



# Grace Church

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Rector

## Script, Campaign, Experiment

### Sermon for the 7th Sunday after Pentecost, July 3, 2016

*Readings:* 2 Kings 5:1-14; Psalm 30; Galatians 6:(1-6)7-16; Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

*Sermon text:* The Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. He said to them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Go on your way." Luke 10:1-2

A foundational belief of monotheism is that God created the universe and is governing and directing it to some end. This guidance traditionally goes by the name of *Providence*: "divine guidance or care; often capitalized: God conceived as the power sustaining and guiding human destiny" (Merriam-Webster).

But the idea of providence raises a host of questions. How is God using us (individuals, the church, all people of good will) to carry out God's purpose or mission? How do those who oppose God's will—the forces of evil, the spirit of rebellion—fit in? What picture do you have in mind when you sing along along to the old hymn, "God is working his purpose out" ([Hymnal 534](#))?

As an exercise in theological modeling, I will suggest three ways or pictures or metaphors for God's providence, keeping the sending of the seventy in mind as an illustration. To make theological modeling even more exciting, I will suggest exemplars for the model or metaphor among the three major Abrahamic religions. Sound good? well, wait, there's more! Since we are celebrating American Independence Day tomorrow, I will also choose for each model an exemplar among American presidents.

The three models are **script**, **campaign** and **experiment**. But before I get into what I mean by these words, let's look at this morning's gospel reading: the sending of the seventy.

Jesus had a plan: "When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face toward Jerusalem. And he sent messengers ahead of him" (Luke 9:51-2). He had "set his face toward Jerusalem" because he knew he had to go there and proclaim the gospel, and confront those who oppose it. He knew he would be acclaimed as Messiah, and that would trigger attempts on his life. He was headed

to the cross. His ultimate purpose was the salvation of humanity (so we believe). As part of the plan, he was preparing for the journey to Jerusalem, and also preparing his followers to carry on after his death.

In chapter nine, verses 1-6, we read of Jesus sending the Twelve out into the surrounding villages to proclaim the good news of the coming of God's kingdom, to heal and teach after his example. They came back and reported wonderful success. Now he was sending a larger group, seventy followers, to the villages that Jesus would visit on the way to Jerusalem. They would take almost nothing with them; they would depend utterly on the hospitality of strangers; they would come in peace and be satisfied with what ever was given in way of food and lodging; if they were rejected they would move on, dusting off their sandals as a sign of separation. They also reported success. Jesus said he saw Satan fall from the sky like lightning—and all manner of dangers handled with ease. The harvest of souls was ready—and the laborers needed were being recruited.

### **Model One: God's Script**

One way we might think of this sending is as part of play or *script* already written. The characters are part of the plot; the lines of each actor are in the script. But they don't know it. They think they have free will and are acting freely—but it is all foreordained, predestined. The seventy had their parts, as did those who either welcomed or rejected them; their choice and destiny was preordained

This picture comes from a theological understanding of God as omnipotent and omniscient. A classic proponent of this view is Calvin, and his theory of double predestination: from eternity, some are elected for salvation, others for damnation. God is an almighty sovereign whose will cannot be thwarted. Even those who oppose are part of the plan. But it is better to submit to the will of God, as best we can understand it. You don't want to be dusted off for eternity.

Among the Abrahamic religions, the one that seems to me to exemplify this high theological understanding of the sovereignty of God is Islam. Indeed, the word Islam means "submission to the will of God" ([dictionary.com](http://dictionary.com); it is from the root of salaam, peace). Often a Muslim believer will include in any plan the qualifying phrase, *inshallah*, God willing. Man proposes, but God disposes (Alexander Pope).

For the model of providence as already worked out and predestined my presidential exemplar is Abraham Lincoln (my favorite president). Raised with Presbyterian influences, he seems to have had a belief in predestination: that God's purposes are being worked out, while we struggle to dimly understand them. As he said in his Second Inaugural Address, both sides in America's Civil War prayed to the same God, both could not be answered; both thought the war would end quickly; both were wrong. But even if the war stretched on until every lash of the slaver's whip was requited with an equal loss of blood shed on the battlefield, the justice of God would still be beyond our judgment.

### **Model Two: God's Campaign**

Predestination is a familiar picture, and despite its disavowal of our experience of free will, it is compelling if you accept a high theological view of God's sovereignty. But let's go to another model, also familiar: the picture of providence as a *campaign*. God is working his purposes out despite opposition. In this picture, there is an opposing force—call it Satan, evil or rebellion. The church is the church militant, singing "Glory, glory hallelujah, the truth is marching on," and "Onward Christian soldier." In this picture the seventy are

a team of scouts or spies, searching the countryside for allies and identifying enemies. The image in one of a political or military campaign (or both). We know God will triumph in the end, but not without a struggle. Whose side are you on?

