

Choices, Chances and Providence

a sermon by J. R. Luck, Jr.
August 7, 2011 at Peace UCC, Greensboro, NC

My friend David LaMotte is a folk singer now living in Chapel Hill, NC and in his career he has written very few love songs. But then he went off and met Deanna and since then he's written quite a few. One of his newer songs is "Chances" and one of the verses goes like this: *"I may be a foolish man to think I glimpse a guiding hand, to bow my head and close my eyes. But what's the probability that you'd be here with me? The numbers do not lie so what are the chances? What are the chances the stars would align? The exact circumstances for this moment in time? What are the chances?"*

So what are the chances? Is everything just random? Is it in the stars? Read your horoscope for this week yet? I think most of us have struggled at some point with choice and chance. Were David and Deanna destined by God to be with each other? How about us and our partners? So did an event happen because of choices that were made, or pure dumb luck, or the presence of the hand of God?

And especially since 9-11 there has been a lot of speculation in this area of theology. Was it just a coincidence and therefore sheer luck that someone's child got a flu virus and they decided not to drive into lower Manhattan for work that day? Or was it the hand of God intentionally protecting them from harm? And if it was the hand of God, why did God not decide to intervene in the lives of the more than 3,000 who died that day? How do we differentiate between the hand of God and what Shakespeare called the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune"? And how do we differentiate between good and bad theology when it comes to chance and predestination and the will of God?

To ground us this morning, let's consider Joseph and his brothers as it's a story about chance and choices and the hand of God. It's also a story complicated by the family dynamics which I have attempted to spell out in some detail in recent weeks. In short, everyone knew Rachel was Jacob's favorite wife and therefore her son Joseph was his favorite son. It also would appear that Joseph had a bit of his old man in him, and he enjoyed... reminding his older brothers as to his favored status. While I hate to shatter a common belief, Joseph did not have a technicolor dream coat or a coat of many colors. What he did have was a coat that would not have been worn to work in the fields. In other words, it was a coat that stated plainly for all to see, others have to work but not me.

Well one day the other boys had had it and they threw Joseph and his pretty, little coat into a pit to die. But eventually one of them thought better of it and instead of killing him, they sold him into slavery to some Ishmaelites who took him to Egypt.

Now in Egypt things went from bad to worse for Joseph. There he was approached by Potiphar's wife who wanted Joseph to meet her for a midnight rendezvous. But when he rejected her sexual advances, she had Joseph sent to prison on trumped up charges. Well, to make a nine chapter story short, one day Pharaoh got wind that a prisoner named Joseph could interpret dreams. When Pharaoh discovered how good Joseph was at interpreting dreams, he put Joseph in charge of storing up supplies for a huge drought that would be arriving. And so it was that the dream Joseph once had came true; people came from everywhere to bow down at his feet and beg for food.

Now amidst the masses coming to Egypt for food were Joseph's brothers, but of course they don't recognize him all grown up and wearing Egyptian headpieces. But Joseph recognized them and he kept the wool pulled over their eyes for a while. But when he did reveal himself, I think it's safe to say that his brothers were more than a little nervous. But instead of vengeance, Joseph says, "Fear not. You meant evil against me; but God meant it for good to bring it about that many should be kept alive." In other words, the brother's attempt to silence an arrogant dreamer became the means by which God kept many alive.

That is the story of Joseph in its reader's digest version and it is a story filled with twists and turns. So is it a story about choices? Well Joseph did choose to shove his status as daddy's favorite into his brother's faces. At least one brother chose not to have Joseph's murder on his conscience. And Joseph

certainly chose not to exact revenge on his brothers. But does that rule out the role of chance and happenstance? Was it just chance the Ishmaelites happened by? Perhaps it was simply bad fortune to end up working for Potiphar's wife. Perhaps it is both/and and more.

I firmly believe in choices and that we as individuals and as a nation and as a church will reap the consequences of our choices. I also believe that sometimes you are simply in the wrong place at the wrong time whether it is the World Trade Center on 9-11 or in Joplin, Missouri when a huge tornado touched down. But I also believe in something called providence.

Webster's defines providence as the state of being provident or the ability to make provisions for the future. But what does that mean?

