



Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard Baker
September 9, 2018 Sermon

Conversations With God: The Destiny Thief

Scripture Lessons: Genesis 12:1-3, 15:15, 16, 17:1-6, 15-19

I've written a lot about destiny in my fiction, not because I understand it, but because I'd like to.—
Richard Russo, *The Destiny Thief*

This is God's world. It is in this world that the Christian movement has its enterprise. In his redeeming person and work, our Lord Christ became a part of our world's humanity and history, and so was and continues to be identified with this world and its destiny as God works out his purposes with human beings—1959 Statement, Presbyterian Church (US)

Preface to the Scripture Lesson:

The story of Abraham and Sarah begins with the ending. Abraham and Sarah will be the parents of a great nation: their offspring will be as numerous as the stars in the sky and the sands by the sea. Quite a destiny. But don't think that the opening line of the story is the ultimate plot spoiler. There's still lots of drama to come; lots of twists and turns, their story is filled with unexpected events and surprises. But all that's yet to come. For now listen to God's Word, the first of many conversations between God and Abraham, in which God proclaims to Abraham their remarkable destiny . . .

Sermon:

"Look, I'm sorry. It's just that . . . well, for a long time now, it's felt like . . . well, like you *stole my destiny*."

So said "David" (not his real name) to the author Richard Russo in an unexpected late-night telephone conversation. "David" and Russo had been students in the same creative writing class at the University of Arizona some 30 years earlier. Although Richard Russo may not be quite a household name, as writers go, he's had great success: eight novels published, two of which were made into award-winning HBO miniseries, a couple of short-story collections, a memoir, a Guggenheim Fellowship for Creative Arts, and, in 2002, the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. But back in that creative writing class, it was David, not Russo, who was the star. The professor predicted that David would go on to great things as a writer, while Russo . . . well, Russo was destined to end up teaching at some obscure state university extension. But somehow, over the course of 30 years, their destinies get switched.

Apparently for several weeks David had been stewing over this, watching Russo's miniseries on HBO, with only his good friend Jack Daniels for company—which is what prompted the unexpected late-night phone call.

"Look, I'm sorry," David said, "I shouldn't have called you the way I did a couple weeks ago—to curse you like that, to say all those awful things about you and your writing, not to even say who I was. That was wrong—I'm sorry."

"Listen, David, you really don't need to apologize."

"Yes, yes, I do: that was wrong—I'm not like that, I don't want to be like that."

"Well, David, at least you don't need to apologize to *me*—because whoever you called that night, it sure wasn't me. I would've remembered that."

So Russo begins his non-fiction, autobiographical essay, *The Destiny Thief*.

Russo grew up in Gloversville, a depressed and dying mill town in upstate New York, the son of a World War II hero, a man who had stormed the beaches at Normandy, and who now spent his days in Gloversville, mostly not working, mostly gambling, and always in and out of trouble. As a teenager, Russo wanted—more than anything—to get out, to get away, to run away from Gloversville, from his father—to reinvent himself. Hence, the University of Arizona, literature, and creative writing. Before he left the University, Russo gave the same creative-writing professor the 400-page manuscript of a novel he had written.

"Dead, lifeless, inert," the professor said, handing it back after reading it. "Except . . . except for those 40 pages of back story about the guy in the dying upstate New York mill town—now those pages had some real life!"

Russo then did just what you'd expect: ignored him—*What does this guy know?*—and put the manuscript away in a drawer. Five years later, teaching at an obscure state university extension, Russo had written a lot more fiction—with almost no success—and had not published much scholarly work, either. His department chair warned him that his prospects for tenure were dim and getting dimmer. In desperation, he pulled out the 400-page manuscript. His creative writing professor was right: those 40 pages of backstory were the best part: there, and only there, he had a voice. All his other writing, while technically proficient, lacked that voice, that distinctive authorial presence. But in those forty pages, that voice: smart, tough, cynical, and sardonic, yet somehow wounded, thoughtful, and compassionate. Russo recognized that voice. He had grown up with that voice. It was the voice of his father. That's when it hit him: to fulfill his destiny as a writer, he would have to embrace his destiny as a child of Gloversville, as the son of his father. He wasn't sure it was worth it. But he was desperate—broke, his wife pregnant with their second child. "In moments like these," Russo writes, "destiny is forged."

All of which raises some questions—questions that Russo muses over in his essay: do we forge our destinies or are they forged for us? Is it life-circumstances and other people (where we were born and to whom, for example)? Or is it chance? Or is it fate? Or is it God? Or is it we ourselves—our own choices and our own efforts—that forge our destinies?

The Bible of course has a clear and definitive answer to these questions, and that answer is . . . "yes." It's all of these things, in some complex, mysterious interplay—I would call it a conversation—that forges our destiny. At the very least, I would say, that is our lived experience. Just look at Abraham and Sarah.

