

The Sovereignty of God
The Reverend Joanna Adams
Morningside Presbyterian Church
Atlanta, Georgia
January 22, 2006

Two Sundays ago, we began a sermon series on Protestantism by thinking together about the grace of God, uniquely revealed in Jesus Christ. Last week, we spoke of the God of the Bible. Today, we turn to the theological conviction most often associated with the tradition of the Reformed faith, namely, the sovereignty of God. Across the centuries, Presbyterians have famously affirmed “the majesty, holiness, and providence of God who creates, sustains, rules and redeems the world in sovereign righteousness and love.” Those stout and formidable words are from our Presbyterian Book of Order. They are a mouthful for me to say and an earful for you to hear. Perhaps you are thinking, “For heaven’s sake, Joanna, can’t you simply say something to help us get through the week? Something that we can take home and think about and be encouraged by? The majesty, holiness and providence of God who creates, sustains, rules and redeems the world in sovereign righteousness and love of his own will is a lot to get our minds around. And, by the way, how about your mind, Joanna? Don’t you need something a little more soul-stirring and applicable to life as you hobble

around on that cast, having to face squarely the fact that you are not immune to the limits and indignities of life?”

Believe it or not, I can think of no better word for any of us to hear today than the message that it’s not about us! Our chief end in life is not to be happy, not to be relaxed, not to have everything go our way. Our chief end in life, Presbyterians have always believed, is to glorify God, who remains firmly in place as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of the universe. The only way life actually works, and the world actually works, is when we are in our place, too, under the providential care of the one Holy, Almighty, and most merciful God who made us.

The Te Deum Laudamus in the Book of Common Prayer is used by our Protestant brothers and sisters, the Episcopalians. It begins, “We praise thee, O God. We acknowledge you to be the Lord.” Lord of what? Lord of all that was and is and shall forever be, which includes you and me, our vulnerable bodies, our sometimes fractured relationships, our hopes and our dreams, our yesterdays and our tomorrows. God is the sovereign Lord over it all. How does the old hymn put it? “God of our lives, through all the circling years, we trust in you.”

I have to tell you that, for me, trusting is easier said than done. I had myself a genuine little sinking spell one night last week. I went to bed, but I

couldn't go to sleep. I couldn't get comfortable. I balled up the sheets. I wasn't sure how I was going to function. I was getting all balled up inside because I was unconsciously making the assumption that there was no power at work in my unexpected situation other than my own. Parker Palmer calls that kind of thinking "functional atheism." I had forgotten that God had not stopped being God of the universe when I had a cast put on my leg. So far, God had sustained my life, and God will continue to sustain me through whatever nuisances I have to deal with. All the weight of our lives is not on our shoulders. There is no adversity we have to face alone. There is nothing that we have to do on our own. Paul writes that it is God's plan for the fullness of time to gather up all things in Christ, things in heaven and one earth, which presumably means everything that happens, the good the bad and the ugly.

Are you ready to swim with me into deeper water? God is in control. I say that as a conviction of faith. What exactly am I saying, and am I saying it with my fingers crossed? It certainly does not appear as if God has gotten the upper hand over the forces of suffering and death, sin and evil? Where do terrible things come from like tsunamis or the plague of AIDS if God is both great and good?

If God is in control, if God is free to do anything God pleases anywhere, any time, then where does that leave the whole matter of human freedom? Paul writes that our destiny was set in place before the foundation of the world. If that's the case, then do we have choices to make, or are we puppets who move only at the whim of an omnipotent power? (1)

Somebody passed along to me last week a Doug Marlette cartoon. One guy says, "Preacher, do you believe in predestination?"

The preacher answers, "I knew you were going to ask me that."

The jokes and misunderstandings about predestination notwithstanding, the sovereignty of God is the best news I know. It means, first and last, that God is free. (2) God is not answerable to the human creature or even bound by our limited and often wrong set of expectations. God is free to act in whatever way God chooses, with whom God chooses.

This, of course, is not good news for those who expect the Almighty to act as they would and to have the same enemies as they do, but how important this Protestant emphasis on the freedom of God is in the face of so much modern Christianity, which often approaches God more like a pet on a leash than as the holy one whose majesty fills the earth. Much of modern American Christianity treats God as a mascot to the nation, rather than as sovereign Lord of all the nations.

Many individual Christians today act as if God is waiting to serve them, like a divine delivery man, rushing in with whatever they ask for, whether it is a parking place at the shopping mall or color coordinated kitchen appliances. I heard a friend say that in her sister-in-law's prayer group, for a month, the whole group prayed for color coordinated kitchen appliances for one of the members. (She got them!)

