

Message: “God is FOR You”

Let’s face it: most of us don’t like uncertainty. We want assurances. So we pay for warranties on the products we buy. We get insurance for trips and our health. Some people read daily horoscopes or visit mediums or use tarot cards to try to get a glimpse of what’s coming. Good luck with that. If only we knew what to expect, everything would be all right; at least that’s what we tell ourselves. We could plan ahead, take advantage of the knowledge we have.

This tendency has been played on by all sorts of people, including comedians. The late night host Johnny Carson was well-known for a character he created, Carnac the Magnificent. For those who don’t know how it worked, Carson would come out dressed as a soothsayer. He would have several sealed envelopes. Before opening each envelope, he would “receive” an answer to a question written on a note inside.

Here are some examples of Carnac’s insights:

A: De-frost.

Q: On a cold morning, what forms on de-grass?

A: Supervisor.

Q: What does Clark Kent wear to keep the sun out of his eyes?

A: That darn cat.

Q: Who ruined that darn rug?

A: Timbuktoo.

Q: What comes after Timbuk-one?

A: Baja.

Q: What noise do sheep make when they laugh?”¹

This is a light-hearted approach to something many people take as serious. It ties to our scripture, Romans 8:28-39. We’ve been exploring the challenges of being human, the sense of hopelessness and uncertainty we can feel and how God saves us. The gift of the Holy Spirit not only liberates us from our old patterns of behavior, but it also gives us new life as Jesus’ family. We are free from the prison of mind, body and soul. We can freely share the grace we’ve received.

¹ <https://www.nightscribe.com/Politics/carnacquotes.htm>

Last week, we learned what it means to be God's adopted children.

Adoption tells us how we come into the family of God. Once we're here, no distinction is drawn. Those adopted aren't worth less or seen as substitutes. All are God's children. All are given grace. All are loved by God. All are valued and worthy. This is true security.

This is marvelously good news. And yet anyone who has a few years behind them knows life isn't easy. The trials we face can be harsh.

What are we to do when we face the disappointments of life?

Paul tells us to wait patiently, expectantly and with joy, as a mother waits for the birth of a child. God has a purpose. We can trust God for *"My plans aren't your plans, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. Just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my plans than your plans"* (Isaiah 55:8-9, CEB). Even when we don't know what to say to God, God's Spirit knows.

This is a message of assurance. God is telling us there is a plan.

"We know God works all things together for good for the ones who love God, for those who are called according to God's purpose" (8:28).

This sounds good. We like it and it resonates with our need for security, not uncertainty. But then we run into the word: predestination. The Common English Bible uses the phrase "knew in advance" or "decided in advance." And it's like a speed bump. We hit it and aren't sure if we're still moving forward or not. Predestination is connected to God's call, salvation and the glory of life in God's kingdom.

What is God the Magnificent telling us through Paul? Let's face it, different people had different views in the past. And some still do today.

We can read these verses from an exclusive point of view. Some see this passage saying God chooses who gets saved and who doesn't. This goes hand-in-hand with the view God controls everything that happens. And so, for Pharaoh's heart to be hardened against Moses and the Jewish people or for Judas to betray Jesus, God must be the agent making it happen. God must choose who is called, saved and given honor.

Thank God for John Wesley, the Moravians and the Methodist church! One of the greatest gifts the Methodist church gives to the world is our knowledge, experience and sharing of God's grace.

God's grace makes the difference. God gives us the capacity to choose. We can accept God's love and grace and choose to answer God's call. Many denominations now embrace this theological view. Once your eyes are opened, you see it was right in front of you all along, hidden in plain sight.

God has a plan, as was revealed in Isaiah. And it's higher than ours. It's no longer a mystery. God's plan is to save everyone. God isn't excluding or condemning anyone, but by grace God does good things so people become aware of their spiritual hunger and thirst. And then, through Jesus, God's grace saves (or justifies) us, pardoning us for our sins and giving us a new life in Christ with a heart for spiritual life. And God's Spirit is with us throughout this life into the next, when God's grace honors us as God's children, Jesus' siblings.

The evidence is found in several verses. For example, we start with verse 29: "*We know this because God knew them in advance, and God decided in advance that they would be conformed to the image of God's Son*" (CEB). God's purpose is to help us become like Jesus in our spiritual and real life, e.g., who we are and how we live.

