

Psalm 112

Praise the Lord!

- Those who honor the Lord,
who adore God's commandments, are truly happy!
- 2 Their descendants will be strong throughout the land.
The offspring of those who do right will be blessed;
- 3 wealth and riches will be in their houses.
Their righteousness stands forever.
- 4 They shine in the dark for others who do right.
They are merciful, compassionate, and righteous.
- 5 Those who lend generously are good people—
as are those who conduct their affairs with justice.
- 6 Yes, these sorts of people will never be shaken;
the righteous will be remembered forever!
- 7 They won't be frightened at bad news.
Their hearts are steady, trusting in the Lord.
- 8 Their hearts are firm; they aren't afraid.
In the end, they will witness their enemies' defeat.
- 9 They give freely to those in need.
Their righteousness stands forever.
Their strength increases gloriously.
- 10 The wicked see all this and fume;
they grind their teeth, but disappear to nothing.
What the wicked want to see happen comes to nothing!

John 3

3 There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a Jewish leader. 2 He came to Jesus at night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could do these miraculous signs that you do unless God is with him."

3 Jesus answered, "I assure you, unless someone is born anew,[a] it's not possible to see God's kingdom."

4 Nicodemus asked, "How is it possible for an adult to be born? It's impossible to enter the mother's womb for a second time and be born, isn't it?"

5 Jesus answered, "I assure you, unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, it's not possible to enter God's kingdom. 6 Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh, and whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Don't be surprised that I said to you, 'You must be born anew.' 8 God's Spirit[b] blows wherever it wishes. You hear its sound, but you don't know where it comes from or where it is going. It's the same with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

9 Nicodemus said, "How are these things possible?"

Sermon

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator, our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit: Amen.

In middle school, I was enamored by stories of sailors, no matter the culture. Whether Vikings on their voyage to North America long before history thought Europeans could have traversed the Atlantic, or Chinese Admiral Zheng whose largest ships were four to five times larger than Columbus' flagship, or Magellan, the Portuguese captain whose fleet became the first to sail around the earth. The rebel within me is especially fond of pirates. Now, the foodie in me hates the stories of gout and dry biscuits, though the salt pork and rum don't seem so bad.

And at some point, every sailor comes to know the fickle, uncontrollable temper of the wind. If a sailor heard what Jesus said to Nicodemus, "The wind blows wherever it wishes. You hear its sound, but you don't know where it

comes from or where it is going," they would likely just nod and continue swab the decks. The very basis of sailing is built on harnessing the winds power, but there's a vital difference between harnessing the wind and controlling it. Sailors eventually find out that, without the wind, they drift into the abyss of nowhere, and too much wind can rip apart their sails or scuttle their vessel. The wind blows wherever it wishes, and the sailors depend on it for their very livelihood. They're helpless without the wind, and they just can't control it.

So too, as people of faith, we depend on the work of God's spirit for our lives, and though we can't control it, we're helpless without the Spirit. When we think about reCreation in our own lives, we must, at a fundamental level, realize that what we're doing isn't creating on our own. We're not the ones in control of this project. Like the wind, the Spirit of God blows where it pleases, and like

sailors, our best bet to make progress is to direct our sails so they're filled with the Spirit. Only then will we go forward, living toward and growing into God's Kingdom.

At some level, this sermon is about free will and how free our will actually is, as God works reCreation in this world. In our culture, most just assume that we have a completely free will and view any kind of predestination, that a greater power may influence our world, as some sort of nursery rhyme, a faint myth that should be left behind with diapers and training wheels. We believe, we demand, that we're free, that whatever we've done we've done it ourselves, that we're so radically independent that we can pull ourselves up by our bootstraps. But where did we get our boots? Even if we bought them by through money that we earned, who made them? And who paid us the money we used to buy those boots? And who gave value to that money so that a swipe of a magnetic strip or a few pieces

of paper became appropriate recompense for the leather and metal and cloth that constitute this epic footwear of folklore?

That's the secret, friends. No one is fully independent. No one is truly self-reliant. So some conclude that, since we're not as free as our political myths imagine, we must instead be fully bound, that whatever actions we perform were predestined by God, such that we have no free choice whatsoever, that our occupations and food choices and spouses and homesteads and the very clothes we put on this morning were chosen for us. Predestination, in this sense, assumes that every event has an architect beyond ourselves, like a game designer building every possible occurrence into the software of life.

But, anyone whose sat with a finicky friend at a restaurant with a long menu knows that there's sometimes too much free will in our lives, not just because of the

choices we make, but because so often we're overwhelmed by the mere capacity to choose. Seriously, taking some of our cousins to Macados, with those long menus, means we also have to pack sleeping bags just in case we're there all night. But more problematic than all that, we have to consider this: If everything is predestined, if God forced everything to happen just as it happened, then we've got to lay the Holocaust and the Trail of Tears and the systematic enslavement of Africans and the intentional denial of LGBTQ+ rights and the hole in the ozone layer and the ever-growing pacific gyre and everything we might point to as evil all at the feet of God. Those, dear friends, are not directions that the Spirit Wind of God blows. That's not the work of our God, and so we trust that predestination of this radically complete sort simply isn't true.

