

Text: Ephesians 1: 1-13

Title: Chosen

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“Hardcore,” written and directed by Paul Schrader, is a gritty-raw-unsettling-story about a father searching for his daughter who is lost in the lurid darkness of pornography and prostitution in southern California. I wouldn’t have paid much attention to the movie when it was released 30 years ago except that Schrader grew up in the bosom of the Christian Reformed Church, the father in the movie is a stern and stoic Christian from Grand Rapids, and the daughter runs away while at a Young Calvinist Convention in California.

The movie is a painful descent into hell. But, at one point the father, Jake Van Dorn, played by George C. Scott, is in the Las Vegas airport with Nikki, a stripper who he has hired to help find his daughter, and they have an unforgettable exchange that includes these lines:

Jake: U stands for “unconditional election”: God has chosen a certain number of people to be saved, the elect, and he has chosen them from the beginning of time. L is for “limited atonement”: only a limited number of people will be atoned and go to heaven. I is for “irresistible grace”: God’s grace cannot be resisted or denied. And P is for “perseverance of the saints”: once you are in grace, you cannot fall from the numbers of the elect. That’s it.

Nikki: Before you can become saved, God already knows who you are?

Jake: Oh yes, he’d have to. That’s predestination. I mean, if God is omniscient, if he already knows everything ~ and he wouldn’t be God if he didn’t ~ then he must have known even before the creation of the world, the names of who would be saved.

Nikki: Well, then, it is all worked out, huh? It’s fixed.

Jake: More or less.

*Nikki: I thought I was *&^% - up.*

Jake: Well, I admit it’s a little confusing when you look at it from the outside. You have to try to look at it from the inside.

And, I thought I was screwed up....

The idea of a God who chooses is incredulous to Nikki. The idea that before the creation of the world God predestined some to be adopted as the sons and daughters of God stretches beyond the boundaries of common sense. The idea of

election is screwed up to a stripper in Vegas and to students in Christian high schools....

Because, while teaching high school every time that I opened Paul's letter to the Romans, or taught church history, or summarized the Canons of Dordt, or read the chapter of Ephesians there was bound to be a befuddled boy in the back row who screwed up his face like he had just bite into a lemon. Then he would announce that the idea of God electing for salvation was an offense. It wasn't fair. It was an affront to his finely tuned sense of justice.... And, usually all it took was one student to raise objections and then the class chorus started:

If God chooses than why bother trying to be good?
If God chooses than he is to blame!
If it is a done deal than I can go anything I want!
If God chooses there would have to be a reason; it couldn't be random. It would have to be fair.
You're wrong! You have to believe ~ that is how you are saved!

These students were considerably more comfortable with what is currently posted on the sign in front of the Catholic Church on 127th Street, which offers a simple recipe:

Be good. Avoid evil. Go to heaven.

Now that's fair!

But, dear friends, part of what makes this morning's text so startling is the unvarnished language of choice:

For he chose us in him before the creation of the world...

In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will...

Now, I doubt that on beautiful morning in July you came to hear a full orbbed systematic soteriology as it relates to God's choice,

but there are a few affirmations that we can proclaim,
there is truth here that we can herald,
and even in this great mystery there is a word of encouragement.

The opening of Ephesians is dense. Verses 3 to 14 are only one sentence in Greek. Without pause, the author piles on powerful and profound ideas that form a sort of chain. They are all linked together and they all move toward an end. They begin before the creation of the world and they end when "the times reach their fulfillment." In one thick long sentence over a handful of verses we go from creation to consummation. The full sweep of time is in the opening of salvo of Ephesians.

And, what it proclaims is that God has a plan or a purpose ~ from the very beginning ~ that all things in heaven and on earth will be brought into unity under Christ.

Therefore, any choosing relates to that. I am not sure that the electing will of God is limited to a roster of who is saved. I am not sure that God is simply picking who gets a seat on the bus to heaven. Rather, the purpose of God, even in election, is that all creation ~ fractured and falling apart in sin ~ will be brought together in Christ.

Martin Luther on a November night in 1532, at a table with a drink and a few friends, put it his way:

*So we see that all history presses toward the forgiveness of sins.
Everything circles toward the center, and that is Christ.”*

From the beginning to the end the purpose of God in Christ is a cosmic reclamation project. Election is part of that grand plan.

For a handful of years, while I was a high school teacher, I taught across the hall from Lew Vander Meer. Lew was a quirky colorful teacher and church planter who was quick to offer folksy-home-spun images to explain theological mystery. And, if memory serves, Lew floated the picture that election is like God putting a bucket in a waterfall. All humanity is lost, drowning, and tumbling over the falls. There is nothing that we can do to save ourselves, but God in his sovereign will chooses to stick out a bucket in and save some.

As Paul puts it in Ephesians:

As for you were dead in your transgressions and sins... but , because of his great love for us, God who is rich in mercy, made us alive...it is by grace that you've been saved.

Now, I am not a big fan of those sorts of images, eventually they fall apart or we're left with unintended impressions, like the water fall is big and the bucket is small, but let me offer another image. Let me offer an image that is rooted in this text.

Our translation reads:

For he chose us in him before the creation of the world...

Other translations read:

... he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world...

Both translations work, but “before the foundation” has the notion of that which is under, supporting, unshakable, essential. Everything is built on the foundation.

Dear friends, our faith is not in our ability to be good or avoid evil.

Our faith is not in our wisdom to choose God.

Our faith is not in our strength to hold onto God.

Our faith is not in our piety, purity, or power.

Our faith is not in our theological tradition or our spirituality.

But! Our faith is the foundation that God lays.

Our faith is in the foundation...

Whatever saving is done, whatever salvation means, whatever choosing takes place it ultimately has to do with the purpose of God, and not in the fickle and flimsy whim of men and women. That is to say that it is not about us; it is not about what we build; it is not about our merit, or our worth....

But! It is about the very foundational will and work of God. Our faith is in the heart of God expressed in Christ, not in my heart that is "prone to wander, Lord I feel it, prone to leave the God I love."

John Calvin, who just turned 500 a few days ago, puts it this way:

By saying that they were "elect before the foundation of the world," he takes away all regard for worth. For what basis for distinction is there among those who did not yet exist, and who were subsequently to be equals in Adam?.... By these words he does away with all means of their election that men imagine in themselves. For all benefits that God bestows for the spiritual life, as Paul teaches, flow from one source: namely, that God has chosen whom he has willed, and before their birth laid up for them individually the grace that he willed to grant them....

Now, I think you could go away from this worried that somehow you got missed in the selection process. I suppose you could go out into the sun today with a cloud of doubt that God didn't choose you when he was selecting the bricks for the foundation.

Or...Or, you could take great comfort in the fact that our confidence is not our choosing, but in the lavish grace of God expressed in Christ. Our confidence is not in our choosing, but in the God who created you, loves you, and sent his son for you.

I've wondered if Paul Schrader, in writing and making the movie "Hardcore," was closer to election than he may think. Jack Van Dorn travels into the seedy underbelly of pornography in LA, seeking and searching for his daughter. In some ways the movie is about his death. And, granted there is no happy ending, but Jake Van Dorn goes after his daughter not because of right action or right belief, but because of love. He goes after his daughter because she is his daughter...

Dear child of God, you are chosen by God in Christ. And, God seeks after you and never lets you go, not because of anything you've done, but solely because of his great love for us in Christ. Thanks be to God.

Amen.