Not convinced? Paul knows where we're going in our uncertainty. He poses a few rhetorical questions, "*So, what do you think? With God on our side like this, how can we lose? If God didn't hesitate to put everything on the line for us, embracing our condition and exposing themself to the worst by sending God's own Son, is there anything else God wouldn't gladly and freely do for us?*" (vv31-32, MSG). This raises a key point for me.

Why would Jesus give up life in heaven to come and be with us if it was just to exclude the very beings God created in the first place?

God wouldn't do that. Jesus taught Nicodemus the truth, "*For God so loved the world that God gave the only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him*" (John 3:16-17, NRSVUE).

Following Jesus' lead, Paul started this chapter by reminding us there is no condemnation for those who believe (8:1).

Now I know what some of you are thinking. I've been there. It goes like this: Okay, so I can see where God's plan, the plan God made in advance, is for everyone to be saved by grace. But I don't feel worthy. If you only knew about me

One of the ways the church didn't help me while I was growing up was teaching the lesson, "You aren't worthy." I expect many of you heard the same teaching as well. While it's true we, as created beings, aren't on the same level as God, the one who designed and created us, this lesson is more about "know your place" and shame than anything else, in my experience. And so our self-talk has been reinforced by a culture of power, position and influence.

Fortunately, Paul reverses things by asking, "*Who would dare even to point a finger?*" (v33). Jesus, God's Son, is the one who will judge us all. This may give some of us pause but consider this: Jesus said he didn't come to condemn us but to offer love and grace. Jesus died and was raised for us to show the power of salvation and resurrection, the way in this life and the life to come. And Jesus sits with God the Creator, as the one who intercedes for us. Our judges are our advocates for forgiveness and salvation! This doesn't sound like a plan to exclude anyone, but to give us every opportunity to trust God and believe.

In Christ, God offers us a get-out-of-jail card. We aren't paroled. Once released, we can't be pulled back. The record of our wrongs is expunged, forever. Sin doesn't follow us around.

God's kingdom operates by a different set of rules. Our life in the divine family isn't governed by judgment but by grace. God does the heavy lifting. God calls us, saves us and brings us to a state of glory. This comes from God, not us. We can live lives of faith, filled with expectant hope and assured by God's all-encompassing, eternal love. Just believe and answer God's call. This is our part in the narrative.

Paul ends on a final, well-loved high note. He asks, "*Who will separate us from Christ's love?*" (v35, CEB). Paul goes on to show us no form of suffering can separate us from the love of God. We are victors over the trials of this life because God assures us nothing in all creation can separate us from God's love.

This is a promise which has been met. Jesus offers us new life, here and now, and for all of eternity. We are assured in who and what we are: God's beloved children. Amen!

I invite you to trust God, believe in Jesus and receive the grace of the Holy Spirit. When you do, you'll be set free to live the life you always wanted, a life filled with love, joy and peace. And you'll become more and more able to love your family, friends and neighbors as Jesus does, offering them the invitation to join us for spiritual food, being saved by grace. This is how we join in as Jesus' family members, living into the grace we've received.

**I don't know about you, but all I can say to this good news is ...
Alleluia! God is good. Praise God!**

Romans 8:28-39 (CEB)

We know that God works all things together for good for the ones who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose. We know this because God knew them in advance, and he decided in advance that they would be conformed to the image of his Son. That way his Son would be the first of many brothers and sisters. Those who God decided in advance would be conformed to his Son, he also called. Those whom he called, he also made righteous. Those whom he made righteous, he also glorified.

So what are we going to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He didn't spare his own Son but gave him up for us all. Won't he also freely give us all things with him?

Who will bring a charge against God's elect people? It is God who acquits them. Who is going to convict them? It is Christ Jesus who died, even more, who was raised, and who also is at God's right side. It is Christ Jesus who also pleads our case for us.

Who will separate us from Christ's love? Will we be separated by trouble, or distress, or harassment, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written,

We are being put to death all day long for your sake.

We are treated like sheep for slaughter.

But in all these things we win a sweeping victory through the one who loved us. I'm convinced that nothing can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord: not death or life, not angels or rulers, not present things or future things, not powers or height or depth, or any other thing that is created.