

Trinity Church in the City of Boston
The Rev. Morgan S. Allen
Easter Sunday, April 9, 2023
Sermon Series III: God's Ultimate Will

Alleluia! Christ is Risen! *The Lord is risen, indeed! Alleluia!*

A great wave swells, a distant star explodes, a new colt straightens its awkward legs and stands for the first time.

Some moments pull the universe taut, stretch the skin of our world thin enough to reveal more clearly the God beneath who bears it, the glorious One who dreamed and fashioned and enlivens all that is. In these thin moments, the light of God blushes in the creation like a child who has swallowed a brilliant lamp, and as she plays and laughs and sings, from deep inside *she glows*. Light meets shadow in unexpected combination, and, with a rush, we see what we have not seen before. Sparkles catch our eye, and we wonder whether the flashes are tricks of the cornea or twitches of the cosmos.

And then there is Easter dawn – this glorious morning! – when blushing gives way to bursting. The earth quakes, the angel descends, and the stone rolls, the world's skin not stretched but *torn* – and not like a wound, but as a flower shoots. And shooting through, is *Love*.

The Rev. Leslie Weatherhead, Minister at London's City Temple during World War II, divided what he called "God's will" into three categories. Having now explored the first two of these divisions, today we conclude our Holy Week sermon series by taking up the third: God's *ultimate* will.

On Palm Sunday we focused on the *intentional* will of God, God's design for the creation. Reflecting on the Cross of Christ, we resolved the theodicy dilemma – that defense of God's goodness in the face of suffering – by proposing God self-limits the power-to-control in support of humankind's freedom. With that theological solution, we affirmed God's first design as life and Love, and we confirmed that God *never* intends suffering – not for Jesus, not for anyone.

On Maundy Thursday we asked: did God engineer Jesus' crucifixion to convene the Last Supper's valedictory events? *Of course not*, we answered, and we pointed instead to the mortal conspiracy working against God's ideal desire for Jesus and his community. According to the Creator's gift of freedom, God did not intervene in that evil scheme, and Jesus submitted himself to the imperial forces. Aimed for redemption, rather than resignation, Jesus transformed the world's violence into God's Grace by abiding God's *circumstantial* will: kneeling before those he loved and bathing their feet. Then, gathering a supper with his friends and family, Jesus narrated what he had done, anticipated his fate, and purposed their community: "I am with you only a little longer ... I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

On this Easter Sunday, we consider “the goal [God] reaches not only *in spite of* all [humankind] may do” to undermine God’s intentions, but even “using that [evil] to further [God’s] plan.”ⁱ That is, in the Resurrection of Jesus, the force of God’s ultimate will transforms the horror into hope; today, God turns death, into life! And, as Weatherhead names, “That is why the Cross is not just a symbol of capital punishment [like] the hangman’s rope, but is a symbol of [evil’s *redemption*] in the cause of [God’s] holy purposes.”ⁱⁱ

He explains of God’s *ultimate* will, “The picture in my mind is that of children playing beside a tiny stream that runs down a mountainside to join a river in the valley below. [The children] can divert the stream and get great fun out of damming it up with stones and earth. But not one of them ever succeeds in preventing the water from reaching the river at last. In regard to God, we are [these] children. Though we may divert and hinder [God’s] purposes, [we do not, cannot] ever *finally* defeat them ... and frequently our mistakes and sins [make] another channel to carry the water of God’s plans to the river of his purpose.”ⁱⁱⁱ

For any of us who have created an obstacle course for racing sticks along a rainy curb to the storm drain, or who have dug trenches in a beach’s sand to redirect the tide, Weatherhead’s image lands. No matter what we set in the water’s path – stones or earth or even ourselves, laying our whole body in its way – the water *always* wins. Inevitably, all those tiny tributaries find their way to the greater “river of God’s purpose.”

Oh, Trinitarians! God has fashioned the world with Love, in Love, and for Love. Like the unseen, unceasing force of gravity, all the cosmos inclines toward a common fulfillment, every life’s stream ultimately running toward a Loving relationship with God and all creation. Though we may contrive circumstances that interrupt God’s intention – whether with those personal sins we tolerate as endemic to daily life, or by the collective wickedness that leads to Crucifixion – the triumph of Easter morning reassures us that God’s ultimate will *shall still be accomplished*, no matter what.

Even so, be sure that the content and character of our lives remains consequential: consequential to God, consequential to ourselves, and consequential to one another. While Weatherhead keeps his ideas tethered to God’s omnipotence with his language of God “using” evil to further God’s “plan,” I prefer we let loose of those notions more completely. Instead of “intentional will,” let us choose language of *ideal design* to describe the order^{iv} and purpose of God’s creation; instead of “circumstantial will,” let us choose *hopes* to describe the infinitely varied expressions of God’s continuing engagement with the universe; and, instead of “ultimate will” or “plan,” let us choose *ambition* to describe God’s final desires – crucially, an ambition achieved not by God’s compulsion, but by our fidelity.

