

# FREE TO CHOOSE

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February 4, 2018

Epiphany 5

[1st Corinthians 9:17-23](#)

[Mark 1:29-39](#)

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(prayer)

The song of the angels is stilled.  
The star in the sky is gone.  
The kings and shepherds  
have found their way home.  
The Work of Christmas is begun.  
**("I Am the Light of the World" - #87VU)**

The light is in the world.

The Work of Christmas is begun.

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We continue to make our way through the season of epiphany - the weeks from the 12 days of Christmas through to the start of Lent.

On Sundays, here in church - since the beginning of January - we have been methodically working our way through the first chapter of the gospel of Mark.

- Jesus spent time with John the Baptist and John's followers by the Jordan River;
- Jesus took time alone with his temptations in the Judean wilderness;
- Jesus returned to Galilee where he proclaimed (like John had in Judea): *the kingdom of God has come near*;
- Jesus spent time by the Sea of Galilee, where he began to acquire followers of his own;
- Jesus taught and healed - with surprising authority - in the Capernaum synagogue.

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It is at this point in the narrative, that the gospel writer notes that "at once, [Jesus'] fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee" (Mk1:28).

Up to this point, Jesus was able to pick and choose where he went and with whom he interacted:

- Jesus chose to retreat into the wilderness.
- Jesus chose to take John's proclamation to Galilee.
- Jesus chose to head down to the water where he chose to invite Simon, John and their brothers to join him in the ministry he was beginning.
- Jesus chose to enter the synagogue and offer his insights.
- Jesus chose to offer calm and renewal to a troubled member of the synagogue congregation.

But things changed after the people of Capernaum shared what they had seen and heard that Saturday in the synagogue. And it didn't take long as we heard today.

After "synagogue/church", one of Jesus' fisherman disciples hosted them in his home.

As soon as the sabbath ended (with the setting sun), crowds of people began to arrive at Simon's house longing to share in Jesus' healing authority: fevers were abated; physical and mental illnesses were cured.

It sounds overwhelming.

<https://youtu.be/g3BE6aMpRsA>

In fairness, Mark doesn't say that Jesus was unable to handle the pressures and demands of the

crowd in the way Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice present things in their play; the image that the gospel presents is that of a healer in full control.

And yet, when people woke up the next morning, Jesus was nowhere to be found.

We are told that Jesus chose some prayerful solitude before the sun came up. This seems to imply that:

1. Jesus needed to re-charge his batteries; or
  2. Jesus needed to sort out what he should do next.
- ...or both.

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When Simon finally found Jesus, he said “everyone [has been] searching for you!” I read that as saying that the crowds were back. The news of Jesus’ authority was still spreading and even more people wanted to experience it firsthand.

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The young ministry of Jesus had already faced a few choice points.

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It began in the Judean wilderness after Jesus’ baptism. After weeks of weighing the options, Jesus chose not to abuse the authority he was given. Jesus chose to return to *John the Baptist’s* group and stayed among them until John was arrested.

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At that point, Jesus then chose to return back to Galilee. The gospel text doesn't give us any details, but, for some reason, Jesus chose not to go back to Nazareth, but to relocate to Capernaum, where his teachings inspired James, John, Andrew and Simon to leave their nets and follow Jesus.

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When Jesus met the troubled man with an unclean spirit in the synagogue, a new direction was chosen - Jesus would teach through actions as well as words.

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*That* choice set up the choice Jesus faced in today's reading... He had prayed about it early that morning. **What Would Jesus Do?**

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*‘Let us go on to the neighbouring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.’*

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*For that is what I came out to do.* Jesus seems to be saying that it was his destined fate to be a travelling preacher-teacher.

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That brings me to what I want to explore today.

Fate versus Choice.

Pre-destination versus Free Will.

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Does God have our lives mapped out for us and we simply live out that divine plan with only an illusion of choice?

**or**

Do we live it out our own choices and God is simply our companion along the way: perhaps

offering guidance but not forcing us on one path or another?

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*Predestination* and *Free Will* are competing ideologies that - both - have long and strong histories within christian theological discourse. This includes many attempts (over the centuries) to have it both ways. Some of the arguments can get quite complicated, but the way I see it - in the end - people really have to lean one way or the other.

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Free Will is pretty easy to understand.

It is the belief that when faced with a choice, we make the choice based on a search of the priorities of our hearts and minds.

While it is true that there are many circumstances that are beyond our control - when we might argue that we have no real choice, a Free Will doctrine would still argue that how we live in the wake of those circumstances can vary... based on how **we** respond; Free Will proposes that the path we end up on is the result of the physics of the universe, human interactions *and* our complex intersecting choices. Free Will is the belief that God is not simply moving pieces around a chess board, all while hacking our minds with an illusion of choice.

