

"DESTINED TO HAVE A GREAT YEAR"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
December 29, 1996

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### INTRODUCTION

Sometime ago there was a Peanuts cartoon that caught my attention. It showed Lucy in the outfield playing a baseball game. Charlie Brown is on the mound, pitching. Lucy calls out to him, "Manager...hey, manager...ask your catcher if he still loves me!" Charlie Brown interrupts his pitching motion and calls to the catcher, "She wants to know if you still love her?" Then, in the next frame, he turns to Lucy and he yells..."He says, 'NO'!" Then Lucy wants to know "why not"? He relays the information to Lucy again. "He says there are so many reasons he can't remember them all!"

Now, this upsets Lucy and she responds from her position in the outfield, "Really? That's very depressing!" Finally, Charlie Brown, becoming more impatient and more exasperated, cries out, "Do you mind if we get on with the game?" Lucy's response at this point is, "Game? What game?" "The baseball game!" shouts Charlie Brown from the pitcher's mound, to which Lucy responds, "Oh, that's right....I was wondering why I was standing out here....."

### DEVELOPMENT

The beginning of a new year is a good time for reminding ourselves why we are "standing out here." In other words, what is our purpose? Where are we headed? Why are we here?

The beginning of a new year is also a good time to remind ourselves of the promises of God and so this morning for a few minutes I would invite you to reflect on some good news taken from Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, chapter one and verses three through six.

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord, Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him...He DESTINED us to be His sons and daughters through Christ, according to the purpose of His will, to the praise of His glorious grace which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved...."

Paul, here, is speaking of our destiny....that we are destined to be God's sons and daughters through Christ and it does raise a question to consider: do you believe in destiny? That is, do you believe that you were put here on earth for a particular purpose? Do you believe that written into your very genes is an ideal scriptu~~for~~ for your life? And if you do believe there is a purpose for your life, do you believe that you have found it and are following it?

### STRONG SENSE OF DESTINY

I've known people who have had a very strong sense of destiny and let me lift this up as the first of three things to emphasize. There are people who believe that God has a plan for their lives and they seek to live out that plan carefully and thoughtfully. They trust God with their lives and they believe that all things do work for good for those who love God and they look for evidence of God's providence and of God's purposes in every aspect of their lives. I could name a few people who have been a part of this church, this fellowship, across the years who have had this gift, if you will. I won't name them here, but talk to me afterward and I'll tell you.

There's an interesting story behind that slogan. Georgette was about 11 when she first go into racing...spinning dirt on go-kart tracks in her native Florida. Her father, Buck Wright, didn't know where he'd get the five hundred dollars to buy his spunky daughter's first go-kart and so, to earn some extra dollars, he cut and sold cyprress trees. One day while out in the swamp, he came across a palm tree that had circled itself and grown up through a knot. He dug it up and made a call to Ripley's Believe It Or Not Museum. They bought this odd and unusual looking tree for, believe it or not, for \$ 500. And the next racing season McMahon took home the championship trophy and she's been blazing new territory ever since, graduating from go-karts to mini-stocks and then on to late-model stock cars.

Georgette McMahon believes that God's hand was at work in her father coming across that unusual looking palm tree in the Florida swamp and thus her motto from early on was "God Is Awesome". Maybe Georgette's belief that "God is with her" has something to do with her success on the track. I'm sure it does. If you run along through life believing that "somebody up here likes you", you're apt to have more confidence, more determination and more endurance. If you believe that God has a purpose for your life, you are more apt to look for ways to turn obstacles into opportunities.

There are people who believe that God has a plan for their lives. And because they believe that....and are willing to build their lives on that.... they end up accomplishing more than the average person.

#### HOW WE INTERPRET LIFE

Now what we're thinking about here and what we're talking about here is how we interpret life. Good times and not so good times...bad times, if you will....happen to us all. But the real question is how we interpret those times.

A psychologist by the name of Martin Seligman has studied this problem many times in his research on what he calls LEARNED HELPLESSNESS. What he has discovered is this:

"That the major difference in whether we are successful or not in life is not what happens to us, but it is how we interpret the things which happen to us...particularly the BAD THINGS."

If when we have a setback, we interpret that setback to mean that we are a loser, or a failure and that we are somehow hopeless and that our lives are never going to work out no matter what we do....we are probably going to give up and given in. But, if we interpret a setback as a momentary detour, a fluke, only a pebble and not an insurmountable boulder, then we are more apt to seek to turn "life's lemons into lemonade"!

And when you come right down to it: isn't think what the life of faith is really all about? Faith acknowledges that we are going to have hardships and setbacks and failures and heartaches along the way. Faith contends, however, that in the sum total of things,

"Somebody 'up there' likes us...and that come what may, if we trust God and take that little leap of faith, life will work out!

When Wayne Kraiss, the president of Southern California College, was a "rookie pastor" in Wheaton, Illinois, he called on a dear, elderly lady who had come to this country from Germany and found her bed-ridden and ill. He prayed with her and following the prayer, he was disappointed that there was no apparent change in her condition and reading the consternation on his face, she said to him,

"Well pastor...this must be one of the 'all things'"

And he asked her what she meant by the "all things". She responded, saying....

