

"Our Christmas Destiny"

Ephesians 1:3-14

January 2, 2011

2nd Sunday After Christmas

In the popular science fiction movie in the *Star Wars* series, *Return of the Jedi*, the hero, Luke Skywalker, is battling his archenemy, Darth Vader. After a flurry of blows with light sabres, Luke slices off Vader's hand. The evil emperor descends a flight of stairs to the two combatants and tells Luke, "Luke, fulfill your destiny," meaning that he is supposed to kill Darth Vader and assume his place at the emperor's side. It is a very strong and powerful destiny, to be sure. However, in this case, Luke does not fulfill his destiny, at least not the destiny the emperor had in mind.

The idea of having a destiny -- something good that is yours before you even know about it and which nothing can stop from occurring -- is a very popular one in science fiction movies. It is also an idea that many people today like to believe in and hope to be true. Some would think that meeting the perfect girl or perfect guy must be destiny. Some would think that bumping into a millionaire who, impressed by your personality and work habits, hires you to a job that pays six figures must be destiny. Some might think that, in athletics, it would be the destiny of a team to make it through the entire season undefeated and win the championship.

Some though might conclude that this whole talk about "destiny" is just a hope or a dream without any basis in reality. It certainly would have nothing to do with our spiritual lives, would it? It would be arrogant or even sinful to talk about us having some sort of destiny with God. There are too many variables involved to think that we already have something so good in the future before we knew about it or did anything about it. There are too many uncertainties to think that nothing could stop it from occurring. Or, is there? The idea of having a destiny is not foreign to Christianity. In fact, the idea that we're born with a particular future in store for us is at the very heart of Christianity and something to ponder as we enter a new year.

It's obvious that we do have a destiny to sin. Our text mentions the creation of the world. Remember that God the Father created this world and everything in it, including people, to be perfect. Adam and Eve changed all of that by choosing to disobey the Lord's command regarding the tree of knowledge of good and evil. That choice not only doomed them, but, like a deadly infection, it corrupted all of their offspring to come.

Back in Wisconsin, when I served in deaf ministry, I knew several families who were deaf for several generations. One family in particular had grandma who was deaf. Her son was deaf. His son was deaf. And his sons were deaf. They were not deaf because they chose to be. They were not deaf because their hearing had occasional lapses which caused them not to hear something. They were deaf because they were born that way and they were born that way because deafness was passed on from one generation to another. They couldn't help it. They were genetically destined to be deaf in that family.

In the same way, sin has been passed down from Adam and Eve. You are a sinner, not because you chose to be. You are not a sinner because you have occasional lapses which cause you to occasionally make bad choices to transgress God's Laws. You were born that way. You were spiritually destined to be a sinner. You are not a sinner because you commit sin. You commit sin because you are a sinner by nature. No matter how hard you try to avoid sinning -- no matter how many New Year's resolutions you make to improve your life and do better, you cannot avoid your destiny.

Yet, although sin and its final destination - the grave and hell- seemed to be mankind's destiny, God's plan to rescue humanity would supersede it. Salvation was destined to happen. We celebrate Christmas and hear the familiar story of Jesus' birth from the Gospel according to St. Luke and we calmly think, "Oh, how nice!"

But we are only seeing the final fulfillment of that plan of salvation in the birth of the Christ child. What we often fail to consider (although our children routinely tell us in their Christmas Eve service) is how easily that plan could have been derailed. After Adam and Eve, humanity became so sinful that God wished He had never created them. God eventually wiped out all of humanity in a devastating flood. But the plan of salvation moved on through Noah and his family. When that petered out due to mankind's sinfulness, God chose a pagan moon-god-worshiping man named Abraham through which to bring about salvation. Abraham nearly screwed up the plan by trying to help it along through conceiving a son with his wife's servant girl. Yet God provided the miraculous birth of Isaac to keep the plan alive. The plan passed on through people like David and Solomon who, although they were noted for their great faith, were also terrible sinners. Through Solomon's penchant for taking on wives and allowing their foreign gods to be brought into Israel, the nation stood under the judgment of God and was destroyed. Yet the plan lived on