A brief word about God’s hopes: by God’s self-limiting the Divine power-to-control in service of our freedom, I do not at all mean that God’s Love for the creation has atrophied into indolence. Rather, God *hopes* life and Love for all people, in every circumstance. Like the synergistic joy of a gleeful crowd lifting a team or a performer (their feet scarcely touching the ground), so God *actively* “cheers” life and Love for us. Indeed, God empowers the Holy Spirit to inspire in us and among us more than what we could achieve alone, more than we could “ask or imagine.”^v

Attendantly, our falling short of God's hopes grieves God. God will not punish us for those shortcomings – again, the God who is all goodness cannot, will not commit such evil. Rather, God grieves *that we punish ourselves*, that we hurt those with whom we share our lives.

For while living contrary to the sum of all God's hopes – God's *ambition* that all people and all the cosmos are restored to Loving relationship with God and with one another – while living contrary to God's ambitions may ultimately prove futile, such contrarianism is not irrelevant to the quality of our lives and the life of the world.^{vi} God has made us for the joys of Easter Sunday! Let us not choose for ourselves or impose upon others the miseries of Good Friday.

God's ideal design;
God's (circumstantial) hopes;
God's (ultimate) ambition.

What difference do these ideas make?

With little effort, I can believe that the son of a Nazarene carpenter was tortured to death by the state and buried in a cave by his followers – but I do not understand the mechanics of how, three days later, he came back to life. I suppose because of my inability to apprehend that mystery, if I had been asked some years ago whether I believed “in the bodily Resurrection of Jesus,” I likely would have answered, meekly, “No.” Maybe some of you share or have shared that skepticism (if not my embarrassment) about this most challenging claim of our faith. If so, do not lose heart; the Body of Christ makes room for wonder and doubt, what the Gospels mark as “amazement.”^{vii} Remember: the first women at the empty tomb were afraid, and even Jesus' closest disciples did not immediately believe.^{viii}

Nonetheless, if it might strengthen just one spirit, I will share that between then and now, something has shifted in me. I still do not understand how the gears of Resurrection turn, of course, and I continue to wrestle the historicity of the Gospel accounts ... but I have come to believe the truth of their testimonies. I believe that something singular between God and the cosmos happened in that moment – on this glorious morning! – and we understand that event as this man, Jesus, raised from the dead. By this mystery, God recreated the universe, a moment unlike any since the creation itself, and unlike any since.

Just as in the first Genesis story God imbues the creation with the capacity to create^{ix} [in an Epiphany-season Forum, we described this as God “creating creationally”], in the Resurrection of Jesus, God imbues the creation with the capacity to renew, to resurrect [God “redeems redemptively,” we might say]. And as the creation's creativity reveals the *imago dei*, that image of God the Creator wrought in the fibers of the cosmos from the beginning, so, too, resurrection has been stitched into our being, and by our undertaking new life – forbearing, forgiving, repairing, reconciling – we witness the *imago Christi*, the very image of the resurrected Christ.

If any of this sounds like a subtle hedge, I do not mean it to be; if asked today whether I believe “in the bodily Resurrection of Jesus,” I would say, “Yes.” The conviction is still not facile for me – I must labor to believe it, choose to believe it. Yet I *do* choose, I *do* believe ... and I hope that you might believe it, too.

Friends, the welfare of our world depends upon Easter, and I hope that we might enter its mystery together. I hope that might join with one another in this Beloved Community of Trinity Church – choosing God as God has chosen us, loving one another as God loves us all. And in the company of the Holy Spirit, I hope that we might dare dream of that moment when blushing gives way to bursting; when faith gives way to fulfillment; when the earth finally become as heaven is, where there is no death, neither sorrow nor sighing, but life everlasting.^x

For, Alleluia! Christ is risen!
The Lord is risen, indeed! Alleluia!

In gladness and singleness of heart, I pray;
Amen.

ⁱ Weatherhead, pp. 48-49.

ⁱⁱ Weatherhead, Leslie. *The Will Of God*. Nashville, Abingdon, 1974, p. 32.

ⁱⁱⁱ Weatherhead, pp. 49-50.

^{iv} By “order” I mean what Weatherhead describes as “the laws of the universe, which are themselves an expression of God’s will” (p. 31).

^v Ephesians 3:20.

^{vi} I draw this use of the word “futile” from *If Grace Is True: Why God Will Save Every Person*, by Philip Gulley and James Mulholland (Harper Collins, 2003). They write, “In this life, many choose their own hell, and, even more terribly, many make a hell for others, and in this way the decision to live a life outside of God’s blessing is not irrelevant. But I believe it is futile” (p. 115).

^{vii} From the original ending of Mark’s Gospel: “So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid” (16:8).

^{viii} Maybe most conspicuously in Luke’s account: “they return[ed] from the tomb they told all this to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them” (24:8-11).

^{ix} From that January lecture: “Likewise, God creates *creationally*, and by that I mean God creates a creation that creates ... God creates ‘seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds.’ That lone detail of ‘seed-bearing’ plants, trees, and fruit highlights that even the earth’s vegetation shares in the Divine power of creation.” God’s commission to the animals and humankind to “be fruitful and multiply” follows (Genesis 1:20-28).

^x Adapted from “The Burial of the Dead, Rite I,” *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979), pp. 492-483. “The Commendation’s refrain is: “Where sorrow and pain are no more, neither sighing, but life everlasting.”