Let me tell you a little about Molly. A survivor of childhood abuse, Molly was and perhaps still is an assistant director for a sexual assault center in Virginia. In the past she has had church-going Christians tell her that God allowed her brother to sexually abuse her for years, so that she can now minister to those who have been abused. No, no, no, no, no! There is choice. Molly's brother made a choice and there are always consequences to our choices. But what is ALSO true is that while God never desired this for Molly, God can take even the darkest of choices and make something out of them as God did with Molly. That God can use horrible events does NOT mean that God predestines horrible events or desires horrible events. When God uses and redeems both the consequences of our choices and the luck of the hand life deals you, it becomes providence.

One of the most popular works of religious fiction - I emphasize that it is in the fiction genre - continues to be the "Left Behind" series, and to be blunt, I think its theology is more often than not, in a word, lousy. It's apocalyptic theology is utterly incongruent with the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. But having said that, author Tim LaHaye does have one thing right: the future does not lie simply in our hands. We may have choices, but ultimately the future does not lie in our hands.

I think one of the reasons we have become such a fearful people and country is that we have come to believe that everything is either left to chance, or, that everything is left to our own choices and our own will. I don't know about you, but neither of those two options are very appealing or very reassuring to me. Chance? Um.... no thank-you. Our own free will? Our choices? I don't think so. I'll take what's behind door #3 please. What is appealing to me is providence; that God will make provisions for our future both from happenstance as well as our choices.

You know a year ago I was going crazy trying to find a job teaching or in the counseling field. I couldn't find one. I couldn't even find an interview. So was that predestined or was I just an ever-so typical job seeker in this lousy economy? Now the best thing that could have happened to me last year was that I take some time off. I desperately needed some time to heal emotionally. So guess what? I discovered that I had an incredibly rare disease. Two surgeries later and I'm at home recovering. I couldn't have worked even if I had gotten a job. Was that predestined or just chance; literally a 1.8 in a million chance?

And during all of that, what job was I not looking for? What job did I have no interest in? That's right pastoring. So was it predestined; was it the will of God for Dale Bennet to call me when I was at home by myself twiddling my thumbs while recovering from surgery? So why am I here today? Chance? The will of God? Predestination?

20 years ago I had no intention of being a minister. Was it simply bad luck that every doctoral program I applied to rejected me despite assurances from multiple professors that I would be accepted somewhere? And with no school to go to for the first time in my life, I chose a job at a church. Was that really a choice? Did Jeremiah have a choice? When you're set aside, ordained from the time before you were born as was Jeremiah, how much choice do you really have? Do you have much choice when you encounter a burning bush? Was it simply luck that Mary fell in love with the one man in ancient Palestine who wouldn't stone her for getting pregnant? Was that relationship ordained by God? If Jesus had to come through the lineage of David, did Joseph really have a choice or had that marriage already been... prearranged?

If you're looking for someone who knows the answers to all of those questions, you've got the wrong interim pastor because I don't. I do not know and I don't even pretend to know. I do know that there are some real theological dangers in advocating for a life that is completely planned or predestined. And leaving aside the theological pitfalls, that whole idea just repulses me. Who wants to be a puppet in a show that's already been pre-scripted? But I also know, sometimes I wonder. Is there more than chance when at least some events happen? At least there is one thing I don't have to wonder about. I don't wonder about providence.

Beyond the presence of random chance and beyond the consequences of our choices, even our poor ones, there is the hand of God at work. There is far more going on in my life and your life this very minute than we are aware, and there is far more going on in the life of Peace church than we are aware. Even now God is making provisions for the future: for me, for you, for this church. So fear not. Our destiny is not in the hands of the Democrats or the Republicans (thanks be to God). Our destiny is not in the hands of Standards and Poor. Our destiny is not found in our weaponry, or our technology. Our destiny is not even completely in our hands although I do believe we are co-creators of it. No, there is another writer of the chapters of our lives. There is chance, but we will not be left simply to chance. There are choices but we will not be left simply to our consequences. There is the providence of God as well.

So I wonder... what does God have planned for us tomorrow? I really don't know, but honestly, maybe for the first time in my adult life, I'm looking forward to finding out.
Amen.