

Week 4: Who Controls Our Destiny?

SHARE: What areas of your life are “out of your control”?

KNOW: The temptation in our journey is to think we control our destiny, but the faith journey puts our lives and future into God’s hands.

GROW: Have a volunteer read the following and a second volunteer read Psalm 31:15-16

Ask any immigration lawyer who works with people seeking asylum and they will tell you one of the greatest burdens is the weight of knowing that the person's life rests in large part on you. I have had countless people who are terrified to go home say to me, "My life is in your hands, I trust you and I will do whatever you tell me to do." Winning such cases is joyous, but even more so a sense of relief.

What makes such cases even more difficult is that one is completely at the mercy of the officer or the judge. Many immigration judges are almost impossible to satisfy. There are certain judges that I walk into the courtroom and I can quote you their decision before we even start. Decision A - I don't believe you but even if I did it would not matter. Decision B- I do believe you, but it does not matter. The question of whether someone is given protection or sent back to persecution and death of ten depends on which judge you have.

We read again in Psalm 31:15-16

These fleeing souls, who are terrified of returning home, know that their future is not in their hands. They know that they need help, and a fair judge who will exercise discretion for them and give them the protection they plead for.

So too in our lives, we need help. So many of us are proud and think that we can make our way through life on our own. We in the West, who are so materially wealthy, find ourselves reluctant to see ourselves as refugees spiritually.

The Christian concept of grace is irksome to many. Some because they resent that God would extend his blessing and favor to people we do not think deserve it. We are constantly tempted to judge others as worse sinners than ourselves. But such an attitude betrays that we do not really understand our own need for God's grace and mercy. Such judgment reflects that we really think that we are good enough on our own and that our future is in our own hands. Others find fault with grace because they think it allows people too much freedom. So many "Christians" are convinced that Christianity is a rulebook with a very specific set of do's and don'ts. Such an understanding is fatally flawed as well. It too does not realize that the essence of Christianity is not rules, but relation. And the only two rules Jesus really ever gave to obey were to love God and to love each other. And love is never about rules, but about each other.

Our relationship with the Father is founded upon his love for us. God cares about us so much that he has provided a bridge to span the gap created by our sin. In return, we come to him acknowledging our need for help. Like the Psalmist, we too say "Yes, Lord, my future is in your hands. I trust you with my life." Like the refugees we are, we recognize that we need his loving grace and cry out to Jesus, "rescue me!" But

unlike our system, God is indeed a true and fair judge. The results of our trust will not vary. For he has already spoken. Call on me, and I will rescue you and make you whole. Put your trust in me, and I will make you a new creation. Be with me, and I will keep your life in my hands, and no one can ever snatch you away.

➤ Do you see yourself as a refugee spiritually?

➤ Where do you struggle to put your life and future in his hands?

➤ Is grace amazing or irritating to you?

➤ How have you experienced God's grace recently?

Have volunteers read the following and Psalm 31:1-4 & 15-16

“Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed, to me: I lift my lamp beside the golden door.”

These famous words from Emma Lazarus, immortalized on our Statue of Liberty, have been the beacon of hope, safety, and a new life of opportunity, for millions of people across the world.

Across the globe, people have dreamed of these words becoming their experience. reality. As one Iranian man once told me, I have always been an American, and now it is reality. Refugees in particular have looked to America, first, as their protector and safe haven.

In Psalm 31:1-4; 15-16

The Psalmist here is seeking refuge. He is in dire straits, and knows that there is really only one true source of protection. The language he is using for freedom and safety is fascinating. He pleads with the Lord to pull him from an enclosed space and to place him in another enclosed space, a fortress.

How interesting that being set free does not mean that we just fly through life going our own way and doing our own things. The Russian word for freedom traditionally meant the berzerk and out of control frenzy of a massive drunken binge. No wonder that the Russians in the Cold War were skeptical of our claims to be the land of the free. Who would want to live in a land full of drunken louts on a frenzied tour of destruction?

So often, we find ourselves looking at God as the quizzical Russian must have. We think that freedom means doing our own thing and being in control of our own lives. And we think that somehow life with God is not really what we want. But the Psalmist understood that true freedom only came from being with God and walking in obedience to the life he calls us to.

When we yield our future to him, we become truly free to take advantage of the opportunities that God grants. When we recognize that he is master, then we are set free and have his blessing. The Christian life is such a paradox where so much seems backwards.

Jesus went to a grave, so that in rising he might forever defeat death. His obedience, even to death on a cross, was the path to freedom and glory for us. And, he asks us to walk in that paradox. He asks us to sacrifice our own lives in service to others, and tells us that in so doing we actually gain real life. He tells us to put our selfish nature to death, and by so doing we put on his nature and become like him. He sends us

out to bring in the tired, the poor, the huddled masses yearning for freedom, the wretched refuse, the homeless and tempest tossed. And he says to us, you are the light of the world. You are the beacon of hope that I choose to use. You are the instrument of my grace. You are the means to bring hope and help and protection to the least among you. As I have loved you, now go, and love.

- Is your light shining, or are you trying to hide it?
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- Reflect on the paradox of freedom in Christ versus the freedom of your own “independence”. What does freedom in Christ vs Independence mean to you?
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- How can you specifically show love and light today?
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Optional Bible Reading: Benedictine Lectio Divina

Read a scripture of your choice or one of the following using the Benedictine practice of reading scripture.

Psalm 146

Lectio Divina literally means “reading of God”.

Lectio Divina is the search for God in his written Word.

This form of lectio divina works best in a group of between 4-8 people.

A group leader co-ordinates the process and facilitates sharing.

Golden Rules:

- (i) members of the group always speak in the first person singular;
- (ii) others listen; discussion or comment is not useful for this format of prayer & meditation;
- (iii) anyone may “pass” at any time, and prefer to pray silently rather than share.

Three readings of the same text from the Scriptures are read aloud by different people, each time followed by a period of silence and an opportunity for each member of the group to share the fruit of his or her lectio.

PREPARATION

The group settles comfortably and prepares for prayer in whatever way works best - focus on breathing/a candle/prayer setting/listening to music/singing.

The leader, or the group together, invokes the Holy Spirit to open everyone's heart to God's Word.

FIRST READING (actually twice)

An unhurried reading, the second time more slowly, to allow people to listen for the word or phrase that beckons, stirs or unnerves, touches the heart. Gently repeat and ponder the word or phrase silently to yourself in the silence (1-2 minutes) that follows.

Each person in turn speaks the word/phrase that has touched him or her.

SECOND READING

In the silence that follows (2-3 mins) each person ponders the word/phrase, attending to the feelings or images that arise, noting how they are seeing or hearing Christ reach out to them through the text.

Each person in turn briefly states what he or she has "heard" or "seen".

THIRD READING

In the silence that follows (2-3 minutes) each person reflects on where and how God is connecting to him or her; what God is calling them to be or to do. It may be through memories, or events of their lives that God is now present. Allow your response to be in whatever way is most natural and spontaneous.

Each person in turn shares the results of his or her reflection.

GO: faith takes action steps.

- Take a step this week to lift up the area that is *out of your control* and put it in God's hands.
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Close in Prayer