

Before the foundation of the world

Ephesians 1:3-14

A Sermon for the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

One of the greatest engineers of all time was Archimedes (287-212 BC). We know that he shouted "Eureka!" when he figured out how to weigh things in water, and we know his statement about the lever: "Give me a long enough lever and I will move the world."

But what happened at the end of his life is equally as important. According to the story, he was in the gymnasium in Syracuse in Sicily, during the Siege of Syracuse. At that time, it was a Greek colony. He doing calculations in the sand when the barbarians stormed into the gymnasium. Engrossed in solving his math problem, Archimedes held up his hands and said: "Don't disturb my circles!" But they didn't speak Greek and thought he was resisting them, so they killed him.

That is in a way what this text in Ephesians 1:3-14 is about. This is the classical spot, the place where it says: "God did it; God does it." It says there in verse 4: ". . . he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him." Well, what does that say in terms of what's happening around us today?

It's hurricane season, drought and fire season, and oppressive heat from coast to coast. US embassy and military bases around the world are on high terror alert. What is God doing? Where is God in all this?

Moreover, we have our own troubles, financial problems, health problems, and heartaches in our own lives. Why does he let it happen? Why does he do it this way?

And then there's the old dilemma: Either God does evil, or God isn't powerful enough to stop it. At funerals people will often say: "It's God's will. God took him." Or: "Life is tough, and you've got to be tough to make it. You have to hunker down and endure." People will also say: "It's fate." There is a lot of fatalism around and thinking that God determines everything.

As you may know, Sam Harris is a prominent, modern atheist. He is even known as one of the "Four Horsemen" of what's called "the New Atheism." (The other three are Richard Dawkins, the late Christopher Hitchens, and Daniel Dennett.) Hawkins has promoted the idea that science proves that everything is determined. Everything is predestined, and that's the way it is. Many secularists have cheered his writings and kind of laughed: "Ha! there the Christians got it again."

And there's the lure of other religions, too. Hinduism is the oldest religion and the third largest religion in the world today (about one billion Hindus). Hinduism has a circular view of time, that is, in the big picture somewhere every three or four hundred million years

everything repeats itself. That means that eventually we'll all be in this room again, and I'll be preaching this same sermon. Everything repeats itself.

And there's is Buddhism, which says that nothing has any differentiation.

And Islam which says that God's absolute will is fate.

But when it comes to Christianity, we come to the problem of judging. Who is to judge? It comes back to those circles of Archimedes: "Please don't disturb my circles!" Who is in charge, and who is not?

We know that Matt 7:1 says: "Judge not that you be not judged," and some think that is the same as the common religion of our day, which is relativism and tolerance. But that's not what is meant. People will quote Matthew 7:1 without realizing that in 1 Corinthians 4:3 it says: "We cannot judge ourselves." Well, if we are not allowed to judge ourselves, what does that do to our circles!

Suddenly we wake up. We cannot even judge ourselves.

Nor can we judge God. Here then in the Book of Job, Job 40:1, the Lord says to Job: "Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty?" Job pulls back, and the Lord says: "Gird up your loins like a man, Job, I will question you" (40:7). Then God says to Job: "Will you even put me in the wrong? Would you condemn me that you may be justified?" (Job 40:8). It's ridiculous to think that we can judge God, but of course that's what happens.

Gerhard Forde, longtime professor at Luther Seminary, noted that in late September every fall, after classes had been going for about three weeks, a student or two would come to his office asking to transfer to a different section under another professor because they wanted to have a God who suited them better. They were faultfinders. It's really the way Voltaire put it: "We created God in our own image and God returned the compliment." There is something so ridiculous about this, and yet this is the way it happens then and now.

In both the Old and New Testaments, confrontations between the Lord Almighty and faultfinders occur frequently. We find it in Job and also in Jeremiah 18:1-6 about the potter and the clay, and in Isaiah 45:9 (paraphrase): "I'm the potter and you are the clay. If the potter decides that this vessel isn't shaped the way it should be, and he decides to shape it otherwise, what right does the clay have to complain?" Or if the potter says: "I'm going to throw this clay away, and I'll start over somewhere else new," this isn't something where the clay can say: "Wait a minute, Lord. I am here to give you advice on how to run the universe."

And that's the way we are: "I'll help you, Lord. You're not doing it quite right."

Then in Isaiah 45:7 it says: "I make weal and create woe." And in Isaiah 7:15: "I am the God who hides himself." I am not who you fashion and make me out to be."

In Jeremiah 10:23, it says: "I know, O Lord, that the way of man is not in himself, that it is not in man who walks to direct his steps." That's very different from our way of thinking and doing.

In the whole of Old Testament religion as we know it, there is that Lordship, the Lord does it his way; he does it for us, in spite of us, and outside of us.

The New Testament picks up the potter and the clay in Romans 9:21, and Paul also writes in Galatians 1:15 that he "set me apart before I was born." He is echoing Jeremiah 1:5: "He chose me before I was born."

Finally, we come to our text for today, this big sentence in Ephesians 1:3-4: ". . . he chose us in him before the foundation of the world." Before the foundation of the world, he chose. Then it goes on in verse 7 to say "by his blood," and then in verse 10 it says: ". . . in order that he might unite or put together all things in Jesus Christ," so there is that way in which God does it outside of us, in spite of us.

What about the Bible here? Is it a matter of: "I know a verse, but there is another verse over there"? No, rather take the Gospel of John because that is the Gospel that people often refer to when we come to this question. In John 1:13 it says of the children of God that they are those "who were born not of blood, nor of the will of man, but of God." The same thing is said in John 6:44: "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him," and John 6:65: ". . . no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father," and John 15:16: "You did not choose me, but I chose you."

This is pervasive in Scripture. Then, of course, what happens is that we are free in Christ, as it says in Galatians 5:1: "For freedom Christ has set you free." To that we say: "Hey, then I've got it made because whatever I do gets a pass." Is that the way it is? No.

Paul takes this up in Romans 3:8, 6:1 and 6:15, where he says: "Does this mean: "let us sin that grace may abound?" Paul then writes in Romans 6 (paraphrase): "If you think that, then you don't get it." He spells it out in 1 Cor 6:19-20: "You are not your own; you were bought with a price."

We come back then to Ephesians 1:4: ". . . he chose us in him before the foundation of the world." It means he adopted you and me as his sons and daughters. As the end of this section says: We have been "sealed with the Holy Spirit which is the guarantee of our inheritance" (Ephesians 1:14). In Baptism we are made his heirs. Paul spells this out completely in Romans 8 and Galatians 4.

We are adopted in him, and that makes all the difference. Amen