

It was meant to be. Anyone ever use that expression? You know when the moment is right, or something goes as planned, or something happens by coincidence – “it was just meant to be.” I have a friend in Mexico (actually he is a grain farmer from Saskatchewan) who says that all the time. We get a table closest to the band – it was meant to be. The sun shines on a day when he plans a group hike over the mountain pass – it was meant to be. Friends end up at the same place by chance and throw a potluck together – it was meant to be. There’s just enough firewood for a beach campfire – it was meant to be. Does anyone else have someone in your life who uses that expression endlessly to explain why things go according to plan, or why things happen perfectly by what seems like coincidence.

But they never say it when the bad stuff happens do they? No one has a heart attack and says – it was meant to be. Or, we had a hit and run accident – it was meant to be. My daughter is a crack addict, my husband is a crook – it was meant to be. Who says that?

For those of you watching my blog this week, you’ll know I was intrigued by the movie “The Adjustment Bureau” that I happened to catch on pay per view this week. I’m sure you can rent it in video stores and I would encourage you to do that. Matt Damon stars as David Norris, a successful, kid-from-the-street politician who falls in love with a young ballerina after a chance meeting in the men’s room at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel. The problem is that their paths were not supposed to cross. It was a chance meeting which required an adjustment, and members of the Adjustment Bureau are those who make the adjustments according to “the plan.” In this case, it “wasn’t” meant to be.

The Adjustment Bureau is Hollywood’s latest exploration of the theological concept of predestination. Predestination is the Divine foreordaining or foreknowledge of all that will happen; with regard to the salvation of some and not others – the brain child of John Calvin, one of the great reformers of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Some folks extrapolate this whole idea to every chance meeting, to every moment of serendipity, chalking it up to some Divine or universal plan. The Adjustment Bureau does just that. It explores the idea that God has a plan, God has the full plan, and only God can change the plan. In the movie, God is the chairman. If things aren’t going according to the plan, measured by members of the bureau in their computers that resemble Ipads, they make the adjustment. One of the problem is that there are only so many members of the adjustment bureau...not everyone’s life gets adjusted.

In the movie, David Norris isn't following the plan, at least the part of the plan that the members of the adjustment bureau can see. They can't see the whole plan, they can only see part of the plan, and they can't tell you why the plan is the way the plan is. They're just following the orders of the Chairman – who has the whole plan, and who is the only one who has the capacity to change the plan. And nothing in the version of the plan these thugs have, puts Norris and the ballerina together; so they do everything in their power to keep them separated. Now while they have very interesting and aggressive power, David Norris isn't paying attention. He wants this girl in every conceivable way. There is an electric, emotional, love connection that they experience in the first minutes of their meeting. And this connection is equally powerful. I don't want to give too much of the movie away, but in the end, the Chairman – read God – changes the plan.

The text that Walter read for us this morning is about a plan...it's about the plan God had for Israel in the early days of her history. It's a plan about a chosen people, a place flowing with milk and honey, and an experience of life without fear, driven by an external law that dictated what human behaviour needed to be. Perfect. Meant to be. The problem of course, is Paul's conversion experience on the Damascus road, and his experience of Gentiles who are clamoring to know the Messiah of Israel's history. Now there's confusion about the plan, there's a need for new thinking and there is a need to understand the ancient writings in a new way. And Paul attempts to do that in the passage Walter read.

He gets pretty convoluted, comparing those who are in and out of the grace and redemption of God to limbs on a tree grafted, or not grafted. In my reading he's trying to say the Gentiles are just as able to claim their adoption as children, but the Jews are a little more equal. It's a crazy argument and it's very difficult to follow. But I believe he's trying to say the plan that Israel once imagined, where the Messiah would turn the tables on the injustice of their experience has been changed by an experience of grace so monumental, it transformed a death on a cross.

In fact, as I read it the last line of what Walter is what really matters. "For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all." In my mind this isn't about Jews or Gentiles any longer. This is about the human condition – we'll mess up, it's in our DNA. In fact, it seems that Paul is saying God created us that way...I'm not certain this is true, I'm just interpreting Paul here. But the point according to Paul is that just as we mess up, we will all experience mercy. And in my mind there is no preconceived, or predetermined condition to earn that mercy. We mess up, God loves us anyway, regardless of what, or in whom, we believe.

One of the best experiences of my week is to gather with the folks at Waves Coffee on Thursday afternoons and wrestle with the questions that come up...whether its politics or family stuff, church business or theology. The conversation is always lively, spirited and there is a whole lot of love around the table.

We happened to talk about The Adjustment Bureau this week and the fact that I think everyone gets to heaven. The idea in predetermination is that God has ordained that some will get into heaven and others will not. And I think Paul is suggesting an adjustment in that thinking. I really hear him saying – we’re all human, we all mess up, welcome to the planet. Doesn’t matter how “bad” you’ve been, God redeems you anyway; whether you accept Jesus as Messiah or not.

Talk about your adjustment bureau. And think about the questions. If everyone gets to heaven what difference does it make that I live a good Christian life, or live a life of debauchery? And I’d say good question and here’s what I think. The church’s job is to give people back to themselves, to help them remember their goodness, to help them discover who they have been created to be in the safety of a gathered community. In that discovery, masks are dropped and people get to look in the mirror the way that Christ might look at them, with forgiveness, compassion and complete acceptance. To accept ourselves as Christ would accept us is perhaps the most difficult task of any human who has lived any kind of life. We’d rather believe the ancient plan, some of us are in...welcomed into the land flowing with milk and honey and others are not. We’d rather believe there are conditions to this love of God, and if we meet them we have our ticket to heaven, if we don’t...oh well.

I can’t believe in, or worship any other kind of God whose love is described as completely unconditional and yet the condition by which I earn that love is through the story of one man’s experience 2000 years ago. I believe Paul is saying the same thing here. We are created, divinely human. In that humanity we will do things that don’t go according to plan. Those things will create pain and anguish. And I say, welcome to the planet. We live the life of Christ because it gives us back to ourselves in grace and it models grace for those who have no idea what that grace looks like. If we don’t create communities of grace, as followers of Jesus, no one will. We live the life of Christ because some of us are called to it. But only because it’s the choice we want to make, not because it earns our way into heaven. That is already taken care of. Friends this is the good news, the gospel of Jesus Christ. Believe it and be at peace.

Amen