

“Chosen”  
Acts 9:1-19a  
6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter

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Westminster, Greenville  
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This past spring, as the UCLA Bruins were making their run in the NCAA men’s basketball tournament to the Final Four, I was reminded of a story about their legendary coach from years and years ago, John Wooden.

Before John Wooden became basketball royalty at UCLA in the 1960s, he was coaching at Indiana State Teachers College.

Trying to advance his career, he applied for two jobs:  
one at the U. of Minnesota, the other at UCLA.

He wanted to go to Minnesota, but there was a problem.

They wanted to keep the coach whom Wooden would replace on board the coaching staff.

Wooden replied that that would not work, so Minnesota promised to find another position for the coach. They would call Wooden on Saturday at 6pm with their offer.

At the same time, UCLA was also very eager to have Wooden, so he told UCLA to call at 7pm on Saturday, figuring he would know whether Minnesota could offer him the job at that point.

6pm came and went, then 6:15, 6:30, 6:45pm...no phone call.

Right at 7:00pm, the phone rang. It was UCLA, they offered the job, and Wooden accepted, figuring that Minnesota had decided to go another direction.

Unbeknownst to Wooden, however, a blizzard hit the Twin Cities on that Saturday, and the phone lines went down.

No sooner did he hang up than guess who called...the University of Minnesota. They explained what had happened. Wooden wanted to go to Minnesota—but he had already given UCLA his word.

Going back on his word, he said, was not the honorable thing to do.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, Wooden ended up winning 10 National championships at UCLA. In other words, he was a SNOWSTORM away from an entirely different career...and who knows what would have happened had he ended up a Golden Gopher.

Was it chance, dumb luck that brought Wooden to the West Coast? Did John Wooden, because of his morals and his desire to keep his word...did he choose to go to UCLA?

Wooden himself said it was fate...which almost seems to suggest, that in some mysterious ways, someone else was in charge, or that perhaps he was chosen...

Chosen.

What is like to be chosen?

Many times, it's a marvelous feeling.

The acceptance letter you've been hoping for comes from college, you get to go where you want to go in the fall...you've been chosen.

You find out you've made the team,  
or you've won the election,

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Jeff Main for this story.

or you received an award you never dreamed you would get...

Many times, being chosen is a marvelous feeling.

Unless you're in the Bible.

The fascinating thing about being chosen in the Bible is that it's not always a marvelous experience.

Just take our text for today.

Saul has been ravaging the early church, when he's blinded on the road to Damascus. God chose Saul, and for three days he cannot see—not the most pleasant experience!

Most takes on this text see it as a description of Saul's conversion experience. And it is.

But it's also a text about a disciple named Ananias, when God tells Ananias that he is to go to the street called Straight, and lay his hands on Saul so that Saul might regain his sight.

To which Ananias says:

“Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done...”

In other words, God—you've got the wrong guy.

I think you've got the wrong guy in Saul, but you've definitely got the wrong guy in ME!

I don't want to be chosen for this role.

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What about you?

Do you want to be chosen?

Not by a college, not by a coach, not by an employer, not by an organization to receive an award...but by God?

Before you answer that, let's explore this a little more.

What does it mean to be chosen by God?

In his memoir, *Surprised By Joy*, C.S. Lewis describes the night of his conversion:

*...I had always wanted, above all things, not to be 'interfered with,'* Lewis writes.

*I had wanted (mad wish) 'to call my soul my own.'*

*Picture me alone in that room in Magdalen, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of [the One] whom I so earnestly desired NOT to meet.*

*"That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me...*

***I gave in, and admitted that God was God,  
and knelt and prayed:***

*[I was] perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England... a prodigal who is brought in kicking, struggling, resentful, and darting his eyes in every direction for a chance of escape..."<sup>2</sup>*

C.S. Lewis wanted his life to be his choice,  
his own idea of who he could be and should be.

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<sup>2</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life*, Orlando, Florida: Harcourt, 1955.

He didn't want to be "interfered with"....

Which gets at the first thing it means to be chosen by God:

Our lives are meant to be interfered with by God!

**We are not our own idea.**

**We are God's idea.**

Our lives are not simply ours to choose, craft, and create.

If that were so, we would always choose success.

We would choose the road that leads to accolades, to awards.

But being chosen by God is not about going up.

It's about going down.

It's not about a life of success.

It's about sacrifice.

It's about service.

It's about humility.

That's what it means to be chosen by God.

Have you ever heard the story of Franz Liszt?

Back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Franz Liszt was an enormously popular musician.

He played the piano, and he gave concerts, and he was someone who loved to put on a SPECTACULAR show.

He gave performances that were flashy and extravagant, hands held high, "assaulting the instrument." Women in the audiences would swoon, and some would even, during his concerts, throw themselves on his piano...

He traveled first class, made piles of money, and was known all over Europe for his adventurous "escapades." If there had been social

media and Twitter in those days, Franz Liszt would have had hundreds of thousands of followers.

But then something happened to Franz Liszt.  
No one's exactly sure what.

He had always had a flirtation, a tug with the church, and at one point in his life, he took vows and made some RADICAL changes.

- He gave free piano lessons to impoverished students.
- Needy strangers would write to him for money, and he just gave it away.
- Hotels would give him a key to the penthouse, and Liszt would pass it to his valet, insisting on sleeping in the servant's quarters instead...

Some historians have scoffed at the changes, saying that Liszt just did it all for show. Others say it was authentic, he was doing what he thought he was supposed to do.<sup>3</sup>

Were these changes the result of a religious experience?  
Did he hear the voice of God?  
Did God choose Franz Liszt?

I have no idea, but I do know this:  
God does not choose people the way that you and I might choose people.