The idea of the sovereignty of God reminds us that God does not exist to serve us but that we exist to glorify and serve God. We are not in the driver's seat. Our proper place is to be humbly grateful before the God of grace who forgives our sins, guides us when we have lost our way, and brings justice to the ends of the earth. These gifts God gives out of God's own "eternal and incomprehensible will." (3)

The story of the call of Abram is illustrative of what I'm want to say about God's doing what God wants to do and choosing whom God wants to choose. There is nothing special about the man named Abram. Not a word is written about his worthiness or fitness for the role God is assigning him to be the father of a multitude of nations. On the contrary, he and his wife Sari are described as being too old to do much of anything new. Abraham himself is ninety-nine years old. But one day out of the blue, the Lord says to Abram, "I am the God Almighty, and I am choosing you to walk before

me and I will make my covenant between me and you.” That’s what divine freedom looks like. But notice the paradox here. God is free to do whatever God wants, but God freely chooses to be bound to Abraham in an everlasting relationship, and not only with Abraham but with all the generations that will come after him. The God who first created the world in sovereign love now loves into existence a new future for those creatures whom God gave life to in the first place. What did Jesus say to his disciples, “You did not choose me. I chose you that you would go and bear fruit.” (John 15:16)

Divine freedom is the key characteristic of a sovereign God who exercises divine freedom through love. How do we know this? Not by looking at the brokenness of the world, but by looking at the one who is the revelation of God. In Christ, we discern God’s eternal purposes. In him, we see the greatness of God expressed in servanthood. We see the new covenant, sealed in the blood of Christ. You would think that the Lord would **have** servants rather than choose to be a servant, but what he did was to humble himself unto death, death on a cross. (4) He freely chose to eat with outcasts, to wash the feet of his followers, to give his life as a ransom for many, to be lifted up on Calvary in order to drive out the rulers of the world and draw all people unto himself. (John 12:32) That was the plan from the foundation of the

world, and it was executed, not by displays of naked power but through the sovereignty of grace and love. (5)

Implicit in this idea is that God will, one day, gather up all things in heaven and on earth, is the expectation that even the most terrible things that happen, in a way we cannot understand, will someday be drawn up into God, who intends to leave nothing unredeemed. Through the power of sovereign love, even evil and death can be used for the purposes of redemption. There are many things that happen that are contrary to the will of God, but God will prevail in the end. One look at the cross, and you will see how it's done. To say that God is sovereign is to say that God is at work in the cosmos from the farthest star in the galaxy to the depths of the little planet called Earth. It is to say that God is active in the broader realms of society and culture, working for justice and human dignity. It is to say that the Spirit of the living God flows through the notes of musicians and the words of poets. It is to say that God is at work in the church and through the church's mission. It is to say that there is a power at work in us personally that is beyond our wildest dreams. The tender shoots of newness are growing in our dark nights of rumpled sheets and unexpected developments. Through it all, the Holy One of Israel, whom alone we worship and serve, is offering new life.

I haven't gotten to the Narnia movie, yet. In fact, I've not read *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* since I read it to Elizabeth years ago. But I'm glad to see America falling in love with C. S. Lewis again and with that very large lion named Aslan, who Barbara Brown Taylor says, "pads around the edges of the story, appearing to save four lost children from danger and guide them home." (6) The children hear about Aslan for the first time from a pair of beavers. They have doubts about whether they want to meet him or not.

"Is he safe?" one of the children asks. "I feel nervous about meeting a lion."

"That you will, dearie, and no mistake," said Mrs. Beaver. "If there is anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than other people or just plain silly."

"Then he isn't safe?" Lucy asks.

"Safe?" said Mr. Beaver. "Don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver is telling you? Who said anything about safe? Of course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."

Taylor continues, "His subjects have no control over him. He is nobody's pet. But he is good, which means he can be trusted. If they will just press through their fear of him, he will save them. If they can climb on his back and hang on for dear life, he will carry them home." (7)

Thanks be to God who, in sovereign righteousness and love, rules and redeems the world.

Notes:

(1) Robert McAfee Brown, *the Spirit of Protestantism*, Oxford University Press, 1965, p.81.

(2) Brown, p. 82.

(3) *The Westminster Confession of Faith*

(4) Brown, p.83.

(5) Ibid.

(6) Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life*, Cowley Publications, 1993, p.60.

(7) Ibid.