

“The Choice of the Chosen”
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
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I Kings 19:15-16, 19-21; Luke 9:51-62

So there we stood on the grey, pitted, cracked asphalt of the playground, a bunch of boys waiting for two captains to choose teams. For me, it was THE worst part of recess. All of us hoped to avoid the shame of being selected last. Well, not all of us. A handful could always rely on early selection because they were good athletes or just popular. The envy I felt. No worries or waiting for them. In a way, it’s a petty memory, but being chosen, instead of being grudgingly allowed to play on someone’s team, can make a big difference on the psyche of a seventh grader, and the same can be true of someone at any age.

Consider the draft process of a professional sport and the disappointment of a player the experts projected would be chosen early but who keeps on falling, team after team passing on him. You can see the pain on the player’s face, and it’s more than just the millions of dollars at stake, more than just pride. He’s back in seventh grade again, except this time things aren’t going so well.

At a less prominent but no less important level, we all strive to be chosen early, preferably first. No matter what the pursuit – romance, employment, or bidding on a house – we want to be selected, to feel the thrill of being picked above others. It seems a little wicked, and there’s definitely a hungry ego in there, but also a healthy competitive impulse, born of a noble aspiration to excel.

But when it happens, when we get chosen, an odd and unexpected sensation can creep into our guts. We become aware that being chosen, despite all its advantages, can be a mixed blessing. It never occurred to me at recess, but with the glory of being chosen first came certain

expectations, like scoring lots of points. A number one draft pick had better perform not just well but better than everybody else, and do it quickly, or it won't be long before the pundits start calling him a "bust," a "bad choice." That's heavy pressure, and nobody knows it better than Elisha.

Out in the fields one day, on the ugly end of a team of oxen, Elisha might have been daydreaming of greater things to come. Maybe he even prayed that God might choose him for a more exciting, more exalted task. Be careful what you pray for, because out of nowhere, the prophet Elijah showed up and threw a garment called a mantle across Elisha's shoulders. That simple gesture chose Elisha to succeed Elijah as God's prophet.

So Elisha said goodbye to his family, things went south for the oxen in a hurry, and Elisha became Elijah's loyal apprentice. After a while, once his work on Earth was done, Elijah ascended into heaven on a fiery chariot, and after Elisha begged persistently to be given that mantle once more, he received it and did amazing things through the power of God. But like any prophet, or for that matter anyone who's chosen, Elisha struggled with competing and conflicting expectations. As he strove to obey the God who chose him, Elisha upset and angered others who wanted to exploit his powers for their purposes, and eventually it got pretty dangerous for him.

What we learn from looking at prophets like Elisha is that being chosen requires a choice by the one who has been chosen. For instance, a person picked for a basketball team must choose to play for that team. You can't just decide in the middle of a game to switch sides. It can be tempting, especially when the other team's clobbering you, and sometimes on the playground that's exactly what happens. The star player, the first chosen, decides to broker a swap or stop playing. Scandalous! But only natural, to maximize the possibility of winning. We hedge our bets at the race track, diversify our portfolios, and there's a measure of prudence

to all of that. But when we are chosen by God, those sorts of calculations and contingency plans cease to serve any purpose.

Now we're used to having options, and that may sound very either/or, but Jesus can be uncompromising. In Luke's gospel, he called out to a couple of prospective disciples, "Follow me." Each asked for a little time to wrap a few things up, and Jesus criticized them both. One wanted to bury his father, the duty of any good son, but Jesus replied, "Let the dead bury their own dead." How is that even possible?! Another wanted to say goodbye to his family, just as Elisha did and was allowed to do when Elijah chose him. Jesus responded, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." What does that mean? He wanted to say farewell to his family, not finish up a field.

We often talk about how harsh and unrelenting the Old Testament can be compared with the New, but Elijah was much more lenient with Elisha than Jesus was with these men. With an impatience born of a deep sense of urgency, Jesus demanded an immediate response, because he was on his way to Jerusalem, and we know what happened there. It was going to be now or never, no waiting for a family farewell or a funeral.

Being chosen requires a choice in return. And when God chooses us, our acceptance brings us into a covenant, a sacred and binding agreement that brings both benefit and obligation, blessing and burden. Being chosen by God means life instead of death, more peace and less anxiety, a hope that diminishes despair. And though the option remains to revoke the covenant at any time, and in ways both small and great, we do so often, once we choose God, every other choice we make is altered irrevocably.

We cannot choose God and hedge our bets or form a contingency plan to leap to the next best thing if we get bored with God or dissatisfied with God's customer service. We cannot

choose God and then makes choices that go against God, at least not without paying a price, like lack of integrity, the pangs of guilt, confusion about who we are and who we're meant to be and what we're meant to do.

Of course, all of us stumble. None are perfect. (If you are perfect, congratulations, but I don't know what you're doing here. This is a congregation of sinners seeking forgiveness, a gathering of the far-from-perfect striving to do the best we can.) But at the heart of every choice lies an intention to do something or to be someone in particular. And when we betray that initial choice, we deny our identity as a chosen people. It's not that God no longer chooses us, but we refuse God's choice, because being chosen is a mutual thing.

It's like the player who gets chosen first, but want to trade teams if his is losing. His commitment wavers, because that player's only real commitment is to himself. He's a mercenary, part of the team, but not a true member of it; someone who accepts being chosen with some very large and unspoken conditions attached.

Our society encourages and validates that type of behavior. Look out for number one. Make a better deal whenever you can. Don't lose, no matter what, because in our society, there's nothing more despicable than a loser. And to a certain point, that's just human nature. But when it comes to holy loyalties, to the commitment we make to the God who chose us and who we chose in return, we can't be #1 anymore, and we certainly can't be mercenaries, ready to jump ship at the first sight of something that seems better. When we accept being chosen by God, God becomes #1, not us.

I almost always got chosen last on the playground during recess, and even that final slot was given grudgingly. Sometimes, a captain would gladly have played 5 against 4 rather than have me on the team. I was clumsy, unskilled, and unpopular. It was humiliating, no matter

how often it happened, but I still got to play and occasionally someone would make a mistake, and the ball would fall into my hands. Of the many good things about God is everybody is chosen first. We were chosen before we were born, chosen before creation began. God doesn't care about your credentials or qualifications: you can be smart or not so smart, graceful or klutzy, rich or poor, plain or glamorous – God chooses everyone to share in the grace and mercy offered by the Chosen One who chose the cross for our sake.

And it's not a once in a lifetime deal. Every day, God chooses us, which means that every day, we need to make a choice to become a real part of the team, honor God's expectations, enjoy the victory of life we know has already been won, while working hard to share the good news with people and declare to the world that there is another way to live – a way of truth, not lies; a way of compassion, not meanness; a way that leads us to love unselfishly and brings us and others joy and brings to God the glory He is due. Amen.