

**John 15:12-17**

**Romans 8:28-39**

**March 9, 2014**

**First Sunday in Lent**

*Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC*

## **ELECTION SEASON**

***Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.***

Gainesville, Georgia lies fifty-five miles north of Atlanta. The self-proclaimed “Chicken Capital of the World,” Gainesville has a statue of a life-sized chicken sitting on top of a thirty-foot tall column in the center of town.

Head out of town, about ten miles to the northeast from the chicken monument, and you’ll arrive at the Dewberry Baptist Church #1 on Clarks Bridge Road. Turn around and go back about four miles to the southwest and you’ll come to the Dewberry Baptist Church #2. You heard right! Dewberry Baptist Church #1 and Dewberry Baptist Church #2. Those are the real names of the churches. According to tradition, the two churches have their origin in a chicken leg. The original Dewberry Baptist Church split in 1848 because of a dispute over a chicken leg. Well, to be more accurate, the split was actually over the idea of “predestination,” but a chicken leg factors into the split.

About half of the congregation were folks who might be called “pro-predestination,” while the other half were “anti-predestination.” At a covered dish luncheon in 1848, two church members (one from each faction) sat across from each other and got into an argument. The “anti-predestination” leader took a chicken leg, turned to the “pro-predestination” leader, and said, “You mean to tell me that before the beginning of time it was predetermined that I was to eat this drumstick?” The “pro-predestination” leader replied, “Yes, brother, you were.”

Well, the “anti-predestination” leader scoffed and said, “HA!” He threw the drumstick across the room and walked out of the church, taking half of the church with him. In another version of the story, while the two church members were arguing, a dog ran up and grabbed the drumstick out of the man’s hand.

According to the story, the group that walked out didn’t want to give up the name “Dewberry Baptist Church” to “those people” who stayed, so they added #2 to their church name. Actually, according to Baptist association minutes, the two churches were not designated #1 and #2 until 1867, when #2 applied for membership in the Chattahoochee Baptist Association, and the association had to figure out a way to keep the church records straight. #1 is on the original church site, but #2 has the oldest set of church minutes!

Despite the apostle Paul’s reminder that “for those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son” and “those whom he predestined he also called,” I’m tempted to leave today’s talk about “predestination” with the chick-

en leg! Although these verses from Romans 8 are frequently quoted in discussions/arguments/explanations of predestination, the focus of Paul's writing is really on our Christian calling to live with hope in God's unfailing promises.

Oh well — I can't resist! Here are some random thoughts about "predestination":

\* on a bumper sticker seen in Wilmington: "Even people who believe in predestination look both ways before they cross the street!"

\* "What is to be will be, even if it ain't never."

\* "Que sera, sera, whatever will be, will be. The future's not ours to see. Que sera, sera."

\* "If it's meant to be, it will be."

I have a Calvin & Hobbes cartoon scotch-taped to my computer monitor in my study. The little boy, Calvin, is steering his wagon, as his stuffed (but real to him) tiger, Hobbes, pushes him down the hill. Calvin asks Hobbes, "Do you believe in fate?" As Hobbes jumps in the wagon for the ride, he asks, "You mean, that our lives are predestined?" As the wagon starts to take off from the dock, Calvin turns around and says to Hobbes, "Yeah . . . that the things we do are inevitable." In the final panel, as the little boy and his tiger soar over the lake in their wagon, Hobbes says, "What a scary thought!"

Presbyterians aren't the only Christians who have some sense of "predestination," but the idea and Presbyterians have been attached at the hip, especially since the time of our forefather in the Reformed tradition, John Calvin. However, if we jump in the wagon with Calvin & Hobbes and soar out over the lake with the idea that "the things we do are inevitable" because they were predestined, we'll miss the mark (and we will also be able to escape responsibility for many of the things we do and don't do in our lives).

When the apostle Paul writes about predestination and calling and justification and glorification as God's people, he does so to instruct people what it means to live as God's people, not just for the future but also right here and now. When we think about predestination, we tend to get caught up in "what's in it for me?" kind of thinking. Paul paints a BIG picture of God's purpose and plan — a purpose and plan that certainly **includes** you and me, but also goes far beyond just the details of your life and mine to include all of creation.

