

“Knowing Salvation and Jesus”

John 6:35-51

Sermon for the Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost 2021; August 8, 2021

Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Rifle, Colorado

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The things Jesus said in his dialogue with some of the people of Israel in the Gospel reading today has had me thinking this past week about answers that have been given to this question: “How do you hope to be saved.” One answer that has been given is that God has decreed in eternity past, in His almighty majesty and power, who it is that will be saved and who it is who will not be. If a person is numbered among those whom God has decreed to be saved, then that person will be. If a person is numbered among those whom God has decreed otherwise, well, to bad for that person.

Of course, one has no way of knowing just what God has decreed. His decree happened in eternity. You and I are finite and have no access to that. It also means that God’s decree happened before a person was even born, before a person even did anything, believed anything, thought anything, willed anything.

Hold on a second. That’s not fair. What kind of God is God anyway? Capricious? Just impose eternal power and that’s it?

The fact is, on this way of reckoning about salvation, God’s decree happened in God’s almighty, all powerful majesty. It happened in the eternal and almighty recesses of His own mind. But that is not something you have access to. That is not something you can know. That is not something you can do anything about, not through repentance, not through hearing the Gospel, not through faith. Jesus Himself says it today: “Not that anyone has seen the Father” (John 6:46). No human being has ever been able to pry into, reason into, climb into, meditate into, or do anything else to get into the mind of God Himself and look into God’s eternal decisions to find out what He has decided and what He has willed.

But Jesus, the One who has descended from the Father has seen the Father. Jesus discloses what we need to know. And this is real knowledge. God is not playing games with us, telling us to look into His word and the Gospel to find Jesus there, but then making decrees apart from His word or that make the Gospel basically irrelevant.

This brings into focus how utterly decisive Jesus is. If God does not disclose Himself in terms of His will toward us and our salvation, He and our salvation remain totally and absolutely unknown.

Praise be to God! He has come to us and disclosed our salvation in Jesus.

So if salvation involves an eternal decree of God which He has made in Himself, in His mind from all eternity, and we cannot know what that decree is, which we can’t, then we have some pretty serious problems. Here is how it can go.

I most earnestly want to be saved. I have heard that God has decreed who is saved and who is not from eternity. But I how can know what God has decreed regarding me? Alas. I cannot know, because I cannot access God’s mind. Oh no.

Despair?

Here is what I will do. I will work real hard. I will try to be real good. I will prosper and succeed. I will triumph over sin and all evil. I will prove that I am part of the group that God has chosen to be saved in His eternal decree from all eternity. Then I will know when I see myself proving it.

Oh no. Where did that sin come from? Did I really do that? That was surely a wicked thing to feel, to say, to do.

I must try harder.

Some time passes.

I have been trying real hard for a while now. Have I done enough to prove it? I am so tired. I am so tired of soul trying to prove it. How much more do I have to do? And how can I overcome these sins that keep rearing their ugly head? I am beginning to feel like I am banging my head against a wall. The more I try to prove that God has decreed my salvation, the less satisfied I become; the hungrier and thirstier I become.

And there all these other people. These other people just keep dragging me down. They just don't get what I am trying to do. Why can't they be as serious about this as I am. They are causing all of these sinful thoughts to well up in me, through their temptations. Its their fault really, because I am trying so hard. If they would just create an environment in which I could succeed in proving that I am in the group God has decreed to salvation, then I could really succeed.

Some time passes.

I can see now that this is not going to work, trying to prove that I am part of the group God has chosen to be saved from all eternity. So it must not be that salvation involves such an eternal decree. It must be that salvation is my choice. Didn't I already recognize just how unfair of God it would be to decree me to hell before I even had a chance to do anything good or bad, to believe or not believe. God cannot be like that, unfair like that.

That's it. Salvation is my choice. Eureka. It is all on me. Here is freedom. Here is release from the burden of trying to prove myself. I choose it. That is how I am saved. My will must really be free to choose, if God is fair. And so I freely choose. I choose God. I choose the good. Here surely is the road to salvation. I will know I am saved when I am seeing myself choose God and choose the good.

Some time passes from the first exhilarating promise of the freedom of choice. Some things happen in life. Some reflection takes place.

Why did I choose to do that? That was not a very good choice. Should not my choosing the good also coordinate with actually choosing to do the good in my life? But I have not been choosing the good in my life. My life doesn't look quite like that.

I got really angry at my boss the other day. I was thinking some really bad thoughts about him. I was wishing that things wouldn't go so well for him. I said some really mean and untruthful things about him to my friend. That was not right, nor good. That was not love: "love your neighbor as yourself."

Oh, boy. God is completely just. What now?

Okay, here is the answer. That was really not my choice. It was something else doing it but not me. I was doing it against my will. My will is good and sound. So I am not really responsible for this.

