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“Chosen and Beloved”
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Baptism of the Lord
January 9, 2011
Isaiah 42:1–9; Psalm 29; Matthew 3:13–17

Almost without failure, when I read a passage of scripture,
or several passages, like these today,

I find myself humming a song, which seems to float up
from the recesses of my mind.

And one of my tasks as a preacher, is to ask why this particular scripture
elicited this particular song, because that might give me some clue
as to how God is speaking to me and to us through these words.

Isaiah's Servant Song, the first of four the voice of the Lord relayed
to the prophet Isaiah while Israel was in exile in Babylon,
contains phrases about God's favored one, like:
my, my, my... servant, chosen, soul's-delight, spirit-recipient,
justice-establisher, light to the nations, eye-opener, prison-springer,
my glory... my, my, my.

And the song that floated to the surface of my mind when I read Isaiah's words
was an old R&B tune produced by Earth, Wind & Fire
called *That's the Way of the World*.

The song was released in 1975, a long time ago, and became one of the top ten
songs on the billboard charts that year.

Earth, Wind & Fire's song contain phrases about the way of the world like
“old at heart”, “sorrowful days”, and “cold of heart”.

Which is interesting to consider, because when I read this first Servant Song from Isaiah,
or Matthew's narrative of Jesus' baptism by John,
I feel like God is issuing us a "pink slip", terminating us from the way of the world,
and firing us from it's old, cold grip through baptism.

How so?

My, my, my... how many times does the Lord God have to say it.

In our world where freedom of choice reigns supreme:

where we like to think we can choose things like our neighborhood schools,
or choose our preferred candidates,
or choose the lowest fat ingredients,
or choose the church of our choice,

God issues us a pink slip, and says guess what?

It is I who have chosen you, and not the other way around.

Out of all the other people I could have chosen, I have chosen you. You are mine.

You belong to me, and not to the world. I have taken you by the hand,
and I have kept you. I have covenanted with you, and you are mine.

Our baptism is a sign of this choosing; not our choosing, but God's.

Before a hand is ever dipped in and drawn out of the water,

God has chosen to draw us us out of the way of this world,
in order to belong to God's beloved community.

Our baptism is a confirmation of this honor.

For our confirmands whom we are affirming this morning, I want to make this clear:

God has already chosen you to begin your life and your ministry in this cradle
that we call the church.

God's voice broke the trees that made the ribs of this cradle;

God's voice was the sonic boom that announced your birth;

God's voice called your mother and father to dance like wild little oxen and calves
at your birth or adoption;

God's voice named you "beloved" even before your parents
baptized you by any other name.

No matter where you go from here, God has chosen and claimed you
as God's own beloved cradle child.

Chosen for what? We might ask. I hope we ask that question,
although the answer is not always immediately forthcoming.

The way of the world would say that we choose to be powerful and successful;
that we choose to be first in line at the mall,
when it opens at 11 a.m. on the first Sunday after Christmas;
that we choose to have our heart's desire,
even if it impinges upon someone else's heart's desire;
that we choose to discard fragile people like broken clarinet reeds,
to throw water on the little voices of children, or of minorities, or
of prisoners sitting in darkness like we might douse persky late-burning embers
in a campfire to extinguish them.

In baptism, God issues us a pink-slip to these ways of the world,
and issues us a summons, instead, to a different way of being in the world:
as defenders of justice for the little and least,
as advocates and protectors of the fragile and unloved,
as bold beacons to the nations of quiet, reserved, non-violent strength.

Our baptism is a sign of this choosing:

God's choosing of our primary vocation.

Before a drop of water ever tingles the skin on our scalp, God has chosen for us
this ministry of justice bringing, of right distribution and right order,
of encouraging, and not coercing,
of love for all of God's created, spread-out earth and earthlings.

And, I might add, this is not a calling for sissies.

I'm not even sure that Jesus knew what he was getting into,
when he stepped into the river with his wild cousin John.

But I do think Jesus knew that it was the right thing to do,
and that it was the beginning of a life of service,
not a life of being served (Luke 22:27).

Anyone who has ever stepped into a body of moving water,
which is what baptism originally involved,
knows that it can knock you off your feet, can have its way with you,
and can carry you places you hadn't planned or chosen to go.
It is stepping into a force larger and more powerful than oneself: God-force.
I'm sure that Jesus was aware of this immanent danger and consequence,
but also of this immanent love.

Jesus knew, without a doubt, that his baptism meant that God was with him,
affirming him of divine companionship every step of the way,
by sending a Spirit dove to alight on him.

And yes, there was that booming voice; the sounding and resounding affirmation from God
that God's chosen one is "mine", that the chosen one belongs to God,
and that God's chosen one is beloved,
before ever being or doing anything to earn or deserve God's love.

Our baptism is a confirmation of this calling and this honor.

Earth, Wind & Fire would say that we are chosen to have hearts of fire,
for the ways of the Lord, and not hearts grown cold.

