

IS DESTINY GIVEN TO US OR MADE BY US?

Philippians 1:6, 2: 12-13, 4: 4-13

The word “destiny” is a very popular word in our world today. But what does it mean? Usually, when people use the word destiny, they mean that something they choose, a path they have taken, a decision they have made about their life, someone they have met... somehow this has altered and shaped their life in some big way... To find your destiny in life is to find what you are made for, your life vocation, your way, your call, where you fit into the larger whole...

But destiny can also be a difficult word too, no? Is it your destiny to fail in a relationship or in life?... Is it your destiny to be sick in some way throughout your life, to struggle for so long, to always come second, to suffer some major heartbreak or setback?... Is destiny something you make or is destiny something that is imposed on you without giving you a choice?...

Well, whether we think of destiny as something positive or something more ominous, we carry a deep contradiction about the word destiny in our world today. Many of us want to believe that our destiny is in our hands. Destiny is what we choose to make it. Our destiny is ultimately up to us to create and to live out. Yet, modern psychology also tells us that whatever freedom we think we have to make choices is already predetermined by many factors beyond our choosing. There are life circumstances that we do not choose that alter and shape our lives and limit our life choices in some big ways... We all have a history and a culture that has shaped us, including our parents, our families, and some core life experiences we've had as children and youth, and these shape the way we see the world and the attitudes we carry in the choices we make. There are also genetics, chemistry, and emotions in us and for some of us, emotions play a big role in the choices we make, like it or not. Some of us have had accidents or experienced traumas in our lives that have shaped how we see the world and the possibilities or limits in our life choices.

So then, how much are the choices we make our choices? And how much are the choices we make determined by factors in our lives not of our choosing? And if the latter, how much is our destiny and the destiny we choose truly our destiny?

On this black history month, I want to point to the figure of Martin Luther King Jr, or MLK as he's known. How much was MLK's epic role as the leader of black civil rights in the U.S. a destiny he chose and how much was it a destiny he was given? How much does the pressure, conviction, and restlessness in us compel us into choosing a path in our lives, and how much are we truly free to make our own destiny? MLK would have described his call as a great leader for black rights not something he chose but something that chose him. He would have said that even when he wanted out because the pressure, the threat, and the loss of his freedom to just

be an ordinary person with an ordinary life looked so attractive, he couldn't do it. Sure, he had freedom of choice technically. Sure, no one was physically twisting his arm to continue to deepen his role and destiny as a leader of the movement. But in his heart and soul he would have said that he had no choice. The choice had been made when he felt the call of God and he could do no other than say: "yes" again and again wherever it would take him... When Jesus prays: "Not my will but yours be done" in the garden before he's arrested, tried, tortured, and crucified, he is saying yes to a larger destiny that chose him before he responded in kind.

OK, but none of us here are Jesus, or even MLK, and none of us here, I believe, feel that kind of larger pressure to follow a path come what may. And yet, what if we thought of destiny and our personal destiny as tied up with everything that's happened, is happening now and will happen in our lives going forward? Where does God fit into all that? And how does thinking of our lives as destiny shape how we live them within a larger purpose and meaning however long we have?

Well, to help us understand what destiny can mean for us personally, as well as us as a church, let's dive into our scripture reading in search of some revelatory wisdom. And in order to really draw such wisdom out, we need to engage what seems like a basic contradiction in what Paul is writing to the Christians at Philippi. On the one hand, he's telling them that their destiny is all up to them. "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" he tells them. "Rejoice in the Lord, always... Do not worry about anything... in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God... whatever is true...honourable...just...pure...pleasing...commendable...keep on doing what you have learned and received and heard and seen in me..." It's all up to you, Paul seems to be saying. You choose... You do it... You make it...

