

## “The Definite Plan and Foreknowledge of God”

Acts 2:14a, 22-32 • Psalm 16 • 1 Peter 1:3-9 • John 20:19-31

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

April 16, 2023

Second Sunday of Easter

Well, we got through Holy Week, and Easter. For those of us who went the whole way – from the joy of Palm Sunday to the weight of Maundy Thursday to the despair of Good Friday, to, finally, the surprise of Easter morn – it was exhausting. In a good way. Spiritually, emotionally, exhausting.

Which means I think we got it pretty much right. Because when you read the story, when you feel the passion and emotion that is inherent in the Gospel narrative, when you try to put yourself *there*, in the feet of the people who cheered for Jesus, who ate with Jesus, who betrayed Jesus, who abandoned Jesus ... the people who stripped Jesus, and beat Jesus, and mocked Jesus, and nailed Jesus to a couple beams of wood ... the people who anointed Jesus, who buried Jesus, who mourned for Jesus, the people who wept bitter tears for Jesus ... the people who went to the tomb that Sunday morning, the people who were so greatly surprised, the people who were both terrified and exultant, all at the same time ... it is a spiritually and emotionally exhausting story. And it's not just a story.

I want to express my tremendous appreciation to our choir. We do Holy Week every year. It's good, *really* good, every single year. This year ... you all just completely knocked it out of the park.

And so now we move on, past Easter, towards Pentecost. Actually, we get to keep celebrating Easter for the rest of this month, and most of the next, because Pentecost doesn't come around until the fiftieth day after Easter, which means we've got seven full weeks to celebrate it, and to sing some more Easter hymns. The disciples got to spend forty of those fifty days with Jesus, the risen Christ, on earth, before he ascended into heaven. The Gospel narratives only tell us bits and pieces of what happened during those forty days. I have a feeling the disciples needed Jesus to explain some things to them, again, and again, and again. Jesus had told them, before he was killed, what was going to happen to him, *three different times*. And they were still surprised at how it all turned out. Sometimes, you just have to hear things over and over again, until eventually they start to sink in.

One of the things the apostles finally came to understand is that all this had been *planned* by God beforehand. That becomes a recurring theme in the New Testament narrative as it continues after the resurrection. Our reading this morning from the book of Acts is a portion of the speech that Simon Peter gave on the day of Pentecost. In a way it's a little premature, since we're not at Pentecost yet, but at the same time, he is giving clear voice to convictions he came to believe passionately and with all his heart sometime, I think, between Easter and Pentecost. This is the same guy who lied about knowing Jesus, not just once, not just twice, but three times. And he was nowhere to be seen when Jesus was crucified. There is a night-and-day difference between the Simon Peter we see in the Gospels and the Simon Peter we see in the Book of Acts. He has come to *believe* some things.

“Fellow Israelites,” Simon Peter says, “listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know—this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law.” Let’s just walk through this slowly. “Jesus of Nazareth” – Jesus had been born in Bethlehem, but he had been raised in the village of Nazareth, in Galilee. “A man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders and signs that God did through him among you” – that’s a way of referring to all of the miraculous things Jesus did on earth: healing the lame, curing the sick, restoring sight to the blind, casting out demons, raising Lazarus from the dead, and so on, all of which revealed the glory of God, and were ways in which God provided ample testimony to people about Jesus’ close connection with the divine. “As you yourselves know” – that’s a reference to how publicly Jesus’s deeds came to be known; no matter how much he tried to encourage people to keep it quiet, word about him spread. Those crowds on Palm Sunday – *no one* could pretend any longer that people didn’t know who Jesus was. “This man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God” – this is the critical part. “Handed over to you” refers to Judas Iscariot’s betrayal of Jesus, and everything that followed after – his interrogation, first, by the Jewish leaders, then his interview with Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, then his death sentence, and finally his public execution. All of that is a very straightforward summary of the events that took place in Jerusalem not long before. It’s the next part that is, in all likelihood, new information for those hearing this speech: Simon Peter’s bold and audacious claim that all these things happened “according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God.” The word “plan” could also be translated “will” or “counsel” or “purpose.” We’re talking here about a divine *plan*, a divine *will*, a divine *counsel*, a divine *purpose*. It was *God’s* plan, *God’s* will, *God’s* purpose, that Jesus be handed over to die. And the word “foreknowledge” – the Greek word for that is *pro-gnosis*, which is, of course, where we get our word “prognosis” from. But our word “prognosis” generally refers to an *anticipated outcome* based on the currently available evidence and symptoms, like a medical prognosis or an economic forecast. Given what we know now, and similar situations we have seen in the past, this is *what we are pretty sure is going to happen*. That’s a prognosis. But the Greek word *pro-gnosis* is stronger than that. The word *gnosis* means “knowledge,” and the prefix “pro” means “before,” so the word literally means *knowledge beforehand*. It’s not just a forecast, a best guess based on the available evidence. It really means, *advance knowledge of something that definitely will happen*. So what Simon Peter is saying here is that God not only *planned* this outcome or this set of events, but God also *knew in advance* that it would turn out precisely in accordance with the divine will. That is to say: God *willed* this to happen, God – in a sense – *wanted* this to happen, and at the same time God knew it *would* happen. Jesus’s betrayal – which happened at the hands of humans – and Jesus’s death – which *also* happened at the hands of humans – were all part of *God’s plan*.

