My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Our Lord God of our hearts, minds, souls and spirits, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

Our text today led to one of the most confusing doctrines of Christianity ever, that God has recorded some names to heaven and other names to hell before we were ever born. John Calvin, the Swiss-French theologian developed this “double pre-destination” and building on the writings of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, quickly realized and called it a “horrible decree”. It completely contradicts any sense of freedom of will, stirs up the old questions of salvation or damnation, and divides folks into two camps on completely seemingly arbitrary terms.

Under double predestination it’s entirely up to God, and we can’t do anything to change what is God’s will for us before we were even conceived. This predestination declared that salvation is an undeserved gift rather than a reward for good deeds, a perk of membership in a church, or some privilege for those who have read the Bible faithfully each day. When salvation is dependent entirely on God’s grace, there is no quid pro quo. Salvation transcends the sands of time, too: God declares judgement before any talents or behaviors of ours emerge. Grace is the antecedent, period the end.

Salvation’s scope may well be none of our business, this trying to second-guess God or figure out who is and is not in the club.

 OK, I don’t like this much either because I know how it ends and it seems like y’all do as well. The trouble comes when folks come and say that God saves only the Christians and no one else. Or that some Christians get the Golden ticket but not others. And for Calvin, let’s not even get started on anyone outside the churches and synagogues. What looks like generosity from the ones who are elect sure looks like capricious cruelty from the point of view of everyone else. Disaster movies re-enact this all the time, don’t they? Who gets in the lifeboats and survives, or the space escape pods before the starship explodes, or is given another’s portion of water when stranded in the desert?

Maybe in the 1500s where 10% or more of the population succumbed to the 4 Horsemen of the Apocalypse this made sense, but this kind of image of God just baffles us here in the 21st century. Think about it this way: a soldier saves a family from a shelled out apartment building that had caught fire. What a hero, right? But suppose the soldier also had the power to save another family before the whole thing went up in flames but chose not to. Still a hero? Matters of life and death, not only for the body but also the soul, make us crazy and make us want to clamor for what it will take to get life. No matter what it takes. We will promise anything, God, just assure us our salvation.

And that’s how the faith of checklists and dos and don’ts got started. Join us, not them, and God will save you! We’ve talked about this before, right?

But I think the thing that really bugs us about this kind of us and them thinking is that there is a finite number in either camp. In the days of yore that number was 144,000. But our faith today accepts that Jesus cannot be contained, as he walked on water, appeared through locked doors, and the resurrected Christ appeared to Mary in the Garden and had breakfast on the seashore. The Holy Spirit comes and goes as it will, which is why it is represented by a dove, birds that come from nowhere and can fly away without our notice, or the wind which will blow where it will. We don’t do too well at binding God to space and time. Our God’s bigger than that.

God might take salvation and grace quite seriously in creation. We humans are quite late to the game, after all, in this 14.6 billion year history of the universe. God figuring out things before the foundation of the world, as it says in Ephesians, as Jesus is represented as the word from the beginning made flesh only now, might not only be possible but probable. What is in God figuring out salvations work in other-than-our-terms he doesn’t put a number on it as one prophet predicts. Maybe God’s saving love is extended to all Jews and Christians. Or as Jesus suggests at times and John explicitly states in one of his letters, that God’s saving love is extended to all humanity and all creation.

Now I’m not saying that we can definitely include all humanity and creation, for sure, because that’s just as much of a claim as the other limits. But we let’s also say with equal conviction that we can’t rule it out, either.

Maybe what rankles our senses about all of this is if everyone were one of the elect, we suddenly include folks who get under our skin. Family with whom we have arguments that turn into regular knock-down, drag-out differences of opinion that leave us gob-smacked. Friends who understand us to the core on some things but we can’t understand them on other stuff much closer to the heart. And let’s not get started on people who just actively oppose us for whatever is the reason of the day. All these folks may be on the list.

But Amazing Grace, as the song goes, saves a wretch like me, too. Let’s remember that the word salvation implies saving of a sinner not a saint. Isn’t that indeed all of us here today? If we take the doctrine seriously, we cannot draw a circle or a line dividing us here, much less along religious or moral lines with the people in our lives. It’s not our line or circle to draw.

I’ll leave you with this final thought.

There were twelve brothers that were jealous of the one who received a double portion of inheritance, and showed off wearing a magnificent coat of many colors. He was taken by his brothers, stripped of his coat, and thrown into a pit and left to die. The poor boy becomes a slave in Egypt and rises to the position of chief administrator to Pharoah because he could forsee the future and saved the country from a horrible famine.

Now…who is beyond the reach of God’s salvation? Who are the villians here? Should they not suffer famine and die as their just desserts? But the story doesn’t let us do that. The victim forgives the perpetrators, though undeserving, and both Joseph and his brothers are saved from famine.

Once pre-destination is disconnected from us being able to know the scope of salvation ahead of time, maybe it’s not so toxic. Instead of dividing up the world into elect and the damned, maybe it’s the opposite: treat everyone as beloved. All are elect children of God, because for all we know it’s true. Our typical categories every election cycle that divide: race, religion, income, education, social strata, belief or disbelief of anything may prove to be outdone by the solidarity of God’s grace, where all are welcome at the banquet table.

Thanks be to God, Amen.