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**TEXT: Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18; John 6:56-69**

As intriguing as it may be to talk about cannibalism today (Did you know that the early Christians were accused of this? Jesus' reference in today's Gospel to eat His body and drink His blood was taken by the early critics of Christianity to be instructing Christians to be cannibals), I'm going to opt out of talking about that in favor of a subject I think is much more relevant. I want to talk with you today about salvation—abundant and eternal life: Do we choose it or is it simply given to God's chosen ones? It's the age-old question of free will vs. God's sovereignty. (Show slide.) This is not a theological issue, one of those ivory tower matters which theologians love to banter about; no! It's a matter of how we go about living our lives in the here-and-now as well as, as some love to ask, "Where will you spend eternity?" So, let's jump in.

Do you believe you have free will? Do you believe you truly have a choice between going to Tom & Suzie's for lunch after church or going home? John and Antonella, you're looking to buy a home. Do you believe you have a choice in the matter? That you're able to choose between this home or that home, between living in Holbrook or Winslow? Jeremy and Gretchen, you hope to have one more child. Do you really think you have that choice? That it's up to you to make that decision? Troy Hill is at ASU currently. Did he have the choice—really, the free will—to go to ASU or NAU or the U of A? He got a full scholarship to all three of those schools. Was it his choice to matriculate at ASU?

As Americans, we want to say, "Yes, of course! I can do whatever I want to do. It's my choice." Our whole American ethic is based on the idea that we can determine our own destiny. It started with our decision to declare independence from England, or perhaps before that even, when the Pilgrims decided to leave England in search of a place where they could practice their faith without interference. We have an election coming up on Tuesday. Don't we have a choice as to who to put in office and which way we'll vote on any particular issue?

This is a bit of a side issue—but not entirely. If you were raised as a Hindu in India, you'd never say you had a choice—about anything. You'd believe that the gods—and there are hundreds of them—control everything, from your choice of mate to the work that you do. This is why the caste system has lasted as long as it has—and it's still very much operative—because Hindus believe that if you're born into a particular station in life, it's the will of the gods that you be, for example, a low caste person. And you have no say over that.

The Muslims also think the same way, at least to some extent. “If Allah wills,” is their mantra and while their understanding of free will is much less restrictive than a Hindu's, they still have a deterministic attitude about life—and that free will, if it exists at all, is very limited. Even the pygmy in the African rain forest believes that his fate is predetermined by the spirits; that there's little one can do about one's own destiny.

Americans—and I don't even mean all Americans because Native Americans, traditionally, don't think this way--are among a minority in the world who believe we have a choice about what we do, that we have the freedom to determine our own destiny.

So, do we or don't we? Do we the free will to make free and independent choices in our lives, or don't we? Does God control everything? The answer is...yes!

In our Old Testament Reading today, the new leader of the Hebrew people, Joshua, who had just taken over the reins from Moses, asks his people a question. They've just finished their 40 year-journey in the wilderness and are standing on the eastern bank of the Jordan River, looking westward, across the Jordan into Canaan, what they've been told is the Promised Land. (Ex. 6:8) As they're standing there, contemplating what lies before them and remembering what lay in their past, Joshua puts a decision before them. He says: “*Choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.*” (24:15) (Show slide.) The River he references is the Nile River on the other side of which lay Egypt, where their ancestors had been enslaved for 400 years. Now, as they're about to cross another river, the Jordan, Joshua tells them to make a decision. Who is going to be your God? he asks. The God of Abraham,

Isaac and Jacob? The One Joshua calls “Lord?” Or the gods of their pagan past. Who’s it going to be? Joshua asks. Make a decision. Choose!

Apparently, Joshua believed his people had the free will, the ability to decide what god they were going to serve.

Is that really different than what any of the prophets from Jeremiah to Amos would ask of the people some hundreds of years later. They would urge their people to repent, to turn from their wicked ways and come back to the true God. They, too, believed their people had a choice—that they had the free will to say, “Yes, I repent” or “No, I won’t.”

