

**Lent II**  
**March 8, 2009**

What does it mean to be the winner, to be chosen, to be the recipients of God's special attention and care? That's a really good question, and the answer has all sorts of consequences for how we see ourselves and our world. It has to do with what we expect from ourselves and from the church and from God. So it's worth a word or two.

A good way into all of this is the story of God's second covenant, the covenant with Abraham, that we just heard from Genesis. Remember last week, when God promises Noah that God will change the natural course of events, and deal with sin by mercy and love, and not by wrath? Well, the covenant with Abraham is the beginning of God's working out that promise; the beginning of God's new way of dealing with creation. It's God's first step to bring a broken and hurting world back to himself. And to do that God creates a community—God chooses one person, Abraham, to be the beginning of a new people, a people created and chosen by God to be God's special people in the world.

So, if we want to know what being chosen is all about, this is a real good place to look. And, if we only saw that one passage we just heard, being chosen would sound like a pretty good deal. All that talk of kings, and offspring, and multitudes and what not makes it sound like Abraham has won some sort of celestial lottery—he gets the big prize. But of course that's only part of the story, and not the biggest part. The biggest part has to do with *why* God promises to do all of this, and what it all means. It turns out that the point is not that God liked Abraham best, or that God didn't like anybody else very much, or that Israel was supposed to have it easier than anybody else. Hardly.

It turns out that the real reasons Israel was chosen had to do with God's plans, and not with Israel's plans at all.

It turns out that Israel was created with a purpose, with a mission, which was that Israel was to be the physical place, the community, where the rest of the could look and discover who God was and what God was all about—and so discover that God cared about them, too; and that God wanted for them, and for all creation, the best that there was.

So Israel was created, not for the sake of Israel. but for the sake of everybody else, so that Israel could make God known to all of creation. And, when Israel was at its best, when it was truest to its own nature and to its mission, then Israel did exactly that. It is uniquely through Israel that the world has come to know that there is but one God, and that this one God not only created all that is, but that this one God also acts in history, and in that acting cares, not just for one people or for a few people, but for all people. It is also uniquely through Israel that the world has come to know that justice, mercy, and compassion are not the virtues of the weak, or the hopeless dreams of losers, but are instead imperative built in to the very web of creation itself, and that they will triumph over any power the world calls its own, or raises against them. This cost Israel, it cost Israel when Israel abandoned it mission, and it cost (usually in different ways) when Israel was faithful to its mission.

So, being chosen, being special, was not what it first seemed. Being chosen, being special, this was about mission, and service, and making it known to the world that God had neither forgotten it nor forsaken it. Israel discovered that it was not in the religion business for its own sake. Rather, in a very real sense, God had put them there for the sake of the world.

To be called is to be called for service, and not for privilege. Always.

Peter learned this the hard way (which seems to be just about the only way Peter could learn anything).

Remember how, immediately before the verses we just heard, Jesus asked the disciples who they thought Jesus was? Peter got it right, he was the first person to recognize that Jesus was the messiah. Peter said it, and Jesus didn't deny it.

Now, this was exactly what Peter had been waiting for and hoping for. He had backed the winner. Jesus was the chosen one, which meant that he, Peter, was among the chosen ones. What was going to happen next, now that the messiah had arrived, was common knowledge. Everybody knew that the chosen one, the messiah would wipe out the Romans, restore the Monarchy of King David, balance the budget, improve the weather, begin an era of peace and prosperity, and so on.

That's what messiahs were for. They were for kicking around the bad guys and rewarding the good guys—especially those good guys who had the smarts to sign up early. Peter knew this—just like everybody else knew this. He thought that being chosen was being chosen for privilege—especially for his own privilege.

Instead, the very first thing this newly named messiah does is insist that he would “undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed”. Hardly what Peter—and everyone else—had in mind. So Peter grabbed Jesus, physically hauled him around, and said “No, this will never happen to you.” That's when Jesus lit into Peter like a pit bull into raw meat.

And that's when Jesus starts up with what are sometimes called his 'hard sayings'—words that make it very clear that it is not only Jesus himself, but also the community that follows him, that will find things difficult, and not to their liking, and, when you get right down to it, not for their benefit.

Instead, the community that grows up around Jesus, (that's us), just like the community that grew up around Abraham, is about being the physical place, the community, that the rest of the can look at and discover who God is and what God is all about—the best place the world can look at to discover the depth and the breadth and the meaning of God's love—not just for us, but for all God has created.

So, those who follow Jesus are called to deny ourselves—that is, to say 'no' to ourselves (unlike Peter, who said 'No' to Jesus) and, in saying this, to become free to know and to make known, not ourselves, but Jesus—not for our own sake, but for the sake of those who might look, and who might see, and who might rejoice in God's goodness.

And none of this is primarily about us as individuals—it most certainly *is* about us as individuals, but not primarily. Instead, it's primarily about us as a community, as what Paul calls the Israel of God, the church, continuing our part of the story we have received from Abraham—about us continuing to be—collectively, that place where the world can look to see who God is and how God operates.

At the end of the day, everything in our story (the Biblical story) everything about election, everything about being chosen, this is really about service; it's really about mission; it's really about giving the world a chance to see the truth of God. This is a big part—a really big part—of what it means for Abrahams' story to be our story, of what it means for us to stand in the that Biblical tradition of covenanted relationships with God that go all the way back to before the beginning.

It also means that what we are about as Church matters—it matters to God and it matters to the world. It's worth taking very seriously. For we are the way God has chosen to reach his world.