

**March 5, 2017**

**TEXT: Genesis 12:1–4a**

**TITLE: Chosen**

*By the Rev. Heather Schoenewolf*

When my husband and I got married, we asked each of our fathers to offer a toast. Frankly, they were two of the best wedding toasts I've ever heard. My father-in-law spoke of the old adage of how we can't choose our family, but we can choose our friends. He spoke of how he and my mother-in-law wanted us to know that they would choose us to be in their life, as friends and as family. They wanted us to know that they loved us, they liked us, and that they wanted the best for us.

Now, I share this story with you not to boast about what wonderful in-laws I have (though they are pretty great). I share this with you because this part of the toast really stuck out to my husband. See, he was adopted as an infant, a chosen son identified as his parents' child before they knew anything about him. As his father toasted him, David heard layers of affirmation in his father's speech—that he had been chosen as an infant, but was then grafted into his family so thoroughly that it was as if he had belonged to their family as their own flesh and blood. And he heard his father saying *he would choose him all over again*—not just as the infant he adopted, but as the man who sat before him—whose gifts he had nurtured, whose choices he supported, whose creativity he had encouraged, whose values he had modeled. My husband heard his Dad affirm that his parents had gotten it right, and would do the same thing over and over again.

See, if we were asked, most likely we would admit that we all want to be chosen: to be picked first for the kickball team on the playground, to get the role in the school musical, to be accepted into the college of our choice. We want we want to be asked on a date; we want to be offered the job. We want to be *chosen*. We want to have our gifts affirmed, our worth valued. We want for someone to say that we *matter*—to let us know that even if we don't achieve the fame and fortune of our dreams, we have made a difference to someone else.

As people of faith, we long to trust that we, too, have been chosen by God. It's part of our story. We have heard it said that we have been created in God's image, redeemed by Christ's grace and sustained by the Holy Spirit. We have heard it spoken at our baptism that our core identity is as children of a God who is engaged in our lives, who loves us in spite of our sin, and who has run the gauntlet to ensure that we are in relationship with God, even when we run from God's love. The promises of our faith assure us of God's love, but we want to trust that it is true—that it is steadfast, unwavering, powerful. We want to trust that God has got us—especially when we waver or grow afraid.

In today's scripture passage, we hear a few brief but powerful verses about God choosing Abraham—the father of not only our faith, but of Judaism and Islam as well. God calls and claims Abram in these verses. He instructs him to leave his family of origin and his home, and to go to the place where God will direct him. Abram is told to

go, trusting wholly on God's providence and care. He is told that God has named him as the one through whom God will build a great nation—even though he and his wife Sarai are advanced in years and don't yet have any children of their own.

And then God uses one word five times in these 3 & ½ short verses: *blessing*. Abram will be characterized by blessing. God will bless him, and this blessing will give him a new identity as one who is to be, himself, a *blessing to others*. God will bless not only him, but all who accept him.

God tells Abram that he will be a blessing not only to those he meets, but to all families of the world—to *everyone*. One commentator dares to state that *"Audacious as it sounds, given the surrounding story, these verses suggest as well that Abram, Sarai, and their offspring actually serve as God's last hope for the world. If blessing fails to work, the alternatives are unthinkable, even for—especially for—God."*<sup>1</sup>

God's blessing to creation is to be transmitted to and through Abram and Sarai. As God engages a fallen creation, God places God's hope on a covenantal relationship with a family, in the hope that through this family covenantal claim will be spread through creation.

It's a powerful narrative—and one that we have even claimed as our own, through our Judeo-Christian heritage. It is a narrative that has given hope to God's people Israel through times of exile and oppression. It is a story that has reminded millions through the centuries of God's faithfulness and steadfast love through impossible and difficult circumstances. It serves as an assurance that God goes before God's people and has a plan—a plan equipped with a blessing.

Yet this powerful narrative has a dark past too. It is one of those texts that humanity has used and to reinforce our own definition that chosenness somehow equals exceptionalism. Let's be honest. So often our desire to be chosen has a second side to the coin: while one side might be a reflection of a celebration of our own inclusion, the other side is often a manifestation of the exclusion of another; while one side is an affirmation that we are loved, the other is also marked with a claim that we can *only* be loved if others are denied.

