

Isaiah 9: 1-2

Psalm 27: 1-9

1 Corinthians 1:10-18

Matthew 4: 12-23

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Sermon: **THE LUCKY COINCIDENCE**

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Summary: And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist.

I've mentioned before from this pulpit that there is no Hebrew word for coincidence. And since, according to the Jewish rabbinical way of thinking, the Hebrew language perfectly reflects reality, it follows that there's no such thing as coincidence. And I think that may just be another way of saying that everything that happens does so in accordance with God's providence, although that involves some great mysteries: why is there evil, why do bad things happen to good people, why are there natural catastrophes, and so on. We're not going to explore those questions today; instead let us begin to reflect on how seemingly minor or accidental things really serve to shape everything that comes after, including our lives, and how that may lead us to be more open to the view that, in some way, God's benevolent hand is behind it all.

Let me start with a homely illustration. I'm on friendly terms with the man who runs the butcher counter at Tops here in town. His name is Bob, so of course I refer to him as Bob the Butcher.

Anyway, aside from being an excellent butcher, Bob is a friendly and chatty fellow, and whenever we do business or run into each other in the store, we tend to spend some time in conversation. Well, a few weeks back we were having one such conversation, and Bob happened to mention that he had a daughter who was starting law school. I said that was nice, and asked him if she had always shown an interest in becoming a lawyer. Not at all, Bob said, and he proceeded to tell me how it came about.

It seems his daughter was enlisted in the Navy doing regular Navy things. One day she was driving away from the naval base, and a motorcycle ran into her car. It did considerable damage, and resulted in a fairly serious injury to Bob's daughter,

serious enough that after her initial medical treatment, she was relieved of her usual duties and reassigned to do what was essentially secretarial work in the JAG unit of the base, which is the unit that handles legal problems that arise during the course of naval operations.

Well, during the course of her secretarial duties, she read the paperwork for a case in which a seaman was facing court martial for some infraction – Bob didn't say what it was – and she noticed something in the evidence that she thought might have a bearing on his guilt or innocence, but that nobody else had picked up on. So she mentioned it to the lawyers assigned to the case and, long story short, sure enough the charges against the seaman were withdrawn. During the course of all this, Bob's daughter discovered both a talent for and an enjoyment of dealing with criminal affairs from a legal point of view, and the upshot is that, now that she's a civilian, she's pursuing a career in law.

Now, that's a feel-good story, but that's not why I'm recounting it. What I want you to think about is the fact that if that motorcyclist had not been reckless exactly there and exactly then when he ran into her car, Bob's daughter's life would have been completely different than it will now be. Her career and all the events of her life would have been different, probably her husband, her children, her grandchildren would all have been different, if that motorcyclist had been one second earlier or one second later in arriving on the scene.

And you can carry this way of thinking back as far as you can see. Suppose the motorcyclist was stopped earlier at a red light a block away, and just as the light turns green, a squirrel runs across the road in front of him, so that he waits a couple of seconds before proceeding. If that squirrel had not run across the street, then Bob's daughter would have had a completely different life.

And of course the sailor who was acquitted would have had an entirely different future as well, if that squirrel had stopped a moment to check for traffic before darting into the road.

Do you see the point I'm getting at? When you begin to think about things in this way, you begin to be filled with a kind of uncanny wonder at the mysterious providence of why things happen.

Each one of you was conceived at a particular instant in time. Had your mother or father climbed into bed five seconds earlier, or two seconds later than they did, you

would not exist. You wouldn't be sitting here now. And yet here you are. And here I am. Glory be to God.

And that brings us back to our Gospel reading. With this openness to the mystery of God's glorious providence, I want to think about just three of the things Matthew describes for us that were part of the setting for Christ's ministry, and without which that ministry could not have taken root, and created the world we live in today.

In this passage, Matthew really reports three things. First, Jesus went to Galilee to conduct his ministry. Second, he enlisted some fishermen to help him. And third, he taught in the synagogues.

Let's consider each of those in turn, in search of God's providence.

