

YOUR DIVINE DESTINY
a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent
based on Ephesians 1:3–12; Romans 8:26–39

The sermon this morning is the beginning of a spring sermon series entitled, “Fulfill Your Destiny.” In the Star Wars epic, there are several occasions when characters are encouraged to “fulfill their destiny,” although the destiny encouraged may involve giving in to the Dark Side. The idea that you have a destiny is a major theme not only in the Star Wars saga but in world literature generally and in world religion. It is a central theme in the Bible; and in this series we will be looking at what God’s Word says about destiny—your own destiny, the destiny of planet earth, and the destiny of all humanity. Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul says that “God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ . . . In Christ we have obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will (Ephesians 1:3,4,11) Likewise in Romans Paul says, “Those whom God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son . . . And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified. (Romans 8:29-30)

Four times in these verses Paul uses the word “destined” or “predestined,” which are two slightly different translations of the same original Greek word —προορίζω *prooridzo*— which has the sense of establishing ahead of time the final condition of something. The clear message is that we have God-given destiny. [*We have been destined according to the purpose of God, who accomplishes all things according to His counsel and will. Eph. 1:11*]

Sometimes people have taken this to mean that God has planned out your life, so that everything that happens to you must be according to God’s design. If this is the case, you could be pretty mad at God for some of the things that have happened! But in fact the Bible never suggests that God is controlling our life like a grand puppeteer. It is plain in the Biblical story that people have freedom to make real choices in life; so the idea that we are predestined does not mean that our life story is predetermined.

When the Scripture speaks of our destiny, it is speaking of the overall direction and goal of life. The huge message here is that our life is not simply random and pointless, but God is leading us somewhere. So what is that destiny to which God is leading us? Our overarching destiny, Paul says, to be adopted as children of God [*He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ . . . in whom we have an inheritance*” Ephesians 1:4,11], and if we are God’s children, this means we have an eternal inheritance. In short, the destiny of which Paul is speaking is a grand spiritual destiny—to be joined right now with the family of God and to live in God’s love forever.

But even if we focus on our spiritual destiny, it is still possible to get tripped up on the

whole “predestination” idea. In his letter to the Romans Paul had said, “Those whom God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son . . . And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.” (Romans 8:29-30) From this some Christians have concluded that God has “predestined” or determined ahead of time who is going to come to faith in Christ and thus who will finally will be going to heaven.

The strongest proponent of this sort of thinking in Christian history was John Calvin, from whom today’s Reformed and Presbyterian churches come. Calvin argued that God chooses some people before they are born to receive salvation—as it says in Ephesians, “God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before Him in love. He destined us for adoption as His children”—and at the same time said Calvin, God chooses other people to be destined for the flames of hell. He put it this way: “God has determined what would become of every individual of humankind. For people are not all created with a similar destiny, but eternal life is foreordained for some, and eternal damnation for others. Every human being is created for one or the other of these ends; we say, therefore, that a person is predestined either to life or to death.” [*The Institutes of the Christian Religion*]

To put Calvin’s ideas in modern terms, we could say that everyone at birth is placed by God on one of two airplanes—either the plane to heaven or the plane to hell. People are free to move around on their particular plane, but nothing can change their final destination. This idea of predestination can be a very comforting one, as long as you believe that you are on the plane to heaven, because it means you can’t blow it—your salvation is secure, since it has been set ahead of time by God. On the other hand, you might say to yourself, “Since my destination is already fixed, why even bother with going to church or trying to live a good life? The Calvinist answer to that is, “If you are not going to church and living a good life, that’s a pretty good indication that you are on the plane to hell.” So Calvinists were motivated to live a life of Christian piety and good works in order to convince themselves that they were in the group predestined for heaven. But what about the group on that other plane? There seems to be something seriously wrong with a theology which suggests that God has created some people with the intended destiny of hell.

If you think that this whole Calvinist notion of predestination makes no sense, then you are a good Methodist, because Methodists vigorously opposed Calvinist thinking, and pretty much prevailed over time. Today’s Presbyterians have mostly dropped the predestination idea; I grew up in the Presbyterian church, and never heard the idea at all. The basic gospel message is clearly declared in passages such as I Timothy 2:4—“God desires everyone to be saved”—and John 3:16—“For God so loved the *world* that He gave His only Son that *whoever* believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” Such passages make plain that that God desires all to be saved, so it cannot be the case that God has decided ahead of time to write some people off. When therefore it says in Ephesians that “God chose us in Christ,” this does not mean that God chose some of us and rejected the

others. It means that God has chosen to save all of us through Christ. God offers to everyone the same bright and eternal destiny. This is why Paul can go on to say that “God has lavished the riches of his grace upon us.” (Eph. 1:7-8) God acts expansively to save humanity, even though none of us deserve it.

The central point here is that God takes the initiative in salvation. God reaches to us with saving grace—God chooses us—before we make any response. We declare this truth every time we have infant baptism—that God has prepared for each of us the destiny of eternal life as children of God. At the same time, we need at some point make a choice—to accept and receive what God is doing for us. This is why, whenever we receive new members, such as we are doing this morning at the 10:30 hour, the persons joining affirm their faith in Christ, and the congregation joins in reaffirming faith. It is our response to God.

To return to the airplane image, imagine that someone has purchased for you a plane ticket to Tahiti. That means you have been “predestined” for Tahiti—in that you have a seat on the plane, and you are set to arrive at the destination of Tahiti at some point in the future. In an analogous fashion, God through Christ has predestined you for heaven, in that Christ has provided for you the way to the ultimate destination of God’s eternal kingdom. But even if the ticket has been purchased for you, you still have to get on the plane. You have the freedom to choose whether to accept the gift or not. So the fact that God has “predestined” us still leaves us free to choose whether to accept the destiny God has provided for us or not.

You can see this sort of dynamic working itself out on multiple levels throughout the Biblical story. God repeatedly chooses people to experience God’s saving power in various ways, but they always have the freedom to choose whether they will trust in God and take hold of what it is that God is offering them. When God chose Moses to lead the people of Israel to the Promised Land, or when Jesus chose to call fishermen to be his disciples, or when the Holy Spirit moved the apostles to proclaim the gospel message to crowds of people, it was always the case that God took the initiative in reaching to people with grace, but in every case people were free to respond in faith or not. So God offers us a marvelous destiny, but it is never forced upon us.

Here you can see clearly the difference between destiny and fate. The idea of fate is that there is an inevitable track in life in which you are caught which will unavoidably run to its end. The idea of destiny, as found in the Bible, is that there is a calling or purpose for you in life in which you will find fulfillment, but you are free to choose to enter into that destiny or not.

In the Bible, people regularly experience this sense of destiny on three different levels. On one level, people often get a *sense of vocation*—a calling to a particular life task. Gideon was called to lead his people in a struggle against foreign oppressors, Jeremiah was called to be a prophet, and Peter was called to be a key leader in the early church. Here people can have all sorts of different earthly destinies. On another level, people experience destiny as a *calling to life purpose*. Here people’s destinies are much more similar; in the Bible, everyone finds purpose by joining with God and sharing the love of God, although the exact

shape of God's activity, and the way that people live out their purpose, varies according to place and time. Finally, people experience destiny as *an eternal destination*. Here everyone's intended destiny is the same—to enter into God's eternal Kingdom. We will be looking further at all these types of destiny as this sermon series progresses. But on every level, we can see that it is one thing to have an intended destiny, and it is another thing finally to *fulfill it*.

In the Star Wars saga, which in many ways reflects Biblical themes, one of the major dynamics is the way in which the characters struggle with their destiny. They struggle to understand their destiny and then they struggle to rightly fulfill it. This kind of struggle is very much at the center of the Biblical story. How do people come finally to fulfill their God-given destiny? Looking at Biblical people of faith, we can note key stages in that journey.

First of all, there is a need to *discern one's destiny*. This often requires a patient listening to God. It is in listening to God that we perceive our eternal destiny, and it is in listening to God that we can discern where God is leading us right now. In the Old Testament, a prime example is Isaiah, who in his search for his destiny went into the temple, and there finally he caught a vision of God, calling him to be a prophet. In the New Testament, the prime example is Jesus, who spent forty days in the wilderness clarifying his calling. So if you are not sure what your calling is right now in life, it is helpful to keep in mind that it often takes time for one's calling to unfold. The important thing is to be attentive to God.

The second step in fulfilling one's destiny is *to accept or take hold of it*. Often people have trouble at this point because they do not like or want the destiny they perceive, especially because God's destiny for us generally involves some form of service for others. When Moses was called to deliver the people of Israel out of slavery, he told God to please send somebody else. He did not like the job description. Or in the story of Jonah, Jonah was called to go east to preach God's Word to the people of Nineveh, but Jonah did not like the people of Nineveh; he got on a boat heading west. Today people often simply do not want to commit themselves to God or to self-giving service for others, and so they avoid or ignore any larger destiny. Yet it is as people take hold of their God-given destiny that they find real purpose and hope.

The third step, after discerning our destiny, and taking hold of our destiny, is *to live into our destiny*. This is what the disciples did as they followed Jesus, which we discussed in the last sermon series. The good news here is that it is not up to us to somehow create a good destiny. Rather we join with Christ, and it is Christ who leads us into that bright and eternal destiny. Therefore our future in Christ is not simply a vague hope but a sure promise. As Paul said, "I am convinced that *nothing* will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:38-39)

The whole idea of destiny is well encapsulated by Paul when he said that God has "a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth." (Eph. 1:10) We will be looking further at that plan as this sermon series unfolds. The

great message in all this is that we are not simply lonely wanderers in a pointless universe; but we have been given by God a good and glorious destiny! So we are not stuck in meaninglessness and despair, but we connect with that divine destiny as we put our faith in Christ.