For what should our hearts have fire? What does the Lord require of us?

To do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God (Micah 6:8)

Included in your bulletin today you will find a bookmark with First Presbyterian's
core values printed on it.

These core values were discerned by our whole congregation, not by a committee,
not by the session, not by the clergy, but by the whole people of God.

They say something of our perceived calling as disciples of Jesus Christ
on the corner of Roxboro and Main.

They say something, but not all, of what we perceive God is calling us to do,
as God's chosen servant people.

Perhaps we should read them together, as we begin a new year of 2011,
to remind ourselves of how we have heard the voice of God speaking to us
through our baptismal calling. Please take out your bookmark

and read with me:

First Presbyterian Church: Core Values

Reformed Worship: *Through a shared liturgy of Word and Sacrament,*

*FPC invites all, in creative and faithful ways, to focus heart, soul, and mind
to the Glory of God.*

Diversity and Inclusivity: *as God has claimed us in the waters of baptism*

with our differences,

we are called to invite and nurture a diverse and inclusive community.

Faith Exploration: *FPC welcomes and encourages all to explore the call to discipleship*

and to consider questions of faith at all points on their journey with the Risen Christ.

Pastoral Care: *God has loved us first; so too, we love and care for one another,*

nurturing mind, body and spirit throughout life's journey.

Historic Placement: *"Downtown by history and by choice," we are committed to being*

a witness to God's steadfast love and justice in the heart of the city.

Social Mission: *FPC advocates for social justice and responds to the "cries of the poor,"*

remembering Jesus' promise to be found among the hungry, homeless,

sick and imprisoned.

Faithful Stewardship: *Called to be stewards of the gifts God has provided, we support*

the foundation that enables this faith community to be generous in hospitality

and in faithful ministry.

Community: *As a reflection of God's beloved community, we seek to affirm*

and challenge one another; rejoicing together as the Body of Christ.

Some of the phrases are direct referents to God's first Servant Song to the people of Israel:

being a witness to God's steadfast love and justice in the heart of the city;

advocating for social justice and responding to the "cries of the poor";

remembering Jesus' promise to be found

among the hungry, homeless, sick and imprisoned.

If these core values sound vaguely familiar, they should.

The voice of God spoke them first; Jesus later embodied them in his ministry.

But as I said, these core values are just the bones of our common calling to discipleship.
Our task as a congregation will be to continue to flesh them out,
and to embody them as Jesus embodied God's way of being in the world.

This past week, I received two beautiful thank-you notes from inmates
at Central Prison in Raleigh, thanking members of our congregation for
sending them home-made Christmas cards from the Advent Festival.
They didn't know who to thank specifically, so they thanked the whole congregation.
One says: "Jesus loves you all!

I want to thank you for the beautiful hand-made Christmas card and thank you
for thinking of me when no one else was, but you.

God blessed my heart hearing from you during this time of year.

I went to court December 10th and the judge took me off death row
and gave me a life sentence because of all the wrong-doing
in the court system and the SBI lab.

Keep me in prayer that God will send me home."

Another says: "I hope these few lines will find you, yours and the families
of First Presbyterian Church all doing well, and in good spirits
of one blessed season going out, and other blessed one coming in.

I wanted to thank you for the lovely hand-made card you sent me for Christmas!
So, thank you for the card. Sincerely, yours in Christ."

While I am encouraged by the prison ministry of Beth Brockman and
Catherine Miller, I am somewhat troubled that God's Servant Song in Isaiah
mentions twice the issue of justice-bringing,
and twice the call of bringing-out from prison those who sit in darkness.

And our own core values mention Jesus' call to the hungry, homeless, sick and
imprisoned.

Do our actions match our words? Are we doing enough for those sitting in darkness
just down the street? The prison is just three blocks away.

We're practically neighbors.

That issue, and others, deserve further discernment and exploration in this new year.

Quite frequently, the voice of the Lord troubles the waters of our baptism.

I share this with you, confirmands, to make you aware that

the task of responding to God's summons and Christ's example

is never completely clear or complete.

Many times we are the ones whose ears are deaf to God's booming voice,

and we are the ones whose eyes are blind to God's pointing finger.

While we want to affirm you in your faith today, to let you know that God chose you first

to belong to God, and to belong to this God-family;

and to affirm you that God loved you first and will continue to love you,

whether you decide to be confirmed or not,

I want to make you aware that this congregation needs you, as new ears and new eyes,

open to the new things and possibilities springing forth from God in our midst.

We need young adults who will respond and be responsible to a God

who has chosen us first, as justice-bringers and light bearers.

And we need young adults who will respond and be responsible to a God

who loved us first and who commissions us as selfless lovers of the loveless.

In our baptism, the dove-Spirit of God is with us; the way of the kingdom is before us;

the voice of God beckons us; and the presence of Christ

goes ahead of us, summoning us to new things and new callings

in this new year.

Chosen and beloved ones, may we hear, see, and humbly respond. Amen.