"When I was a little girl back in Germany, one day I asked my mother what it means that 'all things work together for good'. My mother was baking a cake and without directly answering my question, she handed me a spoonful of baking soda. And it tasted awful. Finally, I asked her what she was doing and she responded that she was answering my question.

"Amelia" my mother said, "I don't want you to ever forget that all things taken by themselves are not always pleasant. But when they are mixed together and fired in the oven...you love the results!"

The baking soda by itself was awful. Mixed, however, into a cake it was wonderful! That is the "faith-filled" way of looking at life. We do not let setbacks, however painful, they may be, defeat us or destroy us. We affirm, yes, that God is awesome, and that somehow God will take the distasteful baking soda that comes to all our lives and somehow blend it with some flour and some sugar and some shortening, and out of it all will come something quite splendid.

Bill Syndor learned that lesson and he counts it as one of the richest secrets of life. He began to look for God's hand at work in his life. He came to see that those baking soda incidents can sometimes turn out to be pretty powerful blessings. Vandals once broke the radio antenna on his car and since he was about to drive through the mountains for a speaking engagement and wanted the radio for the trip, he took the car in to have the antenna repaired. The mechanic informed him that his brakes were dangerously worn. After fixing the antenna and then repairing the brakes, he said to him,

"You would never have made it through the mountains with those brakes". And Syndor, reflecting on that word thought to himself..."yes, even adversity may in retrospect be recognized as a blessing...."

Friend...life is a matter of interpretation. Some of you who tend to come down heavy on the literal side of things are probably asking,

"Are you saying that God caused the vandals to rip off that man's antenna so that his bad brakes would be revealed?"

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Dennis and Barbara Rainey in their book, Moments Together for Couples, tell about one such person. Elizabeth Aleward was her name and she was a British missionary. As a young girl, she had two "great sorrows". The first one was that her hair was black and straight (when all of the popular girls her age had a head of full golden curls), and the second one was that while all her friends kept growing taller, she ended up being rather short.

Years later, God called Elizabeth Aleward to the mission field in China. As she stood looking at the people to whom God had called her to minister, two things became apparent to her. First: each and every one of them seemed to have long, straight and black hair. And, secondly, each and every one of them had stopped growing at exactly the same moment (and height) she had. She said that she bowed her head and said a quick prayer: "Thank you, God....You know what You are doing!" Elizabeth Aleward believed in destiny....in other words, she believe she was right where God had meant for her to be!

Some of you are familiar with the name of Corrie ten Boom...a modern-day saint. She, too, had this same sense of personal destiny even though she had spent a very painful time in a Nazi concentration camp and lost her sister in that camp. After World War II, Corrie ten Boom traveled around the world and spoke of her war experiences in Holland and her imprisonment at Ravensbruck. Numerous times she shared the story of "God's love" in her life even through those truly painful and difficult and tough times.

She often used simple symbols to illustrate great truths about God. For instance, in one of her presentations, she would take with her a piece of cloth with a crown embroidered on it. First she would hold up the cloth with the lovely embroidered side showing - all the threads forming a beautiful crown. This she would describe as the plan God has for our lives. Then she would flip the cloth over to show the tangled, confused underside....illustrating how we view our lives from a human standpoint. There is a pattern to life, she would often say.....and it's a pattern we may not always see. Corrie ten Boom believed in that feeling of destiny. She was one of that beautiful company of people who believe that there is a divinely ordained plan for their lives.

#### THOSE WITH IT ACCOMPLISH MORE

The second thing we would do well to see is that people who have this sense of destiny to their lives accomplish more than those who do not. The experts who study these things tell us this is so. In other words, if you believe that God is at work in your life in a special way, that He or She has a plan for your life, you will probably accomplish more than if you did not believe that.

It makes sense if you think about it. If you believe that a loving God has a plan for your life, you'll likely be a more optimistic person than somebody who believes he (or she) is out there all on his or her own. I think you'll be more prone to get back up and try again after you've been knocked down. And you'll be more apt to look for ways to turn defeats into victories...especially if you believe God is "at the controls of your life."

Georgette McMahon is a 23 year old race car driver from Charlotte, North Carolina and she is hoping "to go" where few women have gone before - to the Winner's Circle at a National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR) event. McMahon emblazons her race cards with the words, "God Is Awesome".

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"Are you saying that God caused the vandals to rip off that man's antenna so that his bad brakes would be revealed?"

I can't answer that. And I really don't know of anyone who can. I can only say that I choose to believe with St. Paul that,

"God has destined for us to be His sons and daughters through Christ...according to the purpose of His will."

I choose to believe that "all things have a way of working together for good to those who love God and serve Him". I choose to believe with Corrie Ten Boom that though we can only see the tangled, confused underside of life's pattern, that God is weaving a beautiful pattern that will only be revealed to us in another realm, in another time...and who knows, perhaps even in this realm and this time!

That's how you and I should choose to interpret life. That's what the life of aith is all about and I have observed many people in my lifetime who have such faith....yes, who trust...trust God in all things and who look daily for God's blessings....they seem to live a better quality of life and are more successful than those who have no faith. So, I say with confidence and with hope that....come what may....you and I are destined to have a great 1997, always remembering that God is awesome!

PRAYER