

“Choices: Destiny Not Fate”

Mark 1:9-15, Amos 5:24, Matthew 4:5-7 & 10:8

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Prayer for Understanding God of grace, you promised to never break your covenant with us. Amid all the changing words of our generation, speak your words of eternal love. Amen.

Walter Brueggemann wrote an article entitled “*Destiny not Fate*”. Destiny is defined as something that has to happen by the irresistible power of an agency. As Christians, we might define destiny as we will enjoy glorious resurrection life forever by the irresistible grace of God. Destiny is our future. Destiny believes our choices determine our present circumstances. Fate is the development of events beyond a person’s control, regarded as predetermined by a supernatural power. Fate says that all your choices are predetermined. Fate says that our present circumstances are all set. Fate says there is nothing you can do to change yourself or change the world. Fate is despair and resignation. Destiny is hope, believing that our loving choices are making a more loving world. Destiny believes that I can become a more loving person. Destiny believes God is loving to bend all to goodness and love **and** each of us is God’s partner in striving for goodness and love.

Walter Brueggemann is a renowned Old Testament scholar. He supports every aspect of his article with scripture. I am going to share Walter’s highlights and conclusion.

Walter begins, “One of our neighbors who will not wear a mask says, ‘Well, if I die it must be my time.’ Our roads, moreover, are strewn with signs that say, ‘God’s got this.’ These judgments, if taken seriously, conclude that we are fated to a future that is already determined for us. This sentiment is a wish for and confidence in a world that is settled, secure, stable, does not change, and cannot change. This sense of fate, when uttered, seems to locate life in a deep trust in God “whose got the whole world in his hands.” In fact, however, it is a statement of despair and resignation, without hope or expectation for anything new. The “God’s got this” posts and the statement of my neighbor together bespeak a sense of helplessness before circumstances that are beyond our control. Fate amounts to a loss of agency, when being an agent is understood as the capacity to act to open new futures for self, for neighbor, and for the world. Agency is our ability to make choices. When one loses agency, one is a passive recipient of what comes, whether what comes is from God or from elsewhere. It is a refusal to take any initiative or responsibility beyond the present status quo.”

Those who worship and trust in fate become powerless and inanimate. They have no agency. They lose hope that their loving choices are making a more loving world.

Regarding Walter’s mask refusing neighbor who says, “Well, if I die it must be my time,” Walter concludes she has willingly signed on for a world in which she is neither permitted nor expected to exercise agency, to have free will to make choices. She understands herself to have no role to play in the shaping of the future that is to come upon us. Walter’s fear, moreover, is that the Church’s singular insistence upon grace from God has become “cheap” in the sense that it diminishes our responsibility to make loving choices.

The covenantal-prophetic tradition of the Old Testament to which Jesus is an heir is an invitation to agency, choice making, as a part of the human role in covenant. YHWH’s covenant partner has an active role to play in the life of the world. On the one hand, YHWH has agreed “to be our God”. On the other hand, we are agreeing to be YHWH’s “treasured people”. The role of treasured people, in the horizon of Deuteronomy, is not a one-dimensional, blind, unthinking obedience. Rather, it is being responsive to YHWH’s commandments, blessings, and love, requiring active interpretive engagement and decision-making regarding how to love God, neighbor, self, and all of creation. Thus, the covenantal tradition is a community at work to generate an alternative future. We are being blessed by God. We can bless others by making loving choices.

Walter continues, “Indeed, if one considers the commandments concerning socio-economic justice, it is clear that responsible obedience is subversive of the status quo, for it concerns debt cancellation, loans without interest, prompt payment of workers and a generous safety net for the disadvantaged.” As covenant people, the imperative is to “choose” destiny, continually choosing life so that you may live abundantly. An alternative is fate, to muddle through the status quo, to endure today’s problem solely on the promise of heaven.