Which, of course, leads to all sorts of questions about the relationship between human agency and the divine will. How much of what we do does God know about in advance? How much of what we do is in accordance with the divine will of God – whether or not we are aware of it, whether or not we are trying to be faithful? Even if we turn our backs on God – as Simon Peter himself did, that fateful night – could that, in some way, shape, or form, be part of a *larger divine plan*? How much of what we do is part of God’s plan, even when we’re doing things that we *know* aren’t right?

If you’re expecting an answer to *those* questions this morning, well, sorry. Not today!

What Simon Peter is saying here is *really* important. It’s also, potentially, *really* explosive. It has the potential of being mis-used by people who *think* they know God’s will, or who foolishly *claim* that they *know* God’s will, when they’ve really given no thought to it whatsoever. I can think of all

sorts of instances in which someone might claim they know what God's will is, and I bet you can too. But let us all remember the third commandment: "You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God." That includes making any sort of presumptive claim about knowing the will of God. If you're going to claim that you know God's will, you better have a really strong and compelling argument from the scriptures. And you had better be prepared to defend it, really *really* well.

That, in fact, is what Simon Peter sets out to do, at least in part, in the next part of his speech. Indeed, this is what *all* the apostles and evangelists had to do, time and time again, whenever they were speaking to a skeptical crowd: they had to *make an argument*, an argument based in *scripture*. There was, at this point in time, no such thing as a New Testament. The first book in the New Testament wouldn't be written until a couple decades later. There were just the Jewish scriptures, what we would call the Old Testament, but they weren't called the "Old Testament" then, nor are they called the "Old Testament" by Jews today. For the Jews in the time of Jesus, sacred scripture consisted, first of all, of the Torah, the books of Moses, the first five books of the Bible; then, secondly, the Prophets, which included the books that bear the prophets' names as well as the historical books that talked about the prophets' deeds; then, thirdly, the book of Psalms; then, lastly, the various other writings that appear in our Old Testament, like Job and Esther and the rest. If Simon Peter and the other apostles and evangelists wanted to make a compelling argument about Jesus, they had to do so on the basis of the writings that the Jews already accepted as sacred scripture. So, in this case, Simon Peter turns to the Psalms, specifically to Psalm 16, a Psalm which is attributed to King David. Simon Peter reads: "I saw the Lord always before me, for he is at my right hand so that I will not be shaken." In Simon Peter's interpretation, "the Lord" refers here not to God, but to Jesus. David is saying, "I saw *Jesus* always before me." Simon Peter reads: "He was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh experience corruption." *Jesus* was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh experience corruption. *God was with him*. "This Jesus," Simon Peter says, "God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses."

Such was part of Simon Peter's argument that day. It is one of *many* such arguments we can find in the pages of the New Testament. What those apostles had to do was go back and re-learn all the scriptures they thought they knew – because, it turned out, the scriptures they already knew talked a *lot* about Jesus – and they never realized it. Not until after Christ had been raised from the dead. Then they had to share with others what they themselves had come to believe: *Jesus had been part of God's plan from the very beginning*. The scriptures had been pointing to him all along. Some of those scriptures said that he would be betrayed, that he would suffer and die, and that he would be raised.

You're probably all familiar with "red-letter Bibles" – those Bibles that print the words of Jesus in red. Those Bibles are helpful for people who want to be able to see quickly and at a glance what Jesus himself said. I think there should also be another Bible, a "blue-letter Bible" or a "green-letter Bible," or pick your favorite color: a Bible that would color all the passages in the Old Testament that talk about Jesus, that point forward to Jesus. That way, as you are reading along in the Psalms or in Isaiah or in many other books, you could quickly and at a glance see the passages about our Savior.

There was a plan. There was a divine plan from the very beginning. A central part of that plan was the betrayal, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Those elements were necessary. Critical. *Essential*.

For those are the elements that won our salvation. Those are the elements that redeemed us from our slavery to sin and from the curse of death. Those are the elements that brought us *life* and *hope*. Humans caused Jesus to die. Little did they know ... it was all for a greater good.

© 2023 Rev. Bill Pinches