First, Galilee. Why did Jesus establish his ministry in Galilee? The answer is because only there could he have found an attentive and sympathetic audience. Unlike Judea to the south, Galilee had been conquered and reconquered many times over the centuries, each time bringing in new ideas and new blood, much of that blood not even Jewish. It was a country full of energetic and even hot-headed people, who were not stultified by ancient Jewish traditions. The roads I mentioned earlier connected it with the rest of the world, and on a daily basis those worldly travelers would pass through its precincts, with their different ideas about culture and religion. As we read in Isaiah, from ancient times Galilee was referred to as "Galilee of the Gentiles," not only because it was so non-Jewish in many ways, but because it was literally surrounded by Gentile nations: Phoenicia to the west, Syria to the north and east, and even the south, the territory of the Samaritans.

Nowhere else in Israel could Jesus have found an openness to his revolutionary message except in Galilee, because of its unique history and location. And surely that speaks to the providence of God. Just as Jesus himself promised his disciples that he would prepare a place for them, surely Galilee was the perfect place prepared by God for his Son to do his work.

And the fishermen casting their nets on its shore...surely they were themselves a product of God's providence. For being fishermen requires a certain character, a character that would have qualified them to be Christ's own representatives.

Fishermen must be patient, and not expect immediate results. They must have perseverance, the quality of continued effort, even when the efforts do not seem to bear fruit. And aren't those the qualities needed to be fishers of men?

Fisherman must select the right bait, the bait appropriate to the fish. It's the same lesson that Paul learned, and then taught that he must become all things to all people, in order to win some. That's something the fisherman already knows from long experience.

And finally, good fishermen must be non-obtrusive, not even allowing their shadow to fall where the fish might be lurking. Just so, the messengers of Christ would need to remember, first and foremost, to direct attention to Jesus himself, and away from themselves.

Considering all that, is it too much to conclude that God's hand was involved in the creation of exactly that lake in exactly that place, for the formation of people of exactly the right character and personality to serve as Christ's representatives? I don't think so. I think it's entirely plausible.

Or think about the synagogues where Jesus began to spread his message. Although there was only one temple and that was in Jerusalem, every town and village, however small, had its synagogue. But where the temple was exclusively reserved for blood sacrifice, the synagogues were exclusively used for teaching. And those synagogues were the perfect place for a new preacher to deliver a new message.

Each synagogue service had three parts: prayer, then a reading from the Hebrew Scriptures, and finally an address or sermon. But it was very different from what we do in our churches. There was no professional ministry. Any distinguished person might be asked to give the address, and anyone deemed qualified by the administrator of the synagogue might be allowed to do so.

That was exactly what Jesus needed: an audience of people who were sincerely interested in religion and willing to listen to him. And after the address, there would always be a time for questioning and discussion, so that Jesus might elaborate on whatever the subject of his address had been.

In other words, it was the very best, and possibly the only way that the message of Christ could have been introduced and have begun to take root. If we look with an open heart, I think we can see the whole history of the Jewish religion leading by God's guidance to the creation of those humble little synagogues.

So, in a certain country unlike any other country in human history, with customs, traditions and opportunities available nowhere else in human history, at a certain perfect time in that country's history, on a particular moment of a particular day when a small group of the perfect potential helpers for receiving his instruction and eventually carrying the good news of his life, death and resurrection out into the rest of the known world just happened to be gathered on a small stretch of beach, Jesus just happened to walk by. What a lucky coincidence, wouldn't you agree?

No, I wouldn't either. In a world created by a loving God, things happen for a reason, in accordance with God's intention. What we see here, writ large in this opening chapter of the greatest story ever told, is the same providential hand of God that we see in our own lives, when we reflect on the endlessly marvelous and wondrously mysterious setting that needed to be in place, exactly as it was, for each one of us to even exist. God so loves each and every one of you that God designed the entire universe and its entire history so that you might receive the gift of life, and the gift of His love.

Psalms 139 perhaps puts the point the most beautifully, so let's close with it in our hearts:

*"For you formed my inward parts;
you knitted me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works;
my soul knows it very well.
My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
Your eyes saw my unformed substance;
in your book were written, every one of them,
the days that were formed for me,
when as yet there was none of them."* (vv. 13-16)

And so our prayer for this morning, heavenly Father, is that our hearts never forget, even though our minds may not understand, that we are each one of us a product of your infinite love and infinite concern. Let our hearts remember that you created the whole universe, in order to create each of us, exactly as we are, not so that the thought might feed our pride, but that it might feed the gratitude we have towards

the one through whom the universe and everything in it was made, your beloved child and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray.