

Acts 1:15-17, 19-25 7 Easter 5.13.21 Pastor Bill Uetricht

Have you ever wondered why you ended up where you ended up, why your life turned out the way it did? And in the midst of that kind of wondering did you talk about things like choice or destiny? Did you say, “What I *did* brought me here,” or, “I don’t really know how I got here; it must have been in the cards.” Some of you might have said, “God must have brought me here.” Country music singer Tracy Byrd in his song “Keeper of the Stars,” speaks in this way about the love he has found in a woman: “It was no accident me finding you. Someone had a hand in it, long before we ever knew.” “Divine destiny,” we would say as we attempt to figure out how we got where we are.

I think the early church frequently engaged in this task of figuring out how we got where we are. The church did this kind of wondering when it came to Jesus and his suffering on the cross. How did he get there? How did a man who initiated a movement of love and inclusion end up being crucified, suffering the worst death imaginable? Well, they posited many theories trying to explain the unexplainable. And a lot of times their explanations included notions about divine destiny. It had to happen. It was in the cards. God had some kind of purpose in it after all.

Now, personally, I find this approach inadequate, but this is what we do when we try to figure out the *whys* of our lives. It’s what the early church did in relationship to the Judas story, which is our interest today. There was and remains a deep mystery with the Judas narrative. Judas was a friend of Jesus. He was a part of the inner circle. And what’s more, Jesus selected Judas to be his disciple. And generally, we tend to think that Jesus has good judgment. But somehow, something went wrong. Couldn’t the pain that is associated with all of this have been circumvented?

Peter, serving as the spokesperson for Luke in Acts says, “Friends the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit through David foretold concerning Judas.” If you note the passages of the Psalms that Peter is referring to, you will think that he is stretching things a bit. He had to work long and hard to come up with those Bible verses, but nevertheless, the conclusion here is that Judas was a part of a greater plan. He did what he did in light of divine necessity. In our gospel reading for today, we experience the same conclusion. Jesus prays: “While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost excepted the one *destined* to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled.” Judas’ lostness was a part of some greater plan.

Now truthfully, Luke’s version of Judas’ demise is more negative view of Judas than is Matthew’s. I think we get in today’s reading from Acts more than a minor critique of Judas’ choices. In Matthew we are told that Judas gave to the chief priests the 30 pieces of silver that he received for betraying Jesus and then went off and hung himself. In Luke, we are told something very different. Luke says that Judas used the 30 pieces of silver to buy a field—the reference probably being to a potter’s field, a field used for the burial of poor people.

It’s as if Luke is telling us that Judas did the dastardly thing that he did only to get a worthless piece of land. And then Luke offers us how he died, a story that is very different from Matthew’s narrative in which Judas hangs himself. It’s not clear in the text, but it appears that Judas went out into the field, stumbled and fell headlong, maybe being impaled as he did so and having all of his bowels, his inners, come gushing out. It’s a brutal story, but from my vantage point it appears to be Luke’s way of saying that Judas got what he deserved. His choices had consequences. Our Psalm for today echoes this sentiment: “The wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation

in the righteous, for the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish!” Yikes! But as Walter Brueggemann says of the posture of this Psalm: “Human life is not mocked or trivialized. How it is lived is decisive.”

So, how did we get here? As we do our reflecting, we talk about destiny *and* choice. Life seems to be a coming together of both. But I don't think that today's story from Acts is satisfied at ending the conversation with that conclusion. This story is not simply about looking to the past and diagnosing it. It is about moving forward into the future. The resurrection of Christ is what is leading the way for the apostles. It's what is driving their current life together and where they are going. An alive Jesus has propelled them into the future. And so, the story must go on, the witnessing must go on. And it must do so with a full regimen of apostles. And they need twelve so that the future is consistent with the past. This new church is connected to the old Israel, which had twelve tribes. This new movement of God is not totally divorced from the previous movement of God. But the beat, nonetheless, must go on. The story must continue in a new way. Rob Bell in his book “Everything is Spiritual” says: “The universe only knows one direction. Forward. Spirit only knows one kind of creation. New creation.” The movement of the Spirit is forward. We lost a man who did horrible things and who, it appears, was a part of some larger story, but life must go on. The witness to the resurrection must continue.

I don't know if you have ever seen the movie “Wild.” It's a true story that chronicles the journey of a very broken woman on the Pacific Crest Trail. The woman had suffered from a heroin addiction and a life of promiscuous sex after the death of her mother. The hike (as is the case for many pilgrimages) was an effort to deal with her grief and her past. The trail taught the lead character, played by Reese Witherspoon, many things. Profoundly, she says, “There's no way to know what

makes one thing to happen, and not another; what leads to what; what destroys what; what causes what to flourish or die or take another course. If I were to go back in time, I wouldn't do a single thing differently. What if all those things were the things that got me here?"

Now I am not so certain about the claim that "I wouldn't do a single thing differently." I personally believe that there is a role in our lives for guilt and regret. And dealing with the past entails confronting and working through guilt and regret. But Witherspoon is onto something when she asks, "What if all those things were the things that got me here?" As a thoroughly modern person, I am a little suspicious of the notion that destiny brought me here, that Judas' actions were a part of some larger divine plan. But let's face it. This kind of talk is all about discerning how we got where we are and recognizing that something bigger has shaped our lives, individually and corporately. And while that work, that discussion is a worthwhile endeavor, the bigger concern is how we move from where we are to where the Spirit is leading us, how we trust the Spirit to take us to a new creation.

You know, it's interesting. The Acts story tells us that Matthias is the one who is chosen to replace Judas. And he is selected, interestingly enough, in a very pre-modern manner. Lots are drawn, which was an ancient way of believing that something larger than individual choice is at work in life. The ancients didn't collect resumes, do interviews, and then cast votes. They relied on what they thought was divine destiny. And out of that mechanism, Matthias is chosen. And guess what? We never again hear about this man, a reality that I think is purposeful. What has happened is not about him. It's about the community. Or more than that, it's about the story that goes on and the Spirit who enables the story to go on and on. What Judas did will not prevent the story from going on into the future. Jesus is alive. The Spirit is at work. The story will go on.

Truthfully, who knows why what happened happened? Who can figure it all out? And yes, maybe it has to do with choice. Maybe it has to do with some larger force at work. Yes. Judas was a bum. And yes, maybe his actions were a part of some kind of divine destiny. And yes, you have done crazy and even destructive things. And yes, your doing those things wasn't always fully your fault. And yes, you were swept up by forces larger than you. And yes, you probably have reason to feel guilt and regret or feel as if you are a pawn within a larger chess game. But hear this: the story isn't over. It's going on. The story of love cannot be stopped. The story of grace cannot be extinguished. The story of forgiveness will not be kept forever dead. It will come to life, and it will go on and on.

And so maybe the call for us is, as Daniel Clendenin says, to patience, humility, and mostly, availability. Who knows where the story of the Spirit of God will lead us next? John Ylvisaker in his great song "Borning Cry" speaks of the Spirit ending the story, completing the story "with just one more surprise." To be led by the Spirit of God is to be taken to surprise!! The resurrection story is taking us to the surprise of resurrection, the completion of the story, when all will be one, when all will live in love. At that point, the love story will be the only story being told and believed. I can't say this for sure—Jesus didn't die and leave me in charge—but I have this feeling that at that time we will be joined by our brother, Judas. Love is the world's destiny.