So what are we left with? If I learned anything in seminary, it was that most "either/or" questions were likely

best answered with “both/and” responses. There is some truth to free will, and some truth to predestination. God is active in the world. We know this from the legacy of Eden, of Eve and Adam, of Noah, of Sarai and Abram visited by God’s messengers, of Jacob wrestling with God at the river’s edge, of the words to Moses through the burning bush, of all the prophets filled with the many words and singular will of God, and most of all through the presence of Jesus, God with us, the fullness of God clothed in the fullness of humanity. Yet, we also know that this world isn’t what God desired it to be because our free will got in the way, because we disobeyed the one who created the perfect place for us to thrive, and so we’ve ruined Eden. In short, God is at work, and invites, not forces, us, to be a part of that work.

I read a wonderful book called *Resisting Structural Evil* by a Lutheran theologian named Cynthia Moe-Lobeda. To

paraphrase her work, she said this: We created the problems in this world. Yet, because of God's presence and purpose, we can correct those problems as well. Thinking about that in light of this text in John 3, perhaps we should say it this way: We fell into sin because we failed to embrace the direction that God's wind, God's spirit, was blowing. We tried to move against God rather than with God, and so we fell away from God. Rather than embrace our God-given birth, we tried to create something contrary to God's desire. Because of God's intervention in Jesus Christ, however, we know that the wind of God continues to blow toward reconciliation, toward peace, toward a new creation. God's not satisfied with the brokenness we brought into the world, and so God makes a way forward for us to help the healing process. In Jesus, we see God's intent for reCreation and God's invitation for us to participate, to help undo the damage done by our sin.

God's done the work of forgiving sin, the work that only God can do, and now God's at work reCreating a world free from sin and invites us co-create this new realm.

This might seem absurd or out of line, but remember that God invited Adam and Eve to name and care for creation, to become creators in the image of their Creator. In Jesus, so too God invites us to bring a new world into existence, a world called the Kingdom of Heaven, a world called the Kingdom of God, that isn't tainted by sin, isn't doomed by our mistakes. In Jesus, God is reCreating all things, and inviting the church to Adam and Eve, co-creating the Kingdom of God.

It's absolutely essential to remember that we can only do this work if God's at work in this already. We cannot do it on our own. Even if we manage to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps, we must remember that God's the one who first gave us leather clothes in the garden, and later gifted

cobblers with the ability to create comfortable, durable footwear. Anything good that we do depends on us directing our sails so that they catch the wind of God as it blows and points the ships of our lives toward the port of God's new kingdom. Without that wind, without God's powerful presence, we would be quite lost at sea.

Yet, the promise in this passage is that the wind of God is blowing. Rebirth is happening. Our baptisms are the first evidence of that, for we're tied to the death and resurrection of Jesus. We are even now in the midst of God's reCreation, and more than that, God's inviting us to become a part of that work. Many of us likely feel like Nicodemus: How are these things possible?

They're not possible because of us, but because God's got a plan. Not a plan where God will force every single event to happen, but a plan where the end of the story is written in the Lamb's Book of Life, where one day every

knee will bow and tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, where all people will revel in the glory of God's Kingdom with healthy bodies, full bellies, and enough of everything, love most of all. That's what we call sovereignty, because God's love reigns supreme and the wind of that love blows toward the land of everlasting life. Will we billow our sails and follow God's lead? That's a choice we can make, and the choice ultimately boils down to this: God is building God's kingdom with or without us. God is finding people willing to work for this good, even those who aren't church members or regular attenders. Yet, they see the movement of the Spirit, and they grasp that wind. God's chosen to offer us a place in that kingdom, and welcomed us with baptism, but whether we go where the wind of God blows, whether we become co-creators in God's reCreation, that's up to us to decide. And the time to decide, dear friends, is now.

What I mean by that is this. We're most alive when we don't just worship on Sundays, but when we shape our entire lives around the Spirit of God. That means we're called to spend money differently, sharing it radically, even if that means others will have better retirements or cooler toys than us. That means we're called to live life differently, making relationships across lines of race and income and ethnicity, even if that means we're risking our comfort. That means we're called to welcome refugees even if others don't understand, to confront racism even though that means losing privilege, to make more environmentally friendly choices even though they might be less expedient or more expensive. We're called to reduce the waste that creates trash heaps in the ocean, reduce the use of chemicals that are tearing God's atmosphere to shreds, and put those resources to work in ways that bless those most in need. Why? Because this is the creation God's

called us to care for, and that includes all people, all places, all resources. We're called to care, and that's not meant to be easy. It might feel like we're rowing against the current at times. But, if we catch the wind of the Spirit as she blows through the world, our work will go a long way toward the Kingdom of God. Amen.