You could certainly say that God determines their destiny; after all, the story opens with God declaring their destiny, and then, later, at two or three key junctures, God re-enters the story to re-affirm it and set things back on course. And yet, for much of the story, God seems curiously inert, if not ab-

sent, in bringing about that destiny, leaving Sarah and Abraham's destiny in their own hands, sometimes with positive results . . . and sometimes God has to intervene to undo their choices (telling Pharaoh that Sarah was your "sister" was not a good idea, Abraham).

At other times, what happens to Abraham and Sarah seems to depend on the acts of others (Lot, Pharaoh, and the mysterious figure, Melchizedek, who drifts in and out of the story); at other times, it seems to depend on chance or accident (What if there hadn't been a famine? What if Sarah and Abraham hadn't gone to Egypt?); and at still other times, it seems a matter of necessity or fate, like it's going to happen no matter what (if they can have a child at ages 100 and 90, respectively, then it's going to happen no matter what). And let's come out and say it, sometimes, horrifically, God seems to be working *against* their declared destiny: as when God says to Abraham: "Abraham, take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering" That is the greatest test of Abraham's faith.

Not only do all these things—God, circumstances, other people, chance necessity, fate, human choices and effort—not only do all these things seem to be interacting in a complex, mysterious interplay to forge our destinies, but the actors involved (including God) seem to be acting, reacting, and interacting with one another to figure out—and to live out—their destinies. Hence, "conversation" in the figurative sense, but also in the literal: a lot of the interaction among the actors is their talking to one another and to themselves to figure out and live out their destinies, witness the three conversations between God and Abraham I read earlier.

And this pattern of conversation recurs throughout the Bible, perhaps most powerfully and most poignantly when Jesus, on the night of his arrest, prays in the Garden at Gethsemane: "Father if it be your will let this cup pass from me; nevertheless your will be done." And in his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground. That is the greatest test of Jesus' faith: in moments like these, destiny is forged.

And not just Jesus' destiny, but ours as well, in fact, the whole universe's. Because . . . well, because Jesus is a kind of destiny thief: his death changes our destiny, in fact, it's almost as if by Jesus' death and resurrection, our destinies are switched. We are born to die—that seems to be the human destiny we all share. But through Jesus' death and resurrection, we are reborn to life, to life eternal, with God. What was once only Jesus' destiny, now becomes ours, as well. And it is quite a destiny. As Paul puts it, God has destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ.

Of course, that doesn't mean that there isn't lots of drama to come for us; lots of twists and turns; our stories are filled with unexpected events and surprises, many of which are still yet to come, as we fulfill that destiny. Like Abraham and Sarah, God promises us a grand, and almost unbelievable, destiny. But how that destiny comes to be . . . well, in the words of the old hymn, God is working God's purpose out; and as Paul puts it, we are working out our own salvation in fear and trembling. It is a back-and-forth, a conversation. But this much is clear: like Abraham we are to have faith: "Abraham believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness."

And by the way, this is Russo's story, as well. It's not that he stole David's destiny. It's that he worked out his own in fear and trembling. He writes this:

[D]ear God I was tired of running away, tired of apologizing, tired of trying to figure out what editors and other people wanted. I would make one final attempt so I could be done with writing once and

for all. . . in truth I was just tired of always getting in my own way. I needed not only to claim as my own the very place I'd been fleeing for so long [that would be Gloversville] but also to lose myself there, to give my full attention to the kind of people whose lives were, at least to me, both important and essential. And so, with no one left to impress, not even myself, I began, finally, to write.

I bring all this up today, because . . . well, first because I think it's important and essential for all of us. But also because today is Convocation Sunday, and I'm soon to give my state of the church talk, which raises the whole question of destiny, our destiny, as Westminster Presbyterian Church.

Like Abraham and Sarah, like the universe itself, we have a grand, almost unbelievable, destiny: to be the people of God, the body of Christ in the world; to proclaim the word of God, to be the ark of salvation; to provide refuge and sanctuary for the weary, friendless, and lost; to teach and to nurture; to be a place of friendship; to worship God in spirit and truth, to keep and declare the truth; to promote justice in the world, to show the world what the rule of God looks like. It's quite a destiny. And even more than that, we have a destiny unique to Westminster: to be part of the life of downtown Dayton, to be a music church, to be a teaching church (especially for youth), to be a place of prayer and spirituality, to be a church that prizes worship—part of our destiny is the music for Convocation Sunday; part of our destiny is the bells ringing in "Masters in the Hall" for "Christmas in the Cathedral."

But just because we know our destiny doesn't mean that there isn't lots of drama to come for us, lots of twists and turns—our story is filled with unexpected events and surprises, many of which are still yet to come, as we fulfill our destiny. Our destiny will be forged in a complex, mysterious interplay between all those elements. And we are part of that conversation. And even when we are tested, and even when we get it wrong, we can trust that God is still with us in that conversation, correcting us, guiding us, working his purpose out as we work our salvation out in fear and trembling. That is our lived experience.

May we too have faith in that lived experience: may we believe the Lord, and may it be reckoned to us as righteousness.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.