

A Sermon by the Rev. Jeffrey A. Packard	Prepared for the congregation of Christ Episcopal Church, Spotsylvania, VA
To be delivered on July 9, 2017	On the occasion of the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 9A

Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67

Loving Intention

So this guy in Chicago was going to lunch. He stopped at a deli and ordered a sandwich. When he pulled out the cash to pay for his lunch, he noticed something and pulled back the dollar bill he was about to hand the clerk at the deli. He looked at it and was amazed that written on the dollar bill was the name Esther. It was weird because he was dating a woman named Esther and had just earlier that day been thinking about taking the relationship to the next level and making it exclusive. He shoved the bill in his pocket and decided then and there for sure that he was going to talk to Esther about how he felt about her. He decided to make a gift of the bill to Esther. He put it in a frame and wrapped it up. That evening, when Esther opened the gift and saw the dollar bill with her name on it, she was speechless. The guy told her what happened and wondered why she wasn't as excited about it as he was. She made a funny face, like a grimace. He asked her if something was wrong. She said no and told him to remind her later to tell him something.

This couple stayed together, got engaged and then married. A few years go by. They were packing up their stuff getting ready for a move and the guy comes across the dollar bill. He says to Esther his wife, "Hey, you never did tell me the story about this dollar bill."

Turns out that when Esther was 19 years old she was working the night shift in a copy center. She was dating someone and not happy with him. She began to wonder: how do people know when they've found the ONE? So she came up with an idea. She wrote her name on a dollar bill. Actually she wrote her name on 10 or 12 dollar bills. She told herself that the guy who ends up with one of those dollar bills would be the one she married. She told her husband

that the day he gave her the dollar bill with her name that she had written on it years earlier she knew that he was going to be the one she married. They don't know how or why, but they feel like the two of them are together for some great reason, like it was meant to be. The couple has been married 18 years, and they don't even wear wedding bands. They just know that they are stuck with each other. (This American Life, #489 "No Coincidence, No Story!" March 1, 2013, NPR)

That's a crazy story, isn't it? A crazy coincidence. It's not unlike our Old Testament lesson today. Abraham is very old and it's time for his son Isaac to take a wife. He makes his servant promise not to allow Isaac to marry one of the women of the land of Canaan where he has settled, the land which God had promised to Abraham and his descendants. The servant promises and travels back to Abraham's home country to find Isaac a wife. When the servant gets to Abraham's home country, he arrives at a spring. He's not exactly sure how he's going to go about getting a wife for his master's son. So he prays the prayer that he repeats in part of the first reading this morning. "O Lord, the God of my master Abraham, if now you will only make successful the way I am going! I am standing here by the spring of water; let the young woman who comes out to draw, to whom I shall say, 'Please give me a little water from your jar to drink,' and who will say to me, 'Drink, and I will draw for your camels also'—let her be the woman whom the Lord has appointed for my master's son." Then, of course, no sooner than he prays that prayer, Rebekah shows up to get some water. He asks her for a drink. She gives it to him, and offers to water his camels too. Bang! He knows she's the one. It's like Rebekah and Isaac were meant to be together.

It's a crazy story, isn't it? Two people are brought together through a complex and unknowable set of circumstances beyond either of their control. A prayer is answered. These

events lead to the birth of Esau and Jacob, and to the nation that God had promised Abraham he would make of him. Some people would call that sort of thing a coincidence. Others would say that there is no such thing as a coincidence. In fact, some people believe that God is in control of everything that happens. Nothing happens unless God wills it, as if God has a string connected to every particle in the universe and pulls those strings, playing the cosmos like a giant marionette. Personally, I don't buy that. Because if that were true, then God himself would be responsible for every evil thing that ever happened, and no person could really be held accountable for what he, or she, did. No, I believe that the universe has a certain freedom, because God chose to create it that way. Things happen, not always because God wills them to, but sometimes just because things happen. There is such a thing as randomness. And human free will is the other confounding factor here. If God were controlling my every action, my every decision, then how could I sin? I would just be like a computer running a program. And if I were incapable of sin, why would I need a savior? You understand, it's not that I think God is incapable of determining anything, and everything, that happens in the world. I uphold the omnipotence of God; God is all powerful. It's just that God has chosen, in God's infinite wisdom, to limit God's own power, and God has chosen to give us free will to determine our own actions. So, am I saying that God doesn't influence anything that happens, that God just wound the universe up like a clock and is now letting it run its own course?