The prophets repeatedly convicted Israel of living by fate, refusing agency, refusing to make loving choices, that bring about an alternative world, where all people are blessed. The prophets regularly conclude that the failure to

making loving choices will bring disaster, even upon the “chosen” people. The prophets urge us to return to destiny, to covenant, to hope, to making loving choices and taking loving action to partner with God in making earth like heaven soon. Amos urges us to live in such a way that **Amos 5:24 “justice rolls down like waters and righteousness flows like an ever-flowing stream.”** This is a call for agency, for making loving choices. Jesus who is situated in the covenantal-prophetic stream of Israel sent his disciples out to **Matthew 10:8 “Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons.”** Jesus’ desire is that we open new futures for those whose present circumstance are skewed toward despair. We are empowered and expected to exercise agency, to make loving choices, to take compassionate action, generating new social possibilities.

Walter continues, “As I was thinking about agency toward newness, I read Mary Doria Russell’s book *A Thread of Grace*. Her book is a remembrance of the way in which generous Italians protected Jews during the Holocaust. “The sages offer us a way to understand the terrible times when we are driven into exile, when we are beaten and enslaved, when we are killed with less thought than a butcher gives a chicken. The Holy One has made us God’s partners, the sages teach. God gives us wheat, we make bread. God gives us grapes, we make wine. God gives us the world. We make of it what we will — all of us together. When the preponderance of human beings chooses to act with justice and generosity and kindness, then learning and love and decency prevail. When the preponderance of human beings chooses power, greed, and indifference to suffering, the world is filled with war, poverty, and cruelty. Bombs do not drop from God’s hand. Triggers are not pulled by God’s finger. Each of us chooses, one by one, and God’s eye does not turn from those who suffer or from those who inflict suffering.”

The quality of life tomorrow is a result of our choices today. Choosing justice, generosity, and kindness will yield a future much different than choosing power, greed, and indifference. Each choice will yield an inescapably future on earth.

A careful reading of the Old Testament reveals that both covenant partners, us, and God, are indispensable for the manner life unfolds on earth. No loving earthly world without the agency of YHWH. And no loving earthly world without the agency of humanity. It is a both/and, not an either/or. In the Old Testament people are summoned by prophets, law, and love to co create with God our earthly future.

I have preached plenty of sermons on grace, on our ultimate future, that all of us will enjoy a glorious resurrection life in heaven for eternity. That is our destiny. Today’s sermon is on life on earth, destiny on earth, how our choices yield our quality of life.

Walter continues, “We may wonder, then, why my neighbor refuses the manifest future-creating chance of mask wearing and why the one who posts “God’s got this” chooses to eschew human agency avoiding our responsibility to make loving choices? Well, for one thing, it is easier! Fate avoids all risk, all venture into an ill-defined possibility. That choice (no doubt made unwittingly) is a decision for a changeless status quo world in which no real future is expected or thought to be possible. The refusal of agency, choice making, is to opt for an abiding present tense of feebleness and helplessness. And of course, that option is vigorously encouraged by powers that prefer that we should rest in helplessness.” Fate is resignation and abandonment.

Since we are in the image of God, we are called to co-create with our choices and actions a loving world. God’s world is not fixed and closed, rather is a creation underway toward newness. The recovery of the theme of creation as an open-ended process is crucial. In that context, effective human agents, are deeply rooted in memories that attest, remember, and treasure old performances of agency, both divine and human; are transformatively located in a world that is under promise, so that faith is indeed the work of seeking “a new country” that is our true “homeland”. That “homeland” is not about life after death but concerns the coming of God’s new creation so that God’s will is done “on earth as it is in heaven.” God is eager to co-create with us vitality, wellbeing, and wholeness for all. We are urged to choose wellbeing in active, daring, wise ways. Loving choices is how we live and prosper in our present “land of promise”.

