

Advent Four – Dec. 23, 2018
Chosen Justly or Just Chosen?

Introduction

I was in Grade 5 when a couple teachers decided to organize intramural softball teams for recess and noon hour play. There we were, anyone who wanted to play, standing around the pitcher's mound while two Grade 8 students started to choose the teams. I remember waiting while the older, more experienced players got chosen first. Finally I was chosen too. I was on a team!

As an adult, working with children, I have faced waving hands and "pick me" when organizing games or asking a question. Most children like to be chosen even before they know exactly what is being asked of them. As we get older, that seems to change. We want to know as many details as possible of what is involved before making a commitment to being chosen.

Being chosen and blessed are part of today's scripture lesson. This theme fits into the overall theme of "The Lord is our righteousness", the title for this Advent series that Joe introduced us to three weeks ago. He reminded us that the word *righteous* isn't a regular part of our vocabulary these days but that we do understand some of the words given as dictionary definitions: 'good, virtuous, upright, upstanding, decent.' From what little we know about Elizabeth and Mary, the two women in today's story, these words seem to describe them as well. They were ordinary, good women who did the ordinary everyday things women of their day would do – cooking, cleaning, sewing, mending, fetching water – and they participated in the worship life of the community as was fitting for them. They were good, decent women.

The Back story

Elizabeth and Mary were steeped in the faith tradition of their people. They knew the story of how their people had lived with 400 years of history, waiting and wondering while God seemed to remain silent. Throughout this time the tiny nation of Israel could never really break free from the domination of greater powers. According to my Bible Study Notes, no prophet had spoken to the people in four centuries. God had long threatened to be hidden, and now indeed a dark shadow had fallen across the planet.

The people regularly heard the scriptures and remembered how the Psalmist expressed the mood of the times this way in Ps. 74:9-10:

*We are given no miraculous signs;
No prophets are left,
And none of us knows how long this will be.
How long will the enemy mock you, O God?*

Only one glimmer of hope remained, the promise of a Messiah. The Jewish faith community staked everything on this promise.

Then on an ordinary day, just like any other ordinary day, Mary, a teenager engaged to be married to Joseph, received a startling visit from the angel Gabriel. She was favored. She was chosen! She would give birth to a son, one who would be great and called the Son of the Most High. Luke writes that Mary was troubled at this news. I'm not surprised. I would have been troubled, too. What could this mean?

Being chosen can be scary, especially if one isn't sure what it's all about. Katharine reminded us of scary feelings in her children's story last week. Mary hadn't exactly been waving her hand and calling out, "Pick me, pick me!" My guess is that she had expected to follow the cultural traditions and live out her life as any other young woman of her day. This angel visitation with the message for an ordinary teenager being chosen to be the mother of the Messiah was not the norm.

We live in a world that has become accustomed to seeing people with money, position and power being chosen for key roles of influence. Political campaigns are influenced by the financial support they can garner from their constituents and the corporate world. Even the religious community isn't always immune to the backroom negotiating that can happen in choosing a new leader. So when an unknown, ordinary person from a third world country is chosen to be the Pope or the President of Mennonite World Conference, we are often surprised. But should we be? Have we forgotten the stories of our faith heritage in which God repeatedly chooses the unknown, the ordinary, to demonstrate God's righteousness and justice?

Being Chosen

When we review the Biblical story, God's way of choosing seems to repeatedly go against what societies throughout time have expected. The chosen one is not from a leading family or a position of privilege. The chosen one is not someone who put out their placard with a list of accomplishments in a run-off for candidacy. The chosen one is not someone who has been climbing the institutional ladder or with the longest resume.

When the Jews wanted a king like other nations, Samuel was guided to choose not someone from a leading tribe or the oldest, strongest, most handsome of Jesse's sons, but young David, a shepherd boy. In the lineage of Jesus, Ruth, a young Moabite woman, an outsider, unable to play the Jewish family connection game until she married, was chosen for her faithfulness to Naomi. When Jesus chose his disciples, they were not from the synagogue leaders but ordinary fishermen and tax collectors who were open to receiving new teaching.

Openness to God's new ways seems to be the key characteristic for anyone being identified 'chosen' in the Biblical story. They include men and women, young and old who accept the invitation to be chosen. In John 15, in the parable of the Vine and the Branches, Jesus says in Vs. 16a: 'You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last.' And what is that fruit? It is that we love one another. We have been chosen to love others.

