

We Are Taken

Isaiah 60:1-6 Matthew 2:1-12

Preached by Richard Bolin at Culver-Palms United Methodist Church

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The secular calendar has brought us to a new year. The liturgical calendar has brought us to the Day of Epiphany, the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. The candles that we lit in the dark days of Advent and wondered at in the holy days of Christmas, now burst forth as a bright morning star. In this light God's love for all the world is revealed.

Magi from the east have come to find the Christ child. Their visit fulfills ancient prophecies, and also is a sign of things to come. The star and the visitors from the east mark this as a birth of universal significance. In this event we see that Jesus has come for everyone.

We begin this new year and this season of Epiphany by celebrating Holy Communion. Henry Nouwen, in his book *The Life of the Beloved*, the subtitle of which is *Spiritual Living in a Secular World*, uses Communion as a way of viewing the whole of our lives. This drama of Holy Communion, which is a re-enactment of the life of Jesus, is also the re-enactment of our lives. We are, after all, the body of Christ. But Nouwen goes beyond that to suggest that what we act out in Holy Communion is the universal human experience.

When we share Holy Communion, the celebrant takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it. In this loaf is the life of Jesus, and these actions reenact the whole of his life. Jesus is taken, that is, chosen by God, blessed, broken and given. This is your life and my life. **The loaf of bread, taken up in God's hands, is each of us and all of us. We are taken, blessed, broken and given.**

This is the Christian story, but it is not just about part of the world. This is the reality in which the whole human family participates, the paradigm which gives meaning to each human life if we would but acknowledge it and claim it.

This is the story that I want to share with you in four sermons during the season of Epiphany. We are taken. We are Blessed. We are Broken. We are Given.

We are taken, which is the same as saying we are chosen. The loaf of bread, taken up in God's hands, is each of us and all of us, held purposefully – not by accident – held lovingly.

Several of us had the opportunity recently to see again the wonderful Christmas opera by Gian Carlo Menotti, "Amahl and the Night Visitors." It is the touching story of the Three Kings briefly receiving hospitality from a poor widow and her child as they journey to Bethlehem. They tell the poor mother of their quest, seeking a child born in poverty who nevertheless holds the world in his hands. They are going to worship him and to offer gold, frankincense and myrrh. When the mother sees the gifts, she wonders why it is not her child chosen to receive this gold. Ah, but what she will soon realize is that her son is chosen. As the story unfolds, we see that these gifts are for her child as well. The journey of the magi is for the sake of her child and for every child. The story is a foreshadowing of the later teaching of Jesus that when you offer gifts to the least, you are sharing with Jesus.

The incarnation of God, the word become flesh, God taking human form in Jesus is a revelation of the reality that we are all the beloved of God. God choosing to come in Jesus, being Emmanuel, God with us, is all of us being taken in God's hands. We are chosen. We are the beloved.

At the far corner of the elementary school playground we gathered by the backstop. The game was kickball. Mark and Tim were the captains. How did they get to be the captains? I have no idea. They were just acknowledged to be the fastest and the strongest. They flipped a coin to see who would choose first. Mark chose Gary. Tim chose Bobo. And they continued on down the line as the rest of us stood there, waiting to see how our athletic skills would finally be assessed. Mark chose me, third from the last, and I gave thanks that I was not David, who was inevitably, and it would seem eternally the last to be chosen.

This is not the way of God's choosing. God has already chosen. All of us were taken at the beginning of creation. **This "being chosen" is not about winning a competition. It is about being the object of God's love.**

Henry Nouwen writes: "I hear at my center words that say: 'I have called you by name, from the very beginning. You are mine and I am yours. You are my Beloved, on you my favor rests. I have molded you in the depths of the earth and knitted you together in your mother's womb. I have carved you in the palms of my hands and hidden you in the shadow of my embrace. I look at you with infinite tenderness and care for you with a care more intimate than that of a mother for her child. I have counted every hair on your head and guided you at every step. Wherever you go I go with you, and wherever you rest, I keep watch. I will give you food that will satisfy all your hunger and drink that will quench all your thirst. I will not hide my face from you. You know me as your own as I know you as my own. You belong to me. I am your father, your mother, your brother, your sister, your lover, and your spouse ... yes, even your child ... wherever you are I will be. Nothing will ever separate us. We are one.'"¹

This is the story that must be told over and over again, looking deep into the soul of each person with the query: "Do you know that you are the beloved of God?" We must tell the story to ourselves, feel ourselves being held in the hands of God, purposefully, lovingly.

Henri Nouwen speaks of "being the beloved" and "becoming the beloved". Being the Beloved is the reality, it is what God has done, it is who we are. And yet we are also Becoming the Beloved as we become aware of that reality, as we acknowledge it, as we claim for ourselves the identity of those whom God has chosen and loved.

Nouwen tells us three ways to claim our chosenness.

First, claim your chosenness by unmasking the world. The world is trying to hide the truth from us. The world is manipulative, controlling and power-hungry. The world is in the business of sending us rejections letters. But every time we get one, we must remind ourselves that it did not come from God. There is an excellent movie playing now titled "The Great Debaters," the true story of a small Methodist Black College in Marshall, Texas with a debate team that went undefeated for 10 years during the 1930's and 40's, including many match-ups with large, prestigious predominantly white universities. The professor coach of the team has them repeat again and again this litany:

Who is the judge?

God is the judge, for God decides who wins and loses.

Who is your opponent?

My opponent doesn't exist.

My opponent is just a voice resisting the truth that I speak.

Your truth is that you are “the chosen child of God, precious in God’s eyes, called beloved for all eternity, held safe in an everlasting embrace.”ⁱⁱ Do not let the world tell you otherwise.

Second, claim your chosenness by seeking and connecting with the truth wherever you find it. The noise of the world tries to cover it up, but the truth remains. We hear Jesus and the prophets speaking it from the pages of scripture. We find it in community at churches, synagogues and support groups. We see it in art and literature that has come to us through the ages.

Once a Vermont farmer lost his watch as he was helping with the annual chore of stocking the ice house. He and his fellow workers stomped all over the sawdust in the ice house floor without any success. They used rakes and poked into dark corners with flashlights and when they were tired of their fruitless search, the men went to lunch. While they were gone, a boy went into the ice house and found the watch. The men came back from lunch, and they were curious as to how he had found it when so many of them had looked so hard. The young man said, "I just lay down on the sawdust, kept real still, and soon I heard the watch ticking."

“Long before anyone heard us cry or laugh,” writes Nouwen, “we are heard by our God who is all ears for us. Long before any person spoke to us in this world, we are spoken to by the voice of eternal love. Our preciousness, uniqueness, and individuality are not given to us by those who meet us in clock-time – our brief chronological existence – but by the One who has chosen us with an everlasting love, a love that existed from all eternity and will last through all eternity.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Finally, claim your chosenness by celebrating your chosenness. Say thank you to God for the gift of who you are. Celebrate in community, for again, you are not chosen in isolation. This is the great wonder and beauty of the fact that we have been taken up in God’s hands. This loaf of bread that God lifts is each of us and all of us. Our awareness of being chosen opens our eyes to see that others are chosen, too.

I invite you this day to claim your identity. You are the beloved, chosen child of God. And let us together go forward to learn what it means to be taken, blessed, broken and given. Amen.

ⁱ Nouwen, *The Life of the Beloved*, p. 36

ⁱⁱ Ibid. p. 59

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid. p. 58