

**Sunday Sermon**  
**July 15, 2018**  
**Psalm 139:1-6, Ephesians 1:3-14**  
**“Before the Foundation of the World”**

### Introduction

Imagine a group of Christians gathered as a house church in Ephesus, feeling discouraged, vulnerable, weak in faith. And they receive a letter. The leader unrolls the letter and begins to read. The words that the people hear touch their hearts with hope, purpose and vision.

And many centuries later, we gather as a church and hear some of those same words from the same letter. And we find there hope, purpose, and vision and a way to face even the most difficult circumstances of life, trusting God’s sovereign providence.

### I

What does the letter say? First of all, it says that our main purpose, our reason for being, is to praise and glorify God. That is why we are here. That is why we are called. In fact, the letter says, God chose us in Christ for this purpose even before the foundation of the world.

Now I understand that modern geologists and geophysicists say that Planet Earth is a little over four and a half billion years old. Creationists, on the other hand, say it is less than 10,000 years old. Whatever the earth’s actual age, this letter says that from before its foundation, God already had us in mind. Does that boggle your mind?

That is what scripture says, in Psalm 139 and in Ephesians 1. That not only before our mothers and fathers could conceive of us and conceive us, but before the conception of the world, God already knew who we were. We were destined for adoption as God’s own. Predestined, you could say.

### II

Ah, predestination, that misunderstood tenet of Presbyterians and reformed theology. We think we do not like the idea of predestination, because it means we are not in control. We want to believe that we have control over things, that we can determine our direction, that we can gee and haw with God like an old farmer pulling on the reins of a mule, determining how the row will be plowed.

But the scripture says God has been knitting and weaving us together for a purpose long before we were born. And God is still working on us. Have you ever seen a tag on a piece of clothing that says, “The irregularities in this product are not flaws but a natural result of the hand-working of the fabric?” That is what God is doing, hand working through the irregularities in our lives to make us God’s own.

And this letter goes further. There is predestination here, but there is also the sovereignty of God, and there is providence. The letter says that God is sovereign over all, controlling all of the universe, and yet at the same time holding you and me individually in mind. And that nothing, absolutely nothing is able to separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus.

Ray Stedman says that when he was about twelve years old, his family moved from Minnesota to Montana.

"The night before we left," he said, "I got down by my bed and said, 'Good-bye, God. We are moving to Montana.'

"I was sure," he said, "that I would not find God in Montana. But when we arrived, there was God," he said, "and I have found God everywhere since."

That is what the psalmist says. That is what this letter says. Wherever you go, you cannot get away from the love of God.

That is the promise we claim: When we cannot sleep for worrying about our child or grandchild. When we have to help our parent or spouse move to a memory unit. When they call to schedule the cancer treatments. When we get the pink slip. When we face some change that has to be made in our life.

### III

No, we do not like predestination, because we want to be in control. And yet when things happen, what do we do? We turn around and talk in terms of luck, because luck absolves us of responsibility.

Do you know that in the Bible's view there is no such thing as luck, chance, or randomness? Instead, according to the Bible, there is providence: God acting, caring, hearing, moving, sometimes when we realize it, more often when we do not, hand working the irregularities of our lives toward a good end.

In the little book *The Good News from North Haven*, Michael Lindvall tells the story of a strident old Calvinist professor of theology who gives a lecture in seminary on the will of God. He argues hard for a high view of providence.

To make his point perfectly, he ambles over to the classroom window and says to the students, "Do you see that man leaning on that lamppost by the bus stop down there?"

The class leans or stands up so that they can see out the window. The man is wearing a business suit and a hat and is fumbling in his pocket for something.

After they each have a look, the professor pauses dramatically and says slowly, "From the very beginning of time, God has intended that man to be standing there at this very moment."

The seminary students do not like the idea. It rankles all notions of free will and independence. Someone asks, "But what if he just got off at the wrong bus stop?"

The professor raises his eyebrows and asks, "The wrong bus stop from whose

point of view?”

### Conclusion

I do not begin to understand everything about predestination and the providence of God. Those take a lifetime of experience and learning. But I agree with Lindvall:

“So much comes upon us that we do not search out and choose. Rather it finds us, and we accept it as grace.

The will of God is an infinitely intricate weaving of incidents and accidents, plans and providence.

Sometimes it works through us,  
sometimes in spite of us,  
but in all things, it can work for good.”

I know it is so in my life.  
May it be so in yours. Amen.

\*Story from Michael L. Lindvall, “A Strange Providence,” in *The Good News from North Haven*, Guideposts: New York, pp.73-81.