

FREEDOM AND DESTINY

Acts 9: 1-19

Some people believe life is all about freedom of choice. We live in a vast, open ended universe where there is order but also random chance. There are pre-determined patterns and rhythms, but there is also spontaneity and freedom. When it comes to our own lives as humans, we are a blank slate and it's for us to fill it all in with our own choices. There is freedom to our choices and life is whatever we choose to make it. Nothing is preordained. Everything is possible so long as you have the resources and support. Life is a story yet to be written and you decide at every step of the way how the story will go.

Other people believe life is all about destiny. There is a reason for why things happen. Things happen in life that may appear to be coincidental, random and chance occurrences, but there is a larger story within which our lives are lived out and it's for us to figure out where we fit into the story. Whether it's the people that come into our lives, the circumstances, the predicaments, the opportunities and the challenges, nothing is random. All of us have a destiny to fulfill and life is about figuring out what our destiny is all about. We are free to opt in and out of it, but opting out will also lead to unhappy consequences. Destiny is all.

OK, so where do you see yourself in these alternatives? Are you more a free-will kind of person who believes much of life is up to you to determine? Or are you more of a destiny kind of person where you see many things in your life and in the world as anything but chance and random?

Well, might there be truth on both ends? Obviously if you are someone who has suffered abuse of some kind or cruel loss, the last thing you want to be told is that there's a reason why things happen the way they do. No reason can justify some things that happen. On the other hand, even when we may reject an absolute belief that everything happens for a reason, it doesn't mean we have to reject the idea that many things happen that cannot just be explained away as random chance either. How many coincidences must happen in our lives before we see such happenings as more than just mere coincidence? Think about some of the key people in your life or some of the key occurrences. Think about the communities you have encountered along the way or ways you're thinking and faith have evolved. Is it all chance? Is it all just random, subject to the spontaneity and freedom built into the order of the universe? Or is there some larger plan or destiny at play? And if there is some larger destiny being played out in your life, does that undermine your freedom to choose your own path unencumbered by some larger plan?

These are big questions asked by people like you and me from the beginning of time. In the novel: *The Book of Lost Names*, which was the focus of our literary society discussion last month, various people are confronted by atrocities being committed by the Nazis in WW2 France. How do they respond? Most people submit to the authorities passively, even if it means being complicit in the imprisonment, torture and murder of innocent people. Others are actively racist and one character in the story even betrays his own race as a Jew.

On the other hand, you have various characters, from a young Jewish woman, to a priest and there is even a German officer, who risk their lives in order to help liberate both adults and children. Why do they do what they do? Even though they have freedom of choice on the surface of things, those who risk their lives, and in some cases, lose them, never regret for one minute what they are doing. They are serving a higher justice. And in their own minds, they have little choice but to obey. Even as they make the choice, there is something higher that compels them to choose their path. Is it their destiny? Have their whole lives led to this time when they can make all the difference to the lives of many they will save?

In his book: *The Road to Character*, David Brooks uses the word: "summons" to describe this higher destiny. People like Moses or Martin Luther King Jr, Joan of Arc or Malala Yousufzai have been summoned to fulfill a higher destiny, and even as they have freedom to say yes or no to such a destiny, they know what they must do. Even as they have a choice they have no choice. What they have witnessed and suffered becomes part of their summons and they give themselves over to it. They play their part in a larger story. They find their destiny.

In our own biblical tradition and especially in our Presbyterian church tradition we call this higher summons a "call." And in our tradition, it's not only great people and those who change the world who are called, and it's not just in extreme times of crisis where people are called. No. Each and every human being is called to fulfill a destiny. While there is always freedom to choose and while there are many terrible things that happen at random and by chance with no larger reason good enough to justify any of it, it is also true that things come our way in life where choosing to say no is no choice we can make. Our freedom can only be fulfilled if we say yes to a higher call and a higher destiny.

OK, preacher, so what is this destiny all about then? How do we figure out our own destiny as the everyday humans we are? Let's explore our scripture reading this morning in search of revelatory wisdom. How does Saul the Pharisee become Paul the apostle? The way his conversion story unfolds it looks like it's all predestined to be. Saul the Pharisee is trying to root out the Christianity infiltrating his Jewish community. He is fighting for a pure Judaism that refuses any hint that Jesus is the Jewish messiah who fulfills God's dream for the people and the world. Jesus is a fraud and Christians are poisoning the souls of their people.