Upon more reflection.

But isn't this denial? Isn't this shirking responsibility? Isn't this letting myself off the hook? Worse yet, isn't this disregard for God's commandments. There is the commandment that requires honoring one's boss. There is that requirement that condemns being angry with one's neighbor. Jesus said something about that (Mat. 5:22). There is that commandment that condemns false testimony against the neighbor.

More reflection.

These commandments are revealing something to me about my will. Oh no. My will is corrupt. It is not as free as I thought it was. How can I hope to be saved by affirmatively choosing God when my will cannot be counted on to always choose the good? My choosing is supposed to be more powerful. I am supposed to be more triumphant and victorious. Yet, here I am, doing what God's commandments require that I not do.

Here too I am beating my head against the wall, again. Maybe this is the conclusion to reach after all: I just don't hope to be saved. God's eternal decree leads nowhere. My choosing leads nowhere.

It just might as well be like this. I am free in my choosing absolutely. Whatever I choose I find my freedom there because freedom and choice are the same. So I will throw off restraint and choose what I will; let my will and my heart and my thought run where they will. But then there is no longer good or evil, only what I choose.

Now we hear Jesus say: "Everyone that the Father gives to Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will most certainly not cast out (6:37). . . . This is the will of Him who sent Me, such that of everyone that He has given Me I will lose nothing, but I will raise such a one up on the last day (John 6:39). . . . This is the will of My Father, such that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him has eternal life, and I will raise that one up on the last day (John 6:40)."

Here we see the way of salvation unfolding. It is the will of God that we be saved. But God does not will that we find His will in an eternal decree, to which we have no access and could never know. God does not will that we find Him in our own choosing, through the powers of our own will. Our will in its natural powers is corrupt, we must admit. We cannot claim to be choosing the good when we choose the wrong, will the wrong.

Praise be to God. God's will is to bring us to Jesus. When we see Jesus, we see the salvation God has provided, here and now, in our time and place.

Jesus is known. He is not hidden in God's eternal majesty. He came forth from God. Took on our flesh. He opened His mouth and spoke: "I am the bread of life. Whoever believes in me shall live." And He allowed them to nail Him to a cross. "This is the bread I give, my life for the life of the world" (John 6:51). Here is God's grace and love manifest for the eyes of our hearts to see and believe.

Jesus gave His life for the world. Jesus died for all. Because He did so, we can know that Jesus has given Himself for each one of us that calls himself or herself "me." Now we can know that God's intent is forgiveness for anyone who hungers for it. Now we are relieved of banging our heads against the wall when we see our own sin, because God has given us Jesus in grace and said just believe in Him.

It is God's will that we believe in Jesus. So His willing is not something we cannot know. His will to save us is revealed to us in Jesus. And He brings us to Jesus (John 6:44), as He brings Jesus to us. When I believe in Jesus, then I also have the confirmation that God has willed me to come to Him; that God has willed me to be saved. Because it is God's will to save me in Jesus to whom He has brought me.

Here is how God wants us to answer the question about hoping to be saved. Do you know Jesus and believe in Him? Ah yes, I have heard the good news about Him. Ah yes, I have heard that He has died for me, indeed for all people, for the whole world, to obtain the forgiveness of sin. Ah yes, I hear Him say to me in His own word, "I am the bread of life for you." Ah yes, I hear Him say to me, whoever comes to me will never hunger. Whoever believes in me will never thirst. Whoever believes in me has eternal life."

I am so hungry to be saved. My soul is so thirsty. I have tried so hard, but just can't find the food I need there.

Jesus feeds me. He feeds me with forgiveness. He feeds me by receiving me. He feeds me with Himself. He feeds my soul. Here is my salvation. Yes, I believe in Him. Now I know God wills me to be saved, because He has given Jesus to me. He gave Jesus then. He gives Jesus now in His word, in the Sacraments, here, so I can find Him and know Him. Now I know God wills me to be saved, because He has brought me to Jesus, and I believe in Him. And Jesus has given Himself for me. And I believe it. The one who believes in me has eternal life, says Jesus.

And His word is true because He has died on behalf of the world in atoning sacrifice. "When I am lifted up on a cross, I will draw all people to myself," says Jesus (John 12:32). And His word is true because He is risen from the dead. He feeds us, and we too shall live. "I will raise Him on the last day," says Jesus. He who said this has also risen in the power of God.

So we do not need to go looking for God where we cannot find Him, and proving our salvation in our own works. God is present for in Jesus, and the things by which we know Jesus. Here is where our hearts find their rest and the food our hearts need, Jesus Himself. Now I can do good without the burden of having to prove something. May God be praised. In Jesus's Name. Amen.