

THE CHOSEN ONES

God's got this thing for choosing.

Because of that, the whole of Scripture can be read in terms of that theme. Think about it.

- God decides to erase the whole of humanity and start over again, but then chooses Noah and his family to survive the deluge.
- God, as was just heard in the first of our readings this morning, decides to establish an everlasting covenant with a human being and, for whatever reason, from all the available pagans, chooses Abram to be the one.
- God, much later, in hearing the groans of the chosen people under Pharaoh's yoke, chooses a very surprised shepherd named Moses to be the lucky fellow who leads them to the Promised Land.
- God, later still, over a period of some 200 years, chooses prophet after prophet to remind Israel of their obligation under the original covenant to remain faithful.

And so on through the whole of the Biblical narrative until we arrive at the scene in John's gospel, the second of our morning's readings, where Jesus, in God's stead, says to his disciples, "You did not choose me, but I chose you" (15.16a). Sure enough, that line reminds us of a number of other stories that appear early in all the gospel accounts, where, among the first acts in his ministry, Jesus chooses all manner of commoner and laborer to follow him--and they do so.

In a word, then, if we're dealing with God, we're dealing with the whole notion of being chosen. If you've ever had the humiliating experience in gym class of being one of the last ones picked to be on some star's volleyball team, then this sermon is for you. This means, my friend, that you're the one that God is looking at and pointing to and calling by name.

But wait a minute! We're no dummies. We may not know the Bible as well as some Sunday School teacher or some preacher, but we've heard enough to know that those whom God chooses are usually in for trouble.

Consider again this Abram. The first words that come out of God's mouth concern what, at the tender age of 75,, in agreeing to the covenant, Abram will have to sacrifice. "Go from your country," God says. "[Go from] your kindred and your father's house" (12.1). So much for the fortune of being chosen!

Can you imagine prefacing a marriage proposal with the words, "Give up the comforts and security of your mother and father's home, surrender all hope of ever seeing most of your friends again, forget being able to sleep in till ten and having someone else prepare breakfast for you . . . so, will you marry me?" Framed like that, who but a lunatic would respond in the affirmative?

I imagine that Abram felt a little like that, too. Essentially he is being told: Give up everything that you have known and everything that you have acquired over your lifetime. Lay it down, let it behind you, because you'll not be able to take it with you. Oh, God assures a staggered Abram, I'm going to make of you "a great nation, and I will bless you . . . so that you will be a blessing" (12.2), but, in being my chosen one, first you will have to decide to draw a line on all that has gone before.

There is no future, God seems to be saying, if you remain lost in your pagan past, if you cling to and stay stuck in your past. This is a totally new start that I am offering, and I am choosing you with which to undertake it.

Knowing how this works is pretty good motivation to keep us as far from God's eye as possible. If we get chosen, we know that we'll be asked to give up things that we don't really wish to give up, and we'll be asked to be things, go places, and do things that, in fact, we don't really want to be, or go, or do.

There should be no surprise, then, that we like to push the "chosen ones" that we know of high on a pedestal. We tell ourselves that we do that as a sign of our respect for them, that it accords them an honor and the esteem that is due to them for their privileged place.

However, the truth of the matter is that, the higher we can push them, the more special and unique we can regard them, the farther away from us we cleverly have positioned them. It would appear that, as much as we say we want to be chosen, we prefer as much separation as possible between us and those who have already received God's tap on the shoulder--because we know what that tap has meant for them, and because we don't especially relish the thought of what that tap might mean for us. So, we convince ourselves to think of them as the rock stars of the ancient world, and since we do not regard ourselves as a rock star of any sort, we figure that that should keep us relatively safe.

Good try. That would be a miscalculation on our parts, because if we read those old stories carefully, we see that typically God bypasses the starlets and the moguls and the luminaries, and chooses instead just the sort of people who would be the last to be picked for that A-level volleyball team in gym class--you know, people like you and me. I realize that, if the object is to stay out of God's field of vision, there is precious little comfort in that.

What can I say? Our God is a strange God--not paying particular mind to the powerful and the pretty (perhaps because it's much too hard for God to catch and keep their eye), but instead paying attention to the rough and real and unfinished elements among humanity--who might just be hampered enough, hurt enough, hungry enough to try a new way. You know, people like you and me.

God's attention is not especially drawn to the coiffed and polished and tuxedoed, but to the ordinary and common and unremarkable, through whom, it turns out, truly great things can be accomplished. You know, people like you and me.

Dodge it though we may try to do, Jesus' words in John are not to them (another way to distance ourselves from it all) but to us. They are words aimed at us utterly ordinary folks who are occupying these pews in this sanctuary, to us who momentarily will gather as a congregation over a meal and then share in a meeting concerned with our common business as the people of God.

"You did not choose me," Jesus assures us, "but I chose you. And I [appoint] you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last" (15.16b). In our own humble ways, God would make of us, as it were, "a great nation, and [God] will bless [us] . . . so that [we] will be a blessing" to many others.

It's a truth that we cannot successfully avoid for long. Inevitably, all feeble excuses aside, we are just the sort of people that God is looking for, people who perfectly fit the profile of everyone that God has chosen from Noah to Jesus, and beyond.

Wait! Do you feel that? Do you feel that tapping on your shoulder? That is God.

Yes, you've been chosen! Now what?