The headings in my study Bible for Romans 8:28-39 are "Ground and Assurance of Christian hope" and "Our confidence in God." The Westminster Confession of Faith, one of the foundational confessional documents of our Presbyterian and Reformed faith, puts it this way in Chapter 20 about "Of the Assurance of Grace and Salvation." The language is a little more formal that we're used to, but you'll hear Paul's words in Romans 8 coming through loud and clear:

*This certainty is not a bare conjectural and probable persuasion grounded upon a fallible hope; but an infallible assurance of faith, founded upon the divine truth of the promises of salvation, the inward evidence of those graces unto which these promises are made, the testimony of the Spirit of adoption witnessing with our spirits that we are the children of God; which Spirit is the earnest of our inheritance, whereby we are sealed to the day of redemption.*

Here's a way to think about what it means to live as God's people who are predestined, elected, called, justified, and glorified in Jesus Christ. You might have to use your imagination just a little bit, since we've had so much rain, snow, and ice in the past six weeks. Just think about the people out in California who are facing a severe drought now and later in the spring when there's not enough snow melt to provide the water they will need this summer. This image comes from one of our seminary professors.

Living as God's predestined, called, elected, justified, and glorified children, "we are like people on a drought-parched land, who hear the distant thunder of the approaching storm. The freshening wind brings with it the smell of rain and the first few drops of moisture. We rejoice as we stand on that barren land, knowing it will soon be washed with the life-giving rain whose presence we already sense. So we stand in our parched and barren present, looking forward with confidence to God's redemption we see begun in Christ, a redemption sure to come because with the Spirit's presence, we already feel those first showers of God's own healing love."<sup>1</sup>

The word "predestination" makes us think about the future: what is our destiny? What's going to happen to us down the line? But Paul's encouragement and assurance is not just — or maybe even primarily — about our future life. Instead, Paul writes about our present Christian lives in light of God's assured future. In the meantime and in anticipation of that promised future, we might feel like we are living on a "drought-parched land." When life batters you from all sides, you might feel as if you're nothing more than "sheep to be slaughtered." When times are hard (and they are in many ways for many people), you might think you're cut off from God's love. Even the psalmists join us in crying out to God when life is hard, "How long, O Lord?"

You'll notice in our order of worship that the choir's anthem is under PROCLAIMING GOD'S WORD. The choir proclaims God's Word every week, but we've been especially blessed last Sunday and today with the two anthems, "The Majesty and Glory of Your Name" and "Who Shall Separate Us?" Pepper Choplin took the words of our anthem straight from Romans 8:31-39. Combined with his beautiful and soaring music, the anthem surely proclaims God's Word of the ground and assurance of Christian hope: "I am persuaded that nothing on earth can separate us from the love of God."

Look at the last line of the anthem: "We will live within the love of our Lord." We won't just exist. We won't sit back and do nothing. We won't escape responsibility because "the things we do are inevitable." We won't despair because of hardship or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword. No, in all these things we are more than conquerors — not because of anything we've done on our own, but

because of everything God has done for us in Jesus Christ. “We will live within the love of God” because God calls us, God elects us, God justifies us, God makes things right again between him and us.

The main editorial in an issue of the Wilmington *Star News* last week lamented the beginning of the “election season.” Already we’re seeing attack ads paid for by outside groups, in the run-up to the May primaries. Then it’s a marathon until the general election in November. While the editorial bemoaned the nature of the ads and the length of the election season, the editor also called for us to be good, discerning, and responsible citizens as we navigate through the multitude of political advertisements.

We Christians are always in “election season.” That is, we believe God has called us — has “elected” us — to lives of service and faithfulness and obedience. “And those whom he predestined he also called.” Our election as God’s people goes hand-in-hand with the idea of predestination. God calls us, God elects us, for service right here and now, in the assurance and hope of God’s promised future. Far from relieving us from any and all responsibility as Christians, God’s purpose and promise give us the strength and courage and motivation to do God’s work “in the meantime.” God’s predestination and election of his people “persuades us that nothing on earth can separate us from the love that is in Jesus, Christ Jesus, our Lord.”

God’s predestination and promise mean a lot more than whether or not we were destined to eat a chicken leg at a covered dish dinner. God’s predestination and election of his people — God’s amazing grace — means what Jesus told his disciples the night before he died: “You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last . . .” (John 15:16)

***Let us pray: God of love and mercy, great and amazing are your deeds and just and true are all your ways. You reach out to us and call us to accept the mercy and forgiveness of your Son Jesus and to walk in his path. Help us by the power of your Holy Spirit to grow in righteousness and always to bring all praise, honor, and glory to you. Amen.***

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Paul Achtemeier, *Romans* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985), p. 148.