Mary was chosen to become a participant in God's salvation story. She didn't understand what all the implications of her willingness would be, but she knew her people's story of waiting and longing, and after what appeared to be brief hesitancy, was ready to say yes. She did not know the heart ache and the pain she would experience seeing the challenges her son would face in life. She could not know the rejection he would face from her own people. She could not know that the kingdom he was ushering in was completely different from what everyone was expecting, including herself.

I wonder, what all went through Mary's thoughts between her question of "How can this be?" and her statement, "May it be to me as you have said." Upon visiting her relative Elizabeth and hearing her confirming words, she moved from silence to praising God for being mindful of her, a humble servant. The words of Mary's song are poetic and eloquent, profound and filled with gratitude. What could be a better way to prepare us for the birth of the Messiah, then hearing these words about the one who came to lift up the humble, and to fill the hungry with good things?

This Advent I've been pondering the connection between Mary's story and ours, particularly about what we can learn about being chosen and responding with acceptance.

Like Mary, we are part of a faith community that has a history of blessings and struggles. We are aware that not all is right with the world. We long for fairness. We wonder, how long can leaders of towns, cities and countries minimize the plight of the poor, the up-rooted, the homeless, the marginalized? When will justice become a greater concern than economic growth? When will we be free of foreign domination? Where is God in all this?

Like Mary, we are ordinary folk. We know hard work and endurance. We have our routines and practices. When challenges present themselves, we have an idea of whom we can contact for advice or even practical help. At the same time we are also somewhat private and guarded about personal information. We don't readily share a diagnosis with everyone right from the day we get the news. We seek out the one or two whom we trust to hold our confidence, and from whom we can expect to receive support. We don't want to be peppered with questions and scrutinized in a public way. Mary went to see Elizabeth, a woman with her own story of being chosen, who provided the confirmation and support Mary needed. Who would you go to or how have you affirmed the chosen-ness of others?

Mary was chosen, and so are we. Yes, God has chosen you and me to be involved in this kingdom story. We have read and studied the Biblical stories that have instilled us with consciences that guide and direct our actions. We have learned the stories of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs and the Good Shepherd, and their call to respond to the poor and the orphan and the stranger in our midst. God has chosen us to take that strong sense of justice we have because of our faith, and to act with great love.

Like Mary, we are given the opportunity to say “yes” to being chosen by God. This is often the toughest part. Like Mary, we want to know, “How will this be?” We wonder. Who will give me moral support? How big is this commitment? How will this interfere with the life I’m comfortable living? Who will support me in this endeavor? Can I trust that God will really be with me in this? And unlike Mary, we might be tempted to find a reason or excuse why we aren’t the right person to be chosen in this time or place.

Like Mary, we need confirmation that the thing we feel chosen for is valid and worthy. It likely won’t be the angel Gabriel that speaks to us, but there may be a still, small voice that directs us to a certain person that would be good for us to talk to, someone whose wisdom and insights we trust.

Finally, one needs to accept the responsibilities that come along with being chosen. There will be challenges and sacrifices, and there will be rewards, and we will never fully know the impact that following a certain path has made. But the willingness to take the less traveled road, the one God has called us to follow, could make all the difference.

This Christmas season we remember two women, justly chosen by God, as key to the story of God’s love revealed on earth. We remember them for their acceptance and willingness to participate in God’s redemption story. We think of their love and commitment to God. We think of the knowledge they carried about the children they were nurturing while all around them neighbours were carrying on as usual.

As we remember the story of the birth of Christ, we are reminded that the story didn’t end with the New Testament. We are part of God’s on-going witness and story in our world. We, ordinary people in Saskatoon, have been chosen by God to live out the love Christ exemplified.

On this fourth Sunday of Advent, the Advent candle reading focused on *love*. Love was at the heart of what two chosen women felt for their unborn babies some 2000 years ago as they spent time together pondering what God was yet going to do. Love is at the heart of God’s gift that we celebrate each Christmas. “Love one another” is the command Jesus gave his disciples as he prepared them for the time when he would no longer be physically with them.

As we spend time celebrating the birth of Christ this year, let us remember the blessing of God’s coming among us. Let us embrace God’s love for us and carry it forward in our relationships within the church and beyond its walls. Let us love because we have been chosen “to love one another”. In so doing, may the blessings of Christ’s birth in Bethlehem continue to bring Peace on Earth to all people.