And is that really any different than what Jesus Himself asked of those whom He called to follow Him. When He stood on the shore of the Sea of Galilee and said to Peter and Andrew, James and John, “Follow me,” wasn’t He asking them to make a decision? To choose that day whom they were going to serve? And their decision to follow Jesus wasn’t coerced, was it? They had every ability to say, “Get lost, Jesus. I’m not going to follow You.” In our very Gospel Reading today we hear that *“From this time many of His disciples turned back and no longer followed Him.”* (John 6:66) Apparently, people do have the freedom to choose whether or not to follow Jesus and for how long.

So, yes, we do have free will! We’re not like some puppets on a string, totally at the beck and call of the puppeteer, every decision being made for us witless beings.

But then, how can we say that God is sovereign, that He is in control of everything? If God is the Mastermind, if He’s “got the whole world in His hands,” as we sing, how can it be that we have any free will? God said to the prophet Jeremiah (1:5): *“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.”* (Show slide.) Did Jeremiah have any choice in the matter of him being a prophet? It doesn’t sound like it.

Solomon, the writer of the Proverbs, reputedly the wisest man in the world wrote this: *“The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps.”* (Proverbs 16:19) (Show slide.) If the Lord is establishing each of our steps, do we truly have any free will?

And then there’s the really tough question concerning Judas. Did Judas really have any choice in the matter of his betrayal of Jesus? Could he not have betrayed Him? John records Jesus on the night of His Last Supper with the disciples, *“But this is to fulfill the scripture: He who shares my bread has lifted up his heel against me.”* (13:18b) (Show slide.) The scripture had to be fulfilled. Someone had to betray Jesus. Did Judas have a choice in the matter or was he simply some unwitting pawn of God’s?

The Church has split over this matter of free will versus the sovereignty of God. Calvinists—those of the Presbyterian camp, those of the Reformed traditions and, to a great extent, Lutherans—come down on the side of God’s sovereignty. They like to use words, taken from scripture, like predestination, election and foreordained. While they don’t completely deny the free will of man, they greatly minimize it. Their soapbox is God’s sovereignty. They love passages like Matthew 10: 29 in which Jesus says, *“Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered.”* (Show slide.)

But then there are the Arminians. (Show Calvinism vs. Arminianism slide.) These are those who follow the thinking of a Dutch theologian called Jacobus Arminius who was born about the same time as John Calvin died. Arminius began to question a lot of the strict doctrines of the Calvinists, questioning predestination, election and foreordination. Arminius began to emphasize that all people are potentially savable and that it’s a matter of their free will, or choosing to respond to God’s grace in their lives. Arminians believe that salvation is a cooperative venture between God offering and man accepting salvation. The song, “I Have Decided To Follow Jesus” is a distinctively Arminian song. We decide to follow or not. Arminians very much like the statement that Joshua made to his people: *“Choose this day whom you will serve...”* Many, but not all, of our evangelical neighbors are Arminians: Baptists, Pentecostals and Nazarenes are of this camp.

The question remains: Do we have free will or is God's will sovereign? (Show slide.) I maintain that the answer is "Yes!" (Show slide.) Yes, we have free will and yes, God is in control. I can't explain it but I know it's operative.

It helps me when I think of raising my own kids. Did Matthew here, as a ten year old, have free will? Yes, he could do his homework or not. Yes, he could brush his teeth or not. Yes, he could weed the garden or not. Were his mother and I in control? Yes, we controlled his privileges and his punishments, essentially forcing him to do his homework. Yes, we bought specially flavored children's toothpaste or showed him pictures of rotten teeth and told him stories of painful mouths that come from not brushing his teeth, essentially persuading him to brush. And yes, I threatened dismemberment and death if the garden wasn't weeded by the time I got home. We allowed Matthew certain freedoms within certain parameters but controlled the parameters and, if necessary, stepped in at times to forcibly make him comply. As he grew older, we allowed more and more freedoms, depending on the behaviors he demonstrated.

