

**Calvary Episcopal Church**  
Ashland, Kentucky  
Sermon for March 4, 2012 ~ Lent 2B  
The Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

Being chosen is a source of joy! Think of the occasions when you were selected to play on a certain team, or to receive a scholarship, or to advance in your organization. We all know the exhilaration of being chosen and, likewise, the disappointment of being passed over.

Being chosen is a source of responsibility. Knowing that we are being counted on and that the welfare of others depends upon how we carry out our task is sobering and challenging. Such knowledge also inspires creativity and courage.

Being chosen can make us feel privileged, which is both good news and bad news. Feeling privileged can make us arrogant or humble. At no time are we more vulnerable than at times of good fortune when we feel privileged.

During the season of Lent, as we remember who we are, we need to be conscious of the fact that we are a chosen people. God's gracious act of choosing is effected and announced in our Baptism, as it was in God's covenant with Abraham. We have been chosen not to feel special, though we are, not to feel weighed down with a great burden though at times the load is heavy, but we have been chosen to be the instruments of the Creator of the Universe in carrying out the divine plan of redemption.

I want you to consider what is involved in being God's chosen man or woman or boy or girl today.

**To be chosen means that God has taken the initiative with us.**

It is very important for us to realize that it is always God who takes the first step in the relationship with us. When you look at the lives of the patriarchs and prophets, the apostles and martyrs, this is always the case. Jesus said to his disciples, "You did not choose me; I chose you." Whenever people think they are a step ahead of God, trouble is not far behind. The ego, not God, is on center stage.

Perhaps many people feel they are not worthy to be chosen. Though they are probably right, the feeling is beside the point as far as God is concerned. God does not choose us because we are worthy. God chooses us because God loves us, has confidence in us, and wants us to play a role in the divine mission. For this role, God gives us all the gifts and graces we will need.

Who was Abraham? Nobody in particular, from our point of view and probably that of his neighbors. Who was Moses? An adopted Jewish boy who was miraculously rescued from floating down the Nile, grew up in the lap of Pharaoh's luxury, discovered his ethnicity, in anger killed an Egyptian soldier, and fled to a place called Midian, where, in time, while he was herding sheep, God appeared to him in a burning bush and announced to him that God had work for him to do in bringing about the deliverance of God's people. He even had a speech impediment. Who was Jeremiah? Somebody who thought he was too young to be God's prophet. Peter, James, John, and the other disciples were fishermen and tax collectors and other socially unacceptable types the religious folks wouldn't

ever eat with. You and I are no less worthy than they. Yet, God has chosen each one of us and called us to join God's family in the most wonderful enterprise the world has ever known.

God always takes the initiative. That's the reason we Baptize people of any age. For us, Baptism is primarily the means God has ordained to signify his gracious choosing. While it presupposes and is based upon faith on our part, we see from the example of Abraham on that God's choosing always comes before. So, no matter what our age when we receive Baptism, we all come as helpless infants. And God marks us as his own for ever.

There's a hymn that expresses it well. "I sought the Lord, and afterward I knew He moved my soul to seek Him, seeking me; It was not I that found, O Savior true; No, I was found of Thee." God always takes the first step towards us.

### **Trust is the appropriate response to the God has chosen us.**

St. Paul points out in today's reading from the Epistle to the Romans that Abraham's faith was "reckoned to him as righteousness" because after God chose him and presented his covenant to Abraham, Abraham trusted God. "Reckoned to him" is a legal term referring to balanced scales - God's promise on one side and Abraham's trust on the other. Abraham was hysterical over the promises God was making to him. We are told that when he heard that he was going to be a father at one hundred years of age, he fell on his face and laughed. I suspect there are some of us who are quite a bit younger who can imagine how preposterous it would seem if we were told such a thing.

Nevertheless, Abraham trusted and obeyed. His trust, his faith, never left him. Even when his body was weak and the way was rough and great demands were made upon him, he trusted God and God never let him down.

Paul tells us that those who trust like Abraham are his offspring. Bloodlines have nothing to do with it. Faith has to come first. Before we get tangled up in Torah, the Law, in rules, regulations, and doctrines, there must be the element of profound trust, a willingness to act, to live a life characterized by confidence rather than fear.

One way Jesus had of talking about the centrality of faith was to say that those who want to come after him must first deny themselves and take up their cross. To deny myself is not to condemn or denigrate myself. I am a child of God and the children of God are the crowning glory of God's creation. No, to deny myself is to get my ego off center stage in my life and give the leading role to God. To take up my cross is to be willing to trust God's leadership no matter what. It is taking up a life of faith and it is the only appropriate response to God when we hear God say, "I have chosen you."

### **To be chosen is to see suffering as a condition of human freedom.**

This does not mean that Christians are masochistic. It means that Christians are given a perspective on suffering. To avoid suffering at the price of our freedom is demonic. That is why Jesus rebuked Peter who, after hearing Jesus speak of his passion, tried to persuade him that there must be an easier way to attain his glory. Jesus then spoke those liberating words, "Whoever wishes to come after me

must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.” And, we know that Jesus did take up his cross and walked the walk before us. He was not exempt from suffering.

Those whom he has chosen must not be so presumptuous as to think we are exempt. To accept suffering and remain faithful is true discipleship. God has called us to glory and promised that we will have it. But God has shown us through his Son that the road to glory is a stormy one. Our faith will be tried by the chances and changes of life and by the calamities and evils that are at every turn. When we surrender our freedom to follow Jesus Christ because we are confronted by obstacles, then we are in danger of becoming obstacles to the faith of others. Remember that one name for Satan is *Diablo* and that name means “obstacle.” So, Jesus was saying to Peter, “Your way of thinking is an obstacle to the life you seek.”

It is through suffering and struggle that we attain fulfillment, that we live out our purpose, that we attain our destiny as children of God.

You can take away my possessions. You can take away my health. You can take away every person in my life that is precious to me. But you cannot take away my freedom to decide how to respond to you. My suffering will not determine who I am and how I respond; my response will be determined by the One who has chosen me and whose grace is adequate for my every need.