“God will not give you more than you can handle.” If this statement is comforting to you then wonderful. However, be careful in sharing it with others. I do not believe that our loving God tests us, or sends calamities, or any kind of difficulty into our lives. God can bring good out of tragedy. The difficulty we encounter sometimes is random and sometimes is the result of poor choices. Sometimes difficulty is a combination. Take a hurricane that destroys someone’s home. Hurricanes are random. Hurricanes today are more forceful due to generations of poor choices regarding the environment. Anyone who buys a house in a hurricane zone is knowingly making a choice that their house may be destroyed by a hurricane. Some of our difficult situations are more than we can handle. Often, we need the help of others and God to make it through. I have seen the statement, “God will not give you more than you can handle,” comfort people and I have seen it shame people and cause greater pain. It appears to be another one of those destiny verse fate statements. Fate says God made all this terrible stuff happen to you, but it is not more than you can handle, so you are ok. Destiny says you have choices as to how you will respond. Your family, friends, and neighbors

have choices to perhaps respond in compassionate, helpful, caring ways to get you through the terrible stuff. Fate struggles to make sense out of tragedy and tends to move on. Fate is sad those people lost their house in the hurricane. God will help them through it. Someday they will enjoy resurrection life in God's eternal indestructible mansion. Destiny asks questions and demands choices. How can I help this family? What do they need? How can we be better stewards of the environment? How will we build houses that can withstand greater storms? How can we alleviate poverty that results in the only affordable housing that is close to work being frail houses in the path of hurricanes? How will we make it possible for all people to enjoy safe housing soon? Fate says, "You are in my prayers." then turns it all over to God. Destiny says, "You are in my prayers." and gets to work on making the prayer a reality.

After Jesus' baptism, Jesus had a choice. Perhaps the fully human aspect of Jesus wanted to hunker down, play it safe at home, take the easy path, enjoy life as much as possible, live by fate. After all, Jesus will save us all through his death and resurrection. Jesus will carry us all to heaven. The Holy Spirit and Jesus fully God aspect drove Jesus to the wilderness, to live by destiny, so Jesus can understand our struggle, suffering, and pain, so Jesus knows our struggle to make loving choices and take loving action. Jesus was driven into the wilderness, so the fully human aspect of Jesus finds ways to co-create with the fully God aspect of Jesus in making choices that change the world for the better in the present, feeding the hungry, healing people, welcoming outcasts, naming injustice and isms, tearing down every wall, welcoming all into a safe loving community, valuing every person. This driven, co-creating Jesus inspired disciples to do the same and is inviting you to do the same today.

Mark 1:9-15 "In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." And the Spirit immediately drove Jesus out into the wilderness. Jesus was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and Jesus was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on Jesus. Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

The united human and God, Jesus, proclaimed the good news and brought the good news through daily choices and actions of compassion, forgiveness, caring, helping, giving, loving, celebrating, rejoicing.

One of Jesus' temptations was to live by fate instead of destiny. Fate says jump into danger God will take care of you. Destiny says do your part to keep safe and God will help you. Fate does not participate in our covenant with God. Destiny embraces our covenant, to be a partner with God in bending all to loving goodness here on earth. And destiny believes that no matter our choices God will in heaven perfect and glorify all. **Matthew 4:5-7 NLT "Then the devil took Jesus to the holy city, Jerusalem, to the highest point of the Temple, and said, "If you are the Son of God, jump off! For the Scriptures say, 'God will order God's angels to protect you. And they will hold you up with their hands so you won't even hurt your foot on a stone.'" Jesus responded, "The Scriptures also say, 'You must not test the Lord your God.'"**

This past week you should have received an email or letter entitled "Lenten Disciplines". In the Ash Wednesday service, Pastor April invited you to make loving choices and take loving actions that reveal your love of the environment, Pastor Riz invited you to love your neighbor, and I invited you to love those in need. This Lent, Trinity Presbyterian, New Life Presbyterian, North Presbyterian, and our friends will strive to make loving choices and take passionate, hopeful, loving action today to make tomorrow better for everyone. We know that most of you are already making loving choices and are taking loving action. Our challenge for you is to add at least three loving actions during Lent. It is a long document because we are striving to provide everyone with loving actions that each of us will make a choice to do. Please pick something from each category, love of environment, love of neighbor, and love of those in need. Once you have chosen your love of environment action, skip to the love of neighbor and love of those in need sections.

Let us strive to follow Jesus' example, to be driven in making choices and taking actions that make earth more like heaven. Amen