God literally moved heaven and earth to make the plan occur according to prophecy, overcoming the biological laws of nature so that the Savior would be born of a virgin and overcoming Joseph and Mary's residing in Nazareth by causing the Roman Emperor to call for a census that would bring them to Bethlehem. What we celebrate here at Christmas time is not simply the birth of the Savior but also the fact that, despite thousands of years of circumstances and endless screw ups and multiple botches by mankind, destiny had been fulfilled in the Babe of Bethlehem. Salvation was here.

Throughout Jesus' life, He was tempted by Satan and dissuaded by his friends to abandon His destiny to die for the sin of the world. But destiny would not be denied. Despite the fact that He had done nothing worthy of death and the fact that He lived under a Jewish government which did not have the right to execute criminals, God worked our miraculous circumstances that brought Jesus to a cross 33 years later as the sacrifice for all sin and, despite all known laws of nature to the contrary, raised Him from the dead three days later as the guarantee of life forever. Destiny was fulfilled, not denied.

Now, if we can see through our own experiences our destiny as sinners, no matter how hard we try to change, and we can see through Scripture the destiny of salvation to come, no matter how hard people tried to screw it up, why would it be hard to believe that each of us individually has a destiny which will ultimately culminate in heaven, no matter what happens and no matter how hard we screw up? The good news is that there is no reason not to believe that and God's Word today in the epistle reading tells us of our destiny as we begin, with Christmas, to celebrate the events in our Lord's life which will fulfill that destiny.

The Scripture says that God did not wait for us to choose Him (something that would be impossible since we are dead in sin and unable to choose), but He chose us. He did not choose us on the basis of how we turned out after we were born or how good we grew up to be. "He chose us in him (i.e. Christ) before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him." In other words, He chose you on the basis of Christ and His merit (not yours) to be holy and blameless. He did that, not only before you were grown up, not only before you were born, but before the world was even created.

He has given you a destiny -- something good that is yours before you even knew about it and which nothing can stop from occurring. Our text even uses that word. "In love he predestined us for

adoption as sons through Jesus Christ according to the purpose of his will." It was, is, and ever shall be your destiny to be sons and daughters of God. You weren't born that way, but God adopted you into His family when you were born again in Holy Baptism and the benefits of Jesus' perfect life, sacrificial death, and glorious resurrection became yours personally. All this, Paul says, is not because of good works you have done, religious decisions you have made, or even because you are less of a sinner than anyone else. It is by "his glorious grace, with which he has freely blessed us (not "might bless" or "will bless", but "has blessed") in the Beloved."

Now you can reject your destiny through unbelief. You, like the prodigal son, can run away from your destiny. But God will never rescind or revoke your destiny to be his sons and daughters forever, no matter what you do. Circumstances on earth cannot alter your destiny. The accusations of Satan and your own conscience cannot void your destiny.

One of the things which is most beloved in our celebration of Jesus' birth is a nativity scene. I'm sure you all have them in your homes. They may serve as nothing more as a decoration, but they can be much more. They can tell the whole story of God's plan. I saw one in the back of a church. On the table is a traditional nativity scene with a manger, shepherds, wise men, and the Holy Family. Directly behind it (unintentionally, I'm sure) is a huge painting of Christ, arms outstretched and saying (in German), "Behold, I am coming soon and my reward is with me." There is destiny. It was the destiny of the Son of God to be born into this world and, after dying and rising to life, to return to give us our reward which is ours by His grace through faith. It is our destiny to have that reward now, to live by faith and with hope in that reward, and, to finally, one day, receive that reward of eternal life when Jesus comes, arms outstretched, to bring us home. Nothing can change that. Nothing can ruin that. Nothing can take it away from you. It is your Christmas destiny. Amen.+