No, I would put it this way: In every moment there is an inexpressibly large number of possible options for every variable in the universe. In other words, when I flip a coin it could land on heads or tails... or it could land on its edge... or it could roll down the street into the sewer... or a crow could swoop down out of the sky and grab the coin out of mid air with its beak, or a giant fissure could open up in the earth beneath my feet spewing lava out and melting

the coin, and any crows in the area, both their heads and their tails. You see? Many different possible outcomes. Now imagine how many variables there are at play in the universe at any given moment—how many coin tosses, so to speak. Each variable could go this way, or that, or some other way, and which way they all go determines the outcome.

Not even physicists believe that the universe is deterministic anymore. They used to think that if we knew all of the variables in a system at some point in time then we could determine what the system would look like at any other point in time, because one event causes the next, which causes the next event, which leads to the next, and so on. So starting with a known set of circumstances one could work out what the system will look like at some given point in the future. This would work in reverse too, by the way. You could figure out how the system got into its current state by working the causality backwards. But we don't describe the universe that way anymore. Physicists talk about probabilities rather than determined outcomes.

So, if there are a mind staggering number of possibilities in every moment, and what happens next is determined by how those possibilities work themselves out, then there is room in the system for intention. When Abraham's servant prayed, or when Esther wrote her name on a dollar bill, those intentions became part of the whole system of events that led to Rebekah coming to the spring at that moment, or Esther's boyfriend ending up with the dollar bill. They put their intention into the complex system making it influence the variables in some way, just as God puts God's intention into the system. I believe that God is, at any moment, working by nudging little variables here and there according to God's own intentions. Not that God is determining exactly what will happen every moment, but God is influencing what happens. It's more like an ongoing conversation between the creator and his creation, God constantly trying to convince the creation to follow his perfect will. When we pray, God accepts that intention from

us and can incorporate it into God's influencing of the outcome. I believe God's influence operates both in the world of physics and in the human heart, a loving intention within the randomness. But of course the rebellious human heart is free to ignore God's intention, or to go against it completely. Sometimes these little nudges converge in a huge event that changes human history, but sometimes they work out in small, seemingly insignificant ways.

Last Saturday my wife Sian and I celebrated our 28th wedding anniversary. In the week before I kept seeing the number 89 pop up here and there as I went through my day. I wrote in the parish register of services and it happened to be the 89th weekday Morning Prayer of the year. I was adding up the balance in my check book and it ended up so-and-so dollars and 89 cents. Things like that happened to me several times that week, the number 89 kept presenting itself to me out of nowhere. That is significant because we were married in 1989. Now, did the number 89 present itself to me because God willed it to for some mysterious reason? Or would those numbers have been there anyway, but I just happened to notice them because I was thinking about my anniversary? What is the probability of me encountering the number 89 on any given day? What is the probability of me noticing it and seeing it as significant? What impact does this experience have on me, my life, my marriage, or the world? Not much, I have to admit, but it did make the week before my anniversary a little more enjoyable. You have to admit, it's an interesting coincidence.

If a coincidence occurs and it happens to be consistent with something I prayed for, is it an answer to my prayer, or is it just a coincidence? I have heard it called a God-incidence. I have heard it said, "God works in *mischievous* ways."

Every week I pray that God will speak through me when I preach. It has happened to me on more occasions than I can count—and any preacher will tell you the same thing—that I have

delivered a lousy sermon, I mean a real stinker, one I am embarrassed to have preached, and on those days there will be someone who says to me after the service, “Wow! It was like you were preaching just to me today. You said exactly what I needed to hear. Thank you.” Now, is that God answering my prayer, or God answering someone else’s prayer? Or is it just a coincidence?

The point is, folks, that if you believe there is a divine being who created the universe and who loves us as his creatures, then it is a perfectly reasonable thing to believe that our prayers have an impact on that divine being. And it is further reasonable to believe that God carries the intentions expressed in our prayers as part of God’s concern as he influences what happens in the world. In other words: Prayer moves God’s heart and God moves the world.

By the way, as I was preparing this sermon and thinking about those mischievous, coincidental ways of God, I remembered an episode of the show on National Public Radio called “This American Life” that they did about four years ago all about coincidences. That’s where the story about Esther and the dollar bill came from. I looked it up online and listened to it again to remind myself of the details of the story. Since I publish my sermons on the internet I figured I’d better give credit where credit is due, so I wrote down the details of the episode. Turns out that it was their episode number four hundred... eighty-nine.

Amen.

Footnote: On the day this sermon was delivered there were 19 people at the 8:00 service, 66 at the 10:30 service, and 4 in the nursery (2 babies and 2 adults). Therefore the total church attendance that day was, you guessed it, 89.