On the other hand, he says that he is confident that "the One (namely, God) who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Christ Jesus... for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for God's good pleasure..." Ok... And for himself, Paul says this: "I can do all things through the One who strengthens me." Really Paul? All things? Remember, Paul is writing this letter stuck in a prison cell in Rome guarded by palace soldiers, awaiting trial before the emperor as a political prisoner charged with causing riots and revolutionary fervor because he is proclaiming a rival king to Caesar, namely, Jesus, as "Saviour" and "Lord". Saviour and Lord are words reserved for Caesar and Caesar alone. It really doesn't look good for Paul, and yet, he can dictate a letter like this to his assistant Timothy to be taken to Philippi so full of faith, hope, love, and assurance that God will fulfill the glorious destiny God has imagined for Paul. How is that?

Well, perhaps, God's empowering is about empowering us. Perhaps God's destiny for us involves our awakening to choices we have before us we never imagined or knew were

possible. Perhaps God's destiny for us arises within the very particular circumstances, situations, struggles and relationships of our lives... Perhaps... OK, so how does this work?

Imagine believing that God is working out your own salvation... God is working out your journey toward wholeness, and God will complete it through this life and into the next... Imagine believing this no matter how many twists and turns your journey takes, however many failures and wrong turns you take, however many false starts to act because of fear happen in you... Imagine if you and I believed that come what may God has begun something that God will complete one way or another... Would such a belief empower, encourage and raise you up, giving you a confidence, a peace and an assurance that is second to none?

From his prison cell Paul is declaring without a doubt that his destiny and the destiny of the Philippians has already been planned out the moment God stirred their hearts with the seeds of faith and began working in them... Even as they must struggle to figure out and discern their path toward wholeness with lots of fear and trembling at times as life can so often stir up, imagine knowing that one way or the other the completion of the journey has already been assured. Imagine living with that kind of certainty. Wow! I want that and I want to be reminded of that in my heart and soul especially when I am in the thick of doubt and questioning, in a wilderness of confusion, fear and misery, and when I am tormented by the feeling that I've totally missed the mark. I want that kind of assurance and confidence too!

Well, this letter may have been first read by the Christians of Philippi, but the Spirit in the letter clearly meant they kept reading it and re-reading it as trouble and doubt about their destiny overwhelmed them. And because it was such a treasure of God's-Christ's-Spirit-energy every time it was read, it wasn't long before this letter was passed along to churches across the mediterranean world eventually becoming scripture. The destiny of this letter was bigger than Paul because the Spirit was in the words and passed through the words. The Spirit through the words could enable any heart to soar even in the most challenging of circumstances. Any heart could find and grow a deeper rootedness of faith in a destiny God had already planned out, a destiny toward wholeness nothing in this world could destroy.

Wow! OK, so what does this letter have to say to the church of Armour Heights 2000 years later and to us as individual Christians trying to make our personal journeys? How do we discern our destiny? Well, like Paul, we don't know what the future holds, for us personally or us as a church. We do know without a doubt that God has stirred in us, and God has blessed us in many ways great and small. But can we believe that the God who began a good work in us will bring it to completion by the day of Christ Jesus whenever that day will be? Can we believe that for all our fear and trembling in search of wholeness God will keep enabling us to will and to work for God's good pleasure and our further advance toward wholeness? Can we believe that our feeble attempts at rejoicing, our imperfect praying, our faltering thanksgiving, our desperate search for inner peace, our best if not always consistent efforts to choose what is

true, honourable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent and truly worthy of praise, will also be met by God's larger embrace as God fulfills our destiny as the hands, feet, voice and heart of Christ for each other and in our world? Can we believe all this?

As we listen and as we share ideas at our AGM today and as we ponder our own lives, our losses and our blessings, our worries and our joys... may we, today, come to believe without a doubt, that "the One who began a good work in us will bring it to completion..." whenever in this life or the next that comes to be, for "it is God who is at work in us, enabling us both to will and to work" for God's good pleasure, glory and delight. Isn't this a powerful faith to hold and a wonderful hope to have? May it be so for each of you today and going forward. And may we give thanks that God has called us into a glorious destiny and invited us to embrace it with our hearts, our minds, and our whole being... Amen.