

Sermon preached at Grace Epiphany Church, Philadelphia
14 February 2010

*Last Epiphany: Ps 99; Exod 34:29-35;
2 Cor 3:12—4:2; Lk 9:28-36, 37-43*

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Happy Valentine's Day! And Happy New Year—welcome to the Year of the Tiger!

“Then from the cloud came a voice that said, ‘This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!’”

Jesus' appearance with Moses and Elijah on the mountaintop is meant to signify that his ministry as the chosen one of God is grounded firmly in the salvation story of God's people. Moses and Elijah represent the tradition of the law and the prophets in which Jesus' ministry is rooted. Moses led the chosen people out of slavery through the wilderness to within sight of the Promised Land; he gave them the law as God gave it to him. Elijah, the greatest of the prophets, represents the tradition of the voice of God speaking through individuals to call the people and their rulers back from the ways of sin, tyranny, and injustice.

To be a prophet is not, as we understand it today, to predict the future. To be a prophet in the way of Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the others, is to speak truth to power, to level a pointed critique of society and government when they are seduced by the temptations of greed, selfishness, and cruelty; when they fail to pursue God's vision for God's people—God's vision of a world that is just, compassionate, and loving. And now, in the scene of the Transfiguration, Jesus appears with Moses and Elijah, and is named the chosen Son to carry forth that message to the world of his day and to our own world as well.

God's people. God's chosen people. God's chosen Son. Being chosen. When you think about it for a minute, the notion of being chosen can be tricky. If I am chosen, that must mean someone else is not. If I am special, that must mean that someone else is merely ordinary. I remember the great anxiety that Valentine's Day caused me in grade school for just this reason. We would decorate large paper envelopes with heart motifs and would hang them on the back of our chairs. These were the “mailboxes.” Then we made out valentines to our friends, with the usual doily lace and red construction paper. When we were all done, we went around the room and put our valentines into the mailboxes of the other kids. All very sweet and innocent, you would think, but my insecurities about alienation and friendlessness made me wonder whether I would get “enough” valentines, or any at all, and whether they would be from the people I wanted them to be from. I worried about whether I would be “chosen” by others, and by how many.

But as Henri Nouwen points out in his book *Life of the Beloved*, being chosen forces us to touch a great spiritual mystery. He says, “To be chosen does not mean that others are rejected. It is very hard to conceive of this in a competitive world such as ours. . . . To be chosen as the Beloved of God is something radically different. Instead of excluding others, it includes others. Instead of rejecting others as less valuable, it accepts others in their own uniqueness. It is not a competitive, but a compassionate choice.”

Nouwen says that we may never understand this mystery fully with our minds, that perhaps we can only begin to grasp its truth in our hearts.

Some of us, though, have in our lives people of extremely sharp intelligence who can force us to recognize the mysterious truth with our minds as well as with our hearts. You'll remember that I'm the youngest child in my family, and the only one born in the United States. In the Western calendar, my eldest brother and I share the same birthday, twelve years apart (which did not exactly make his twelfth birthday the happiest of his life, since I kind of took over the limelight). The Chinese lunar calendar, as you may know, runs in cycles of twelve years, and so you might expect us—my eldest brother and I—to be born under the sign of the same animal. But because in the lunar calendar the new year fell between his birthday and mine, he was born in the Year of the Tiger, and I was born in the Year of the Rabbit.

Once, in a particularly ugly fit of adolescent nastiness, I remarked to my mother the six-year gap between my middle brother—my other brother—and myself, and intending a snide judgment on what I perceived to be a marriage of little affection, I said, "Well, obviously I was an accident." Rather than give me a well-deserved smack across the face, my mother immediately shot back, "What do you mean? You were the most intended child of all! . . . We needed you for American citizenship."

And so I was a chosen one, after all. Chosen, and beloved, and lucky (people who are born in the Year of the Rabbit are supposed to be lucky). Very slowly, and very gradually, over time I began to shed my adolescent tendency to feel alienated, solitary, and friendless; I began to lose the romantically induced sense of being hopelessly alone in the world; I spent less time looking for reasons to be unhappy with life, and I started to notice the many gifts that I had been given by, first of all, my parents, and then by my teachers and by the communities that supported me; and I began to see my life as it truly was and is—lucky, blessed, chosen, and beloved.

In this last year the mothers-in-law of both my brothers died. A couple of weeks ago I was not with you because I was presiding over the memorial service of the mother-in-law who just died in December, at age 101. In reflecting on her passing my thoughts of course turned to my own mother, to both my parents. I reminded myself of the struggle of that entire generation of Chinese immigrants and Chinese-Americans to give us, their children, the best lives possible. Through talent, intelligence, relentless hard work, commitment, and utter devotion, persisting through prejudice, uncertainty, and global war, they succeeded beyond anyone's wildest dreams. As I had the privilege the other week to remind my siblings, my nephews and nieces, and their cousins, our family has no choice but to be profoundly grateful for the lives we have been given.

And gratitude, as Nouwen tells us, is the necessary and proper response to realizing that one is chosen and beloved. He reminds us, "You have to celebrate your chosenness constantly. This means saying 'thank you' to God for having chosen you, and 'thank you' to all who remind you of your chosenness. Gratitude is the most fruitful way of deepening your consciousness that you are not an 'accident,' but a divine choice."

It is when we can look at the world with the open heart of gratitude instead of the shriveled, cowering heart of fear and anxiety that we become capable of the actions that can transfigure the world—not just for ourselves, but for the people around us. It is when we rest confident in our chosenness and our belovedness that we can increase our heart's capacity for love, compassion, generosity, and forgiveness, and offer to others the

realization that they, too, are beloved and chosen by God. It is when these things happen within our hearts that our faces change from the closed, sullen, dark look that many of us wear to defend against a threatening world, a look that I know I wear much of the time (but hey!—I’m working on it)—change that dark look on our faces to the glorious light that shines from Jesus’ face as he is transfigured by the announcement that he is the chosen one, the beloved of God.

Again Nouwen reminds us, “When we keep claiming the light, we will find ourselves becoming more and more radiant. . . . Every time we decide to be grateful it will be easier to see new things to be grateful for. Gratitude begets gratitude, just as love begets love.”

We are all God’s children, beloved and chosen. May the light of that knowledge shine forth in our faces, may it transfigure our lives, and may our radiance be known in the gratitude and love that we offer to the world.