I will use Judaism as an Abrahamic religion exemplifying this view. For Jews have always been surrounded and outnumbered by larger nations and empires—as we heard this morning in the story of Naaman and Elisha from 2 Kings. Their very way of life involves a clear separation from the gentile world—circumcision, diet, all the commandments of the Torah. This has enabled Jews to survive centuries of dispersion among the nations, holding on to their cultural and religious identity until back in a homeland—and where they are today still embattled, surrounded and outnumbered.

For a president, how about Reagan? Like the second Bush, he saw the opposing nations as an “axis of evil” that he would confront with implacable resolve. He had a clear moral line that he fought for—and a strong sense of us versus them. This resolve indeed hastened the collapse of the Soviet state.

### **Model Three: God’s Experiment**

These first two are familiar models—and there is a lot of biblical material to use to support them. But imagine for this morning a third way: God working God’s plan out as an *experiment*. Trial and error; letting a sort of Darwinian natural selection process work itself out as various ways to realize God’s plan or purpose—a reconciled and harmonious creation. Not an entirely random experiment, but allowing for accident, free will, astonishing variety.

Biblically, the picture is of creation as multiplying: from a single individual, Adam, then Eve, then many. Humanity does not flourish as one tongue and purpose (tower of Babel) but many tongues and nations. Just as life, so humanity and all its ways of life and faith, struggle, fail, flourish, and lead to new creation. Adaptation may involve competition but it may succeed even better through cooperation and self-giving (*agape* love). As complexity grows, consciousness emerges, moral imagination develops and the high concepts of justice, beauty and truth exert their own progressive force. The arc is long but bending toward God’s dream of a just, verdant and peaceful world (to borrow a phrase from a charitable foundation).

In this picture, the seventy go out as a test. They are seeing who will welcome them, and they are testing their own courage, faith and capacity for rejection. Some will receive them with welcome, some will not; some of the followers of Jesus will pass the test, some will not.

The first test was the twelve—the core. Now the group is expanded—in a biblical model reminiscent of Moses selecting seventy elders for a legal and spiritual council (Numbers 11). The circle will keep expanding. In the end the disciples are to go into all the nations, teaching and baptizing—in every language, among every people. In each place and among all the different sorts of people, local and cultural adaptations will be made.

So Christianity is itself the example of this third model. Right from the beginning—four gospels, twelve disciples, many nations—there were varieties of Christianity, some in tension, even opposition. Some thrived, some failed; some spread, some did not. We have a Greek Orthodox stream, a Latin Roman Catholic stream, and almost exactly 500 years ago, the Protestant reformation—and a modern

explosion of denominational varieties. The branch of Christianity, grafted onto the trunk of Judaism (Romans 11;17), has many itself many limbs and leaves—the better, perhaps, to catch the sun’s light.

Many see this as a missionary failure—contravening Jesus’ prayer for unity among his followers (John 17). But perhaps it is a virtue, a feature not a bug. Let a hundred flowers bloom—let the factions multiply—and in this way the truth will emerge (1 Corinthians 11:19). There is an ecology of denominations—and perhaps even of religions. People are similarly motivated by a longing for God—for meaning, purpose, justice, love—but there are many languages in which the good news is spoken. Many kinds of music, creating both harmony and dissonance. We will see what emerges in the end. Perhaps God is even wondering—while also guiding, calling, pruning, planting, conducting, composing.

Who is the American president that exemplifies this approach? A trick question. I nominate the Founding Fathers of the American experiment in democracy (as Lincoln called it). They were different and sometimes opposing: Hamilton and his vision of an international and urban America, Jefferson with his agrarian ideal, John Adams from Massachusetts, James Madison from Virginia. George Washington was the indispensable man—and first president—but the great individual example of this approach is surely Benjamin Franklin: scientist, journalist, entrepreneur, diplomat and statesman—holding the various views and individuals together at the Constitutional Convention, a pragmatic idealist, an experimental patriot.

I do believe God is working God’s purposes out. This is a matter of faith, not knowledge; we cannot know the mind of God. As the prophet Isaiah spoke in the name of God: “My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

But still, judging by the pattern of God’s loving care of creation, we have grounds for hope:

“For as rain and snow fell from the heavens and water the earth, bringing forth life and giving growth, seed for sowing and bread for eating, so is my word that goes forth from my mouth; it will not return to me empty; but it will accomplish that which I have purposed, and prosper in that for which I sent it” (Isaiah 55:8-11; BCP 86). God’s word will not echo endlessly in an empty, random universe—but the dream will be realized, the plan worked out, the purpose fulfilled.

Let’s keep trying in our own way to be part of it.

In Christ’s name, Amen.

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