are human, but we have that in us, and at moments it shines forth.

Finally, it means that we can rest in God.

I talked at first about New Years Resolutions. I think most of us want to be better people—because that is how we were created. That shows we share in the holiness of God. But we don't do it to impress God. We don't do it because we think God will love more if we are better people. I would love to lose 40 pounds this year, but God will love whether I do or not. I have been chosen by God before the foundation of the world, I don't think a weight loss program will strengthen that choice. It won't make God love me more. I want to do it, because it is good for me. It will make me feel better, and I will be in better health. But God loves me regardless. I have been chosen, regardless.

So we can rest in God. There is nothing you can do to make God love you more than God loves you now. And the good things we want to do and the good things we do, we do them because we share in the divinity of God through Christ. We were created to do them, we were chosen to do them.

The more we worship, the more we spend time with the God who chosen us, the more like God we become. And that is our True Self. Amen.