That's the second point.  
You and I might choose according to accomplishments or track record or whether we think they are trustworthy. But not God.

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<sup>3</sup> This description of Liszt's life comes from two sources: a sermon/lecture by the Rev. Dr. Tom Long, and a book by Harold C. Schonberg, *The Lives of the Great Composers*, New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1997.

That's what got under the skin of Ananias in our text for today.  
 God tells Ananias to go to Saul, and Ananias can't believe his ears!

Saul?

“Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.”

To which God replies:

“Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings...”

All of which means that being chosen by God is not just about humility. It's also about HOPE.

It's a way of saying that God can work through anyone.  
 That God can grab hold of anyone.  
 That God can make a good future with anyone,  
     no matter one's past, no matter one's problems,  
     no matter what other people might think...

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Ten years ago, a 59-year-old woman named Mary Johnson was invited to talk about what it's like to live next to a convicted murderer.

The person who committed murder is now out of jail, having served his term in prison.

He is Ms. Johnson's neighbor.  
 In fact, Ms. Johnson and Oshea Israel are not just neighbors.  
 They are friends, and she treats him like a son.

He takes out her garbage for her, she gives him a hard time if she hasn't heard from him in a couple of days...

All of which would seem fine, and generous.  
Mary Johnson refuses to judge Oshea Israel by his past.

Except for one thing.  
The person whom Oshea Israel murdered almost three decades ago was Ms. Johnson's own son.

"You and I met at Stillwater Prison," she says to Oshea.  
"I wanted to know if you were in the same mindset of what I remember from court—where I wanted to go over and hurt you. But you were not that 16-year-old. You were a grown man. I shared with you about my son."

Ms. Johnson goes on to say that she has forgiven Oshea.

And he replies, "As far as...forgiveness from you, sometimes I still don't know how to take it because I haven't totally forgiven myself yet."<sup>4</sup>

To forgive the man who kills your child?  
And not just to forgive, but to build a relationship with him?  
To live next door to him?  
To treat him like he's your very own son?

I do not think for one second that God wanted Mary Johnson's son to be killed.

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<sup>4</sup> As told on NPR's StoryCorps, May 20, 2011, found at [Forgiving Her Son's Killer: 'Not An Easy Thing' : NPR.](#)

But in the years that followed, Ms. Johnson had a vision—a vision of an organization that would support not only mothers like her, but also the mothers of children who had taken a life. And she knew that in order to do that, she had to forgive Oshea Israel.

“When Oshea told me he wanted to share his story publicly with me so that he could help others, I couldn’t believe he wanted to do this,” Mary Johnson recalls. “It’s not easy for us to stand next to each other, again and again, and share our story—but I say...sharing your story is the road to healing.”<sup>5</sup>

Do you think Mary Johnson and Oshea Israel just sat down and came up with this good idea?

Or do you think what Mary Johnson did—was somehow God’s idea?

That God chose them...

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I asked you a little bit ago whether you wanted to be chosen by God. Do you remember that question?

Let me provide a footnote to that question.  
It’s a RIDICULOUS question.

Because the question before us is NOT whether you and I want to be chosen.

We already are.

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<sup>5</sup> As told to The Forgiveness Project, found at [Mary Johnson and Oshea Israel - The Forgiveness Project](#).

Just like God chose Ananias to go to Saul, not as an enemy but to call him “Brother Saul...”

Just like God chose Saul, not to persecute the church but to build God’s church...

Just like God chose ordinary people long ago, God is still choosing people today. For example, later this afternoon, over 50 confirmands will be celebrated. It’s a wonderful moment in which we recognize that they have chosen to be a part of Westminster.

But what’s even more wonderful is the knowledge that before they could ever make that choice, God chose them.

Just like...God has chosen you.

You know what God has chosen you to do, right?

God has chosen you...to love.

To love not just your family, not just your neighbors as yourself, not even just strangers...but to love the people whom you dislike. To love the people who always get under your skin.

Your enemies—that’s how Jesus put it.

Not many people in this world make a point to love their enemies, but followers of Jesus are called to do it.

God has chosen you to do it.

Do you know what else God has chosen you to do?

God has chosen you to forgive not just one time, not just 7 times, but 70 times 7.

That’s not something everyone in this world is going to do.

But it's something that Jesus asks his followers to do.  
God has chosen you to do it.

Do you know what else God has chosen you to do?  
God has chosen you to deny yourself and take up a cross.

Now I can see you starting to protest over that one.

After all, this past year has been filled with all sorts of crosses, all sorts of sacrifice and stress and grief that we NEVER GOT TO CHOOSE...

But God has chosen you—to take up your cross, to carry someone else's cross, precisely BECAUSE it's been a difficult year for so many of God's children.

Now, about this being chosen business, there's a caveat.  
The caveat is this:  
If you want to argue with God about God's choices, that's perfectly fine.

Plenty of people argued when God chose them.  
You'll be in good company.

Do you remember Moses? The burning bush?  
How God came to Moses in the bush and told Moses to go to Pharaoh to bring the Israelites out of Egypt...what does Moses say?

“Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?”

Moses argued with God!  
Or how about the prophet Jeremiah?

God went to Jeremiah, and God said:

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,  
and before you were born I consecrated you;  
I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”

To which Jeremiah replies: “Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.”

Many times, many many times in the Bible there is resistance to being chosen.

There’s arguing.

You’re free to argue too.

You are free to do that, it is your choice!

Just remember what happened in each of those cases:

Moses argued. Jeremiah argued. Ananias argued.

And God said: Go!

Go do what I asked you to do!

So you are free to argue with God about the love and the compassion and the radical grace that God has asked you to share with this world.

Go ahead! Put up a fight!

But what do you think God is going to say to you?

(Amen.)