In our fear and our insecurity we too often think that the only way we can have anything is if others *can't* have what our hearts desire. We get it into our heads that there isn't enough to go around—enough resources, enough talent, enough affection... Somehow our skill at kickball finds less meaning if everyone else is a kickball star to. There's no "in crowd" if there no one watching from the outside. *There is no "us" if there is no "them."*

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<sup>1</sup> Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year A, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide.

We watch this play out not only in personal relationships, but on a global stage. Within our own nation, this sense of chosenness has impacted our country's history in troubling ways since our nation's founding. We have seen the rotten fruit born from white supremacy—from the treatment of Native Americans upon the colonization of this country by Columbus, to slavery to the current rhetoric sparking hate crimes against Jews, Muslims, African Americans, Mexicans, and sexual and gender minorities (to name a few). Dozens of Jewish Community Centers are receiving bomb threats; an Indian man was murdered at a bar by a white man who cried out that he didn't belong in this country. And we hear cries and read tweets that identify the press as an enemy, Muslims as terrorists and Mexican migrants as a threat to American jobs and security.

We see this play out across the world as well. We have seen this rationale justify decades of apartheid in South Africa. We have seen this rhetoric play out in the Holy Land where the claim of exceptionalism has led to violence and unrest between Israelis and Palestinians. Time and time again the manifestation of this either/or mentality has led to the literal and figurative building of walls, the indoctrination of civil rights abuses, and political policy that has sought to assert the primacy of one group over another. In any context, *it simply isn't right*.

But, see, our text is clear: God's choosing of Abram is so that Abram will be a *conduit of God's blessing*. Being "chosen" by God is not a means of setting one's self apart for special privilege, esteem or power. *Chosenness, rather, is extended to God's people along with a Divine imperative that God's people are claimed and called to be one through whom God extends blessing to ALL of creation.*

Across all faith traditions, this call to be a blessing includes a mandate to prioritize the needs of the poor, to welcome the stranger, and to care for all who are deemed "the least of these" according to the law of the land. *Who then are we to bless?* Those who are on the outside of any circle looking in: those who are told that they are not good enough, that they do not matter, that their humanity is worth less than another. We are told to use our gifts to care for those whose resources are limited or lives are endangered. We are called to protect those who are vulnerable and being harmed.

We are called, perhaps, to follow in the footsteps of our Muslim brothers and sisters who raised more than \$60,000 to repair vandalized tombstones in a Jewish Cemetery in St. Louis. We are called, too, to follow in the footsteps of our Jewish brothers and sisters in Victoria, Texas who gave the keys to their synagogue to the leaders of a local mosque that was burned down so that their Muslim brothers and sisters would have a place to worship.

We are called, as the youth who are here among us this morning, to give up a portion of our abundance so that the needs of others may be met—even doing something as simple as fasting for a few hours and giving the money we would have spent on a meal to help Syrian refugees who are struggling to find safety in a strange land.

We are called to view our identity as God's children not as a marker that sets us apart for glory, but rather as an identity that is infused with a call to love and serve others in the name of the God who first loved us. God's blessing is not a commodity to hoard. Rather it is a gift given to us so that we might freely share it, and in doing so give thanks for all of the good things that God has done.

One rabbi writes:

This, then, is the way covenant is born: We are told to leave what is safe and comfortable in search of a better place and a more authentic self, a self that is blessing at its very core. In order to achieve this, we have to know that God wants us to become godly in a very distinctive way—namely, to love and value the other as deeply as we love and value ourselves. The road to the Promised Land is often dark and painful, filled with human suffering and degradation. It is those very places to which God dispatches us, to bring blessing, and thus to become blessing. It is in the moments of truly surpassing ourselves that the covenant becomes genuinely embodied in our lives. And so we go, for God and for ourselves, toward the blessing that is the Promised Land, and toward the Promised Land that is blessing.<sup>2</sup>

May it be so.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.beliefnet.com/faiths/judaism/2000/11/birth-of-a-covenant.aspx?p=2#6uzLH04OR1aRUUwx.99>