Now this analogy breaks down at all kinds of points but I think there's some value in understanding our freewill in the context of parameters God sets. Yes, we can do what we want within these limits—but God still reserves the right to intervene if and when He sees fit.

So are we truly free to do what we want? I think so, within the parameters God sets—but God can intervene and take control of the wheel whenever He chooses—so, no, our free will is limited. And aren't you glad? Aren't you glad that you're not in charge completely? Oh, my! It would be terrifying to think that I'd need to live with the consequences of every dumb thing my free will led me to do. I don't have the wisdom to know whether or not to buy this house or take this job or pull away from this relationship. But God does have that wisdom and He can either endorse a decision we make and bless it, or forgive and redeem any dumb decisions we make.

In the book of Nehemiah, the Israelite people are returning to their homeland after many years of exile in Babylon. They begin to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, which had been torn down by their enemies. These same enemies are still around and are opposed to the re-establishment of the city and the people and the power of these Israelites—and so they plan sneak attacks and try to thwart

the Israelites in various ways. Nehemiah advises his people to do two things: 1) Pray to God (show slide) for protection; and (show slide) 2) post guards. Pray to God and post guards. In other words, appeal to God's sovereign power and, simultaneously, take action yourself. Hmmm...

Along this same line, there's the matter of God fighting for you and taking up your own weapons. Mary and I are reading through 1 and 2 Samuel at the moment. Over and over again, David and his men are told that God is on their side and will fight for them—and yet they're instructed to take up weapons themselves and launch forth into battle. If God is fighting for them, why do they have to take up weapons themselves? Why doesn't God just snap His fingers and end the battle the way He wills? For some reason, God seems to want to see how willing we are to be obedient, how we will exercise our free will.

Or how about when the leper asked Jesus to heal him? (Lk. 15:14) Jesus tells him to go and show himself to the priest and, the text tells us, while he was going, he was healed. Could Jesus have healed the man without any action on the man's part? Of course, He could have! He was God. He was sovereign. But for some reason, Jesus wanted that man to take some action himself, to exercise his own free will, and go and show himself to the priest. It was while this leper was in the process of being obedient that he was healed. God chooses to give us rope—either to bless us or hang us.

Tim Keller uses the example in Acts 27 in talking about this matter. Paul is in a ship, being taken to Rome as a prisoner. They're crossing the Mediterranean when a wicked storm arises. Everyone is fearful but an angel comes to Paul with the message that not one soul will be lost, no one is going to die. It's what God had decreed—God's sovereignty, right? And yet when the storm worsens and some of the sailors make plans to jettison the ship, Paul shouts at them to stop, saying that if they leave the ship, all of them will perish. Well, God has already told them that no one would die but now, it seems, if they exercise their free will to leave the ship, all will die. Well, which is it?

This interplay between humankind's free will and God's sovereignty is a mystery and I think that anyone who tries to determine is too definitively is going to get into trouble.

I've just started re-reading the book of Acts with a small group. Soon we're going to read the post-Pentecost story of Peter preaching to the men of Israel (Acts 2:23). Peter preaches this (show slide): *"This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge..."* In other words, this didn't happen by accident. God was in control all the way. But then Peter goes on, *"...and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross."* In other words, you are responsible for what you did to Jesus. You are guilty of this terrible crime. You used your free will to do this wicked thing. Well, was it God's will that Jesus die? Yes. Was it man's free will that crucified Him? Yes. This is called an antinomy—an apparent contradiction. (Show slide.) But somehow, in some way, within God's sovereignty, it's possible. I like to say we have free will within God's will. Nothing happens outside of God's will, no matter how horrible. And the horrible things that happen within God's will—well, He's God and will somehow redeem that because, you see, redemption is His business.

