

Exodus 19:2–8a

2They had journeyed from Rephidim, entered the wilderness of Sinai, and camped in the wilderness; Israel camped there in front of the mountain. 3Then Moses went up to God; the Lord called to him from the mountain, saying, 'Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: 4You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. 5Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, 6but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites.'

7 So Moses came, summoned the elders of the people, and set before them all these words that the Lord had commanded him. 8The people all answered as one: 'Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do.' Moses reported the words of the people to the Lord.

Holy, Holy, Holy One, guide us by the Spirit of truth to hear the Word of life you speak, and to give all glory, honor, and praise to your threefold name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

I thought it might be interesting to talk a little bit about election today. Not the election that will be happening in November, but the concept of election. Election is a very Calvinist or Presbyterian concept. The idea that some people are elected by God to be saved. This goes hand in hand with the concept of Predestination. Because if some are elected, they were elected to be saved by God before they were even created. The concept seems fine to some degree. We as Presbyterians believe in the sovereignty of God, meaning that God is all powerful and all knowing, so even if we believe God creates us with free will, we would believe that God knows what our choices will be. Things start getting a bit sticky when we someone points out that if some are elected or predestined to be saved, that would imply that some others are not. This is the concept of double predestination. Now many of us would take exception that God would create someone that God knew was not going to be saved. It doesn't really fit the idea of a loving creator does it? This is some pretty heavy theology at this point. It's theology that some may want to delve deeper into, but today I think we need to look at it from a different angle.

The idea that some are elected, and others aren't makes it very difficult for ecumenicalism, not just among those of different faiths, but even different denominations of Christianity. Under a strict version of election, anyone who doesn't believe like I do, is not one of the chosen people, and is not going to be saved by God. Some would say that they should only work and associate with those who are also elected or saved. They might fear being tainted by the non-elect. I don't agree with this idea, but some people believe this.

Our scripture from Exodus talks about the first time God elects a group, the Israelites who he has freed from Egypt. Moses has led the people out of Egypt to the base of Mount Sinai, and they are going to stay there for a couple of years. Moses is going to trudge up and down that mountain multiple times to speak to God, to receive the Ten Commandments and other rules and instructions, and to beg for the people's lives when they inevitably anger God by breaking the covenant, multiple times.

For the first trip up the mountain God tells Moses to tell the people that they are the chosen people of God. They are chosen to be a kingdom and nation that keep's God's covenant and sets an example of holiness for the rest of the world. Moses does this and in the scripture the people all agree to this covenant together in one voice. It should be noted they did this without

even reading the fine print of the contract, since God hadn't given Moses all the commandments and rules yet.

God choosing the Israelites at Mount Sinai models three aspects of election that I hope will correct some misconceptions about election and put it into a different light that will help us recognize God working in all people and religions.

First, election is a process. We have a tendency to think of election as a one-shot deal that is directly related to our salvation and our call, especially those of us called to leadership in the church. We tend to think of it as an epiphany moment, like when the Holy Spirit came to me when I filled the pulpit at my home church the first time. Or when Moses heard God's call in the burning bush. Or when Saul was blinded on the road.

The thing is that in all of the cases that I've mentioned, God had been working things on the downlow for quite some time before that. God had been working with the Israelites to free them from Egypt even before Moses was put into a basket and sent down the river as a baby. Paul had been groomed even before he started persecuting the church by being at the stoning of Stephen. I had been pushed by the Holy Spirit multiple times before that epiphany moment in the pulpit at Knox Church in St. Paul. My own call was a process that took years to finally come together in that epiphany moment, and even then it took a second time in the pulpit for me to start looking at seminary.

These examples I've listed show that God is prodding, directing, and enticing people to do God's will all the time, and not just the chosen special few, but all of God's creation. In other words God is playing the long game, and when we choose to do something contrary to what God wants, God just moves on to plan B, or C, or plan double ZZ for the one hundredth time.

So looking at election this way means that it isn't a status marker that favors one group over another, but perhaps election is an experience that people have in common when they approach God, even if they come from drastically different directions or backgrounds.

The second aspect of a different way of looking at election that I would like to put forward is that election entails responsibility. There's a fine line here, but I think we must look at it. As one commentator pointed out, "Critics of the doctrine of election point out that, all too readily, "the elect" come to think of themselves as God's pets, singled out for special favors, and exempt from the worst penalties for bad behavior. However, the election of the Israelites is anything but the granting of special privileges. Election is for a job, a mission: to be 'a priestly kingdom and a whole nation.' In the same way that one tribe, the Levites, to which Moses is said to have belonged, functioned as priests for all Israel, so all Israel is to be the priest, the holy servant of the nations of the world. To fulfill this role requires difficult disciplines: obeying the Lord and keeping the covenant, the details of which are about to be spelled out at very great length. Understood as a calling out for special responsibility, election can be seen not as special honors for a favored few but rather as a mandate to all nations and to all religious communities as well."

In one of his books, Chuck Swindoll tells about a very interesting case that came before the courts in the state of Massachusetts back in the 1920s. It concerned a man who had been walking along a pier when suddenly he tripped over a rope and fell into the cold, deep waters of that ocean bay. He came up sputtering, screaming for help, then sank beneath the surface. For some reason he was unable to swim or stay afloat. His friends heard his faint cries in the distance, but they were too far away to rescue him.

But within only a few yards was a young man lounging on a deck chair, sunbathing. Not only could the sunbather hear the drowning man plead, "Help, I can't swim," he was also an

excellent swimmer. But the tragedy is that he did nothing. He only turned his head to watch indifferently as the man finally sank and drowned. The family of the victim was so upset by that display of extreme indifference, they sued the sunbather. The result? They lost the case. With a measure of reluctance, the court ruled that the man on the dock had no legal responsibility whatsoever to try to save the drowning man's life. My point with this story is that we may be called to be elect, but in answering that call we will have responsibility to do God's will, some of which may not be easy.

I say there is a fine line in this aspect of being elect because the implication is that you can earn your way to heaven. If you do what God wants you get the reward of salvation. The flip side of this would be that if you ignore the call of God you wouldn't get into heaven. The twist here is that perhaps election isn't about personal salvation at all. Perhaps it's all about helping God fulfill the coming of the kingdom. The question is: are we going to take the responsibility or not?

The third and last aspect of election that I want to mention is that election creates a people. It's interesting how the Bible tends to speak exclusively of the elect collectively, as a chosen people, most of the modern theological arguing and posturing about election focuses on whether an individual is elect or not, and how we can tell. Certainly, God does call individuals to specific tasks, like I mentioned before, Moses, Paul, myself, and many more, but those people that are chosen don't work in a vacuum. Through Moses, God extended the call to all of Israel. Through Paul, God extends the call to the Gentile world, and through my call to ministry God is extending the call to the people of this congregation, this community, and to any others I may come into contact with. To put it in current event terms, perhaps God is using us to spread the message of grace and love of Jesus Christ like a virus? We give to someone and they give it to several others and so on, and so on until it spreads all over.

Finally, I think Theologian Christopher Morse does a good job of exploring the concept of election and its opposite damnation. He suggests that election is directly related to the group and not the individual. He asks, if all have fallen short of the glory of God what does God finally intend for all of us? Perhaps God means to eternally condemn our offenses, but especially the social practices and structures that institutionalize our evil deeds, rather than individual people among us? And by the same principle, might not the entire motley human race be called, in the end, to be God's holy people? Perhaps someday all of humanity, chosen by God, may answer God's call as one, saying "Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do." That is something that we should look forward to. Amen.