

Sharing the Good News

from the pen of the Mission Interpreter



May 23, 2021, Volume 3

Pentecost Providence

Adapted from Pastor Frank Honeycutt's column in Living Lutheran

There are Christians who seem absolutely certain that God is directing every single moment of their lives—both the profound and the mundane. Not only does God lead them to the right person for marriage, but also to a parking place that has just opened in a crowded shopping mall lot because God positioned the car to be in the right place at the right time. This seems just a breath away from puppetry, with God pulling divine strings. Where is our freedom in this scenario? At the opposite end of the spectrum are those who believe God wound up the world long ago like a watchmaker and set certain natural laws in motion but then stepped back dispassionately to see what would happen. This theological position (deism) feels pretty close to giving up on God entirely.

The word “providence”—literally meaning “seeing ahead”—is relatively rare in Lutheran circles. The psalmist proclaims “Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them yet existed.” (Psalm 139:16). There’s always a tricky tension in the Christian life between God’s providence and our allowance to rebel or obey. Tilt too far one way, and we’re puppets; too far the other way and were cozying up to deism and a God who might be historically revered but not personally known.

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Each Pentecost season, I’m struck by how these old stories from Acts seem so utterly removed from my normal experience *until I realize my life would be drastically different by tinkering around with just a handful of seemingly random events from the past*. Seminary wasn’t on my radar in high school. The choice of Clemson over Auburn led me to a certain campus pastor and employment at a summer camp I’d never seen and the eventual meeting of a woman who became my wife and life partner with whom I’ve parented three unique children. Were these meetings and turns random chance only? Fiddle with one choice, one “chance” meeting and my life would be vastly different. And so would yours in a similar retrospective.

Providence avoids both puppetry and chance, and assumes God is actively wooing us into certain work and specific relationships that have been in the divine imagination for a long time. Some days I’d like a map that leads from here to there with the same clarity and conviction that led Paul and Timothy to Lydia on the banks on a certain river—a certainly that feels unmistakably divinely directed. God’s providence, however, usually traffics in more subtle, *but no less powerful*, guiding grace—a grace that imagines the very best for our lives, and a love that allows us to go our own way when we insist.

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