Did Judas have to betray Jesus? No, he didn't, but someone had to. Did Pilate have to order the execution of Jesus? No, he didn't—he had the free will to let Jesus go—but somehow someone would have had to bring about Jesus death. There is a plan, God is in control but within that plan God grants humankind a fair amount of latitude.

Regarding our ability to choose to follow God or not, I am strongly in Martin Luther's camp. Luther said this in his Explanation to the Third Article of the Apostles Creed: (Would you read it with me?) (Show slide) "I believe that I cannot by my own understanding or effort believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith." In other words, we are unable to choose God for ourselves; God must prompt us, through His Spirit working in manifold ways, to choose God. We can never pat ourselves on the back and say, "Well, I have decided to follow Jesus." You've decided to follow Jesus only because God has been pushing, shoving, and relentlessly pursuing you to decide for Him. God's been influencing you and sometimes kicking you in the butt to awaken you to your need for Him. He's the reason you've said "Yes, Lord, I believe!" You can take no credit for this; you can only thank Him for His work in your life which brought you to that point.

However, if you choose to reject God, well—you have the right. Those Israelites on the shores of the Jordan that day had the choice—the free choice—to reject God and return to their pagan ways. They could not claim, however, that they had brought themselves to the shores of that river. They could not claim that they earned the right to enter the Promised Land. It was all grace.

I believe the only people who are in hell or who will be in hell are those who put themselves there. These are people who used or will use their free will to reject the gift of salvation God offered them.

Here's an old illustration that I've cited before but I want to use it again and I'll close with this. (Show the slide of the archway to heaven.) Imagine you're approaching the gateway to heaven. As you approach you look up and there is printed (show slide) Matthew 10:32: *"Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven."* And maybe even this verse from our First Reading this morning (show slide): *"Choose this day whom you will serve...but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."* (Joshua 24:15) You acknowledged Jesus, you chose to follow God, you think, and so with a certain amount of pride you walk through that pearly gate into heaven. As soon as you enter heaven, however, you turn around to that same archway and there above the door on that side you see written (show slide) John 15:16: *"You did not choose me but I chose you"* and also (show slide) John 6:44, the very words of our Gospel this morning: *"No one can come to me unless the Father who sent Me draws him."*

You see, it's both true: We have free will and God is sovereign. How this antinomy, this apparent contradiction, works itself out is well...God's business not ours. We are responsible for the choices we make in life. God calls us to be engaged in the world and wants us to take an active role in our relationship with Him. And yet, we must always realize that nothing depends on us entirely. God is in control. He does have the whole world in His hands.

Toward the end of the musical *The King And I*, the king, who has been pummeled with various opinions and philosophies and is uncertain as to how to proceed with his kingship, says, when

reflecting upon all of it, “It is a \_\_\_\_\_” (Solicit response.) That’s right: Puzzlement. It is a puzzlement.

That’s a good term, I think, for exact how the matter of free will and God’s sovereignty interplay. It’s a puzzlement.

Let me conclude with one more slide, one which I appreciate and hope you might, too. (Show the slide of Charles Spurgeon on this subject at age 24 and 47. Read the text.) As long as we keep close to the Bible—ALL of the Bible and not just certain pet texts, I think we’ll be all right. We may not understand everything—some things may be a bit of a puzzlement—but the Word of God will keep us balanced, and moving forward with a bit of humility. Amen.

Songs:

Opening	“Come Thou Almighty King” (ELW#408)
Psalm	“I Will Trust In You” (Daniels)
Before/AfterGospel	“I Am The Bread Of Life” (ELW#485, Vs. 1-2, then Vs. 5)
Sermon	“All The Way My Savior Leads Me” (A Tom/Redman remake of the traditional hymn by Fanny Crosby; sung by the Worship Team)
Closing	“All The Way My Savior Leads Me” (Traditional hymn)