But what happens to Saul? On his way to a Jewish community up north in search of Christians to imprison, there is a light so bright it blinds Saul and he falls to the ground. He then hears a voice. It is the risen Christ who confronts him, asking: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Persecuting followers of Jesus is equivalent to persecuting Jesus himself. Saul remains blind and needs to be taken by hand into the city. He has a kind of breakdown where all he has believed comes into question.

And while all this is taking place, the story takes us to another person, a Jewish Christian in that same city named Ananias. He has a vision of Jesus, too, where he is told to go to Saul, lay hands on him for healing, and welcome him into fellowship. Ananias is understandably scared. Saul is a violent man and he has the authority of the Jewish leaders to arrest and imprison all Christians. How can he trust that this is not all a trap?

But Ananias is told this: "Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." Saul is chosen and called, and Ananias is told what he must do. Certainly there is freedom of choice, but the fulfillment of destiny is by far the larger story that needs to unfold. Ananias, like Saul, must play his part. Sure they are free to make whatever choice they want to make. But in reality, there is only one path and one choice. Every other path and every other choice are ruinous.

OK, but what if this same story was being told today in a way we would more readily understand it? I mean, visions, light, blindness and Jesus speaking in what appears to be an auditory way? Well, let's personalize it. Have you ever felt threatened by a truth that would mean significant change in your beliefs and your life? Isn't it true that all too often we resist a truth that would disrupt our lives and we try to silence it and shut it down? Whether it's people telling us things or our consciences and hearts stirring, we resist change because it can really be difficult.

But at a certain point we can resist no longer, we break down and give in. Any other choice would be ruinous. Saul had a major breakdown. He had tried to silence his heart and conscience and all hints of Christianity, because his whole life was built around a form of Jewish faith that was very different. He was rising up the ranks as a young, up-and-coming Pharisaic leader. And now this faith from nowhere has come totally shaking him up. Finally, he can resist it no longer. The dissonance in his spirit between his ambition and a life-time of training versus an authenticity of love that is Jesus, breaks him in two.

While in the city, Jewish Christians hear he is there. Ananias is bold enough to take a chance, inspired as he is to follow a Jesus who not only risked his life for love, but was crucified for it. And so he goes to Saul, he opens his heart to Saul. Saul is given another chance. He is given the hand of forgiveness and reconciliation. He begins to heal. He can see again. His gifts as an educated Pharisee can be of great service to the Christian cause.

Ananias and other Christians of that community take the risk to welcome Saul and give him their trust. It pays off. Saul will become Paul, the great apostle to the gentiles, and he will give incredible leadership to the Jesus movement all the way to his death in Rome decades later.

So then, even as there is destiny being fulfilled in this story, and even as individuals are summoned, called and chosen, even predestined, to play their parts, every choice made must be made freely in order to be authentic. Every heart given over to the cause of love and justice must be given freely even as the choice once made feels more like a surrender to a higher truth. All too often we make choices in life but once made and lived out, we cannot imagine any other choice that could ever have been made. There is a larger story in which we must play our part. Living our lives is about figuring out where in the story of God's love and justice we fit in.

OK, preacher, this is all fine and good. But most of us will never be like Paul, or like any other great person with a strong sense that their lives, their visions and their doings are the fulfillment of some great destiny. How do we find our own path and how do we claim our freedom to choose it?

Well, why not ponder your life right now. Who is in it and who should be in it? What is going on in you right now? Where is your heart stirring? Where is fear an obstacle? Is it blocking you or holding you back from some choice you need the courage and love to make? What are the situations, responsibilities, opportunities, and perhaps, commitments yet to be made? What are the practices yet to be taken up? Our destiny is all that makes our lives and the situations of our lives what they are. How are we being called to fulfill God's love and justice in our own lives and our own relationships right now?

The choices are yours to make. You are free. At the same time, you are also called. The risen Christ is calling you to follow him in your own life, in all that is uniquely yours – the gifts, the opportunities and the limitations and responsibilities too. How may you figure out the larger story you are a part of and the part you may still have to play? What destiny is left for you to fulfill however little or much of life there is left for you to live?

Let us pray: Come to us, O God... shine a light on our way forward... and give us the courage and faith to follow through in fulfillment of your call to us; Amen.