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A Free Will doctrine can be uncomfortable because it is lonely. It seems to be the antithesis of the basic hope of faith ... that *we are not alone*; that *we live in God's world*.

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A Pre-Destination doctrine brings comfort into an uncomfortable world. We long for a deeper meaning behind circumstances that defy understanding.

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We often hear Pre-Destination language in the aftermath of a tragedy. There must be a greater purpose behind the suffering:

- This happened for a reason.
- God must have a greater plan.
- God was looking out for me.
- A child dies... God needed a new angel.

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People sometimes reflect on fortunate circumstances with pre-destination language. Even when the results are good, if we can't see the logic, pre-destination offers an explanation.

- God wanted me to get on this plane...
- God has blessed me...

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A Pre-Destination doctrine can be uncomfortable because it is cruel. It seems to be the antithesis of the basic hope of faith ... that *God is love*. Logic tells us that in a universe governed by Pre-Destination, God picks winners and losers... and the criteria for who the losers are doesn't always make sense.

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Free Will offers opportunities to have an impact in the world;

Pre-Destination offers contentment that there is a time and purpose for everything.

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But...

Free Will paints a lonely existence;

Pre-Destination - a cruel one.

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All of this hinges on how we understand the nature of God.

Two characteristics often ascribed to God:

- Omniscient;

- Omnipotent.

For many of us these are the very definition of God: all-knowing and all-powerful.

This does give rise to the skeptic's [paradoxical question](#): *Does God know how to make a stone that is so heavy that God is unable to lift it?*

The "omnipotence paradox" comes in many forms:

- The oldest might be from Pseudo-Dionysius in the 6th century: *Can God deny himself?*
- Other variations: *Can God create a prison so secure that God could not escape?*
- *Can God draw a triangle who angles do not add up to 180°?*
- Or my personal favorite - [Homer Simpson](#) asking Ned Flanders: *Could Jesus microwave a burrito so hot that he, himself, could not eat it?*

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Our language forces us to *anthropomorphize* God. Our ability to understand God is limited by our human experiences. The best we can do is imagine what we might do if we were all-powerful and all-knowing.

Here's an ironic question on the free will, pre-destination debate:

Is God destined to use God's omnipotence and omniscience to their fullest potential or does God have the ability to freely choose to be less than that?

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In the 1999 movie, [The Matrix](#), Morpheus [tells](#) Neo that *there is a difference between knowing the path and walking the path.*

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The truth is... I really don't know whether I am a slave to fate or whether everything depends on me. I doubt that this is a knowable known.

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I really want to believe that I am more than an algorithm being played out.

I really want to have my life matter.

I want the conversations we have at times like our Annual Congregational Meeting after church today to have the potential to bring something new into our midst.

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I get hints that this is possible when I see all of the choices at work within today's gospel reading.

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Jesus chooses to expand how he will teach people about the Realm of God.

He chooses to show wholeness and renewal in his actions as well as his words.

Simon's mother-in-law offers her service to guests in her home.

The disciples choose to go looking for Jesus.

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Jesus (like John the Baptism) had been preaching a gospel of choice: *The Kingdom of God is near. Will you turn toward it and believe in this good news?*

Perhaps my best hope for free will comes from the day that Jesus came down to the lake shore: *I*

*will be fishing for people. Will you come and follow me?*

Simon, James and their brothers chose to leave their boats on the shoreline and seek other seas when Jesus called their names.

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The book of [Acts](#) tells us that this same Simon (now going by Peter) told the full story of Jesus' life, death and resurrection to stunned crowds during the Festival of Weeks (fifty days after the first Easter) and 3,000 people chose to walk the path discipleship that day.

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Maybe I have free will, but God exists beyond linear time and knows (ahead of time) what I will choose. ??

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For me... I will assume that my choices matter.

And... I will assume that God remains my companion, regardless of where those choices take me.

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If God can have it both ways, I will too.

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I will take seriously the invitation to be the hands and feet of Christ in the world, without expecting my god to force my actions.

God, for me, is my companion and guide - not my auto-pilot.

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I will walk the paths I choose, but I will never walk alone.

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Guided by testaments, old and new...

- I choose kindness, mercy and humility.
- I choose faith, hope and love.

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And... I will greet the Christ-light in you as we find ourselves sharing the road.

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I believe that we will make a difference... because we can.

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Let us pray:

Holy God, we seek wisdom to make good choices so that we may advance Jesus' good news. Be with us on this journey.

Amen.

\*\*\*offering\*\*\*