

I

A few years ago, my wife Amy and I decided that our family was ready for a dog. And so we began browsing the Web site of our local humane society, and we saw a picture of a dog we thought would make a good fit for our family.

The next day, I stopped by the Humane Society to get a look at the dog in person. She was indeed a beautiful dog, and I knew she would make a great addition to some lucky family. But for reasons I can't quite put into words, somehow, I just knew she wasn't the dog for us.

There were lots of other great dogs in the room, dogs of all sizes and breeds and colors, and to be honest, it was all a little overwhelming. Then I noticed a shaggy, scruffy dog in a pen all by himself. And again, for reasons I can't quite articulate, I knew that he was the dog meant for us. The next day, I brought Amy and the boys to meet him, and he jumped up on their laps and licked their chins, and that's how our dog Yogi -- yes, our dog's name is Yogi Baer -- came to live with us.

There's nothing particularly special about Yogi that made him different from all the other dogs there. He wasn't the biggest or the cutest, the smartest or most athletic. But we just knew that he was meant to be ours. For reasons that we can't even put into words, we chose him and made him part of our family.

II

In the culture in which we live, we're accustomed to making choices, aren't we? Maybe it's been awhile since you've been inside a grocery store, but the next time you're in one, just look at all the different choices there are for something as simple as canned green beans.

I read some years ago that someone looked at the drink menu from their local coffee shop, and they did a little math. Accounting for all the different sizes and styles, all the different choices of flavors, creamers, and sweeteners, there are over 14,000 different ways to have a cup of coffee.

And of course, if you haven't heard, there's an election coming up. In our culture, we are accustomed to the concept of choosing.

But what about God? Did God choose us, or did we choose God? And if we are in fact, God's chosen people, then what implications does that have for our relationships with everyone else?

III

All of that that brings us to our story for today. This Fall, we're doing something of a high-level overview of the Hebrew Scriptures, also commonly called the Old Testament. We began last week with an account of creation in the early chapters of

Genesis, and we noted that the first eleven chapters of Genesis are often referred to as “pre-history narratives.” The accounts of creation, the story of the Great Flood and the Tower of Babel, are our ancient ancestors’ testimony about how the world came to be as it is.

But a dramatic shift in the narrative happens at the end of chapter 11. At the end of chapter 11, the focus narrows from these grand, sweeping tales of how the world came to be as it is, and instead focuses in on one couple.

We are introduced to a man named Abram and his wife Sarai, and we learn two things right off the bat about this couple. They are 75 years old, and Sarai has never been able to conceive or bear children.

Infertility, of course, is still a challenge for many modern people. But in the ancient Near East, barrenness represented hopelessness. In the ancient Near East, property and wealth were passed through the firstborn male heir. To be unable to produce a male heir meant that the family’s days were numbered. It meant that when the couple died, their legacy, and any hope of life beyond death died with them. In many ancient Near Eastern cultures, barrenness was often interpreted as a signal that the family had fallen out of favor with the gods.

And that’s what makes this story all the more scandalous. Because at the end of Genesis 11, we are introduced to this 75-year-old man named Abram and his wife Sarai, and we learn that Sarai is barren. Not to put too fine a point on it, but in their ancient context, they were dead people walking.

And then we turn the page to chapter 12, and we read that the Lord called to this old, childless couple and said, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house and go to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you so that you will be a blessing, and in and through you all the nations of the earth will be blessed.”

To me, this is one of the most important passages in all of Scripture. First, it tells us that God’s intention for the world is blessing. God’s purpose, what God is ultimately out to do in the world, is to bless *all* the families of the earth. But in order to accomplish that purpose, God isn’t going to just snap God’s fingers and say, “Let there be blessings.” Instead, God is going to accomplish that work in and through a particular people. In theological terms, we call this “the scandal of particularity.”

Of all the people in the world, God chooses Abram and Sarai. There’s nothing in the text that says that they were any better or worse than any other couple in the world. The text doesn’t tell us that God chose them because they were the smartest, or the most athletic, or the cutest, or the most faithful. As a matter of fact, part of the scandal and shock of the text is that Sarai was barren. How in the world is God going to make a great nation out of this childless couple when they’re already in their seventies?

But the text tells us that Abram and Sarai went, just as the Lord had told them. They trusted and believed that they had been chosen and called by God to be part of God's mission of blessing all the families of the earth, and so they set out for points unknown.

But the journey did not go smoothly. There were problems and challenges every step along the way. And time continued to tick on, and still Abram and Sarai were no closer to having a male heir than when they'd first responded to God's call. And that brings us to our story for today. I invite you now to listen for a Word from God from Genesis 15:1-6

After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, "Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield: your reward shall be very great."

But Abram said, "O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" And Abram said, "You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir."

But the word of the Lord came to him, "This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir." He brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your descendants be."

And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

IV

My friend, here is something I believe in my heart of hearts. There are more than seven billion people with whom you share this planet, but God has chosen you. Yes, you. God has said, "I have this grand plan for the blessing of all the families of the earth, and I am going to accomplish it in and through you."

And you might say, "Well, hold on now. I'm pretty sure I'm not blood related to anyone from the ancient Near East, much less Abram and Sarai."

And that may very well be true. But families come in all shapes and sizes, and you need not be blood related to be part of a family. And in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, you were adopted into this family story. When we baptize, that's part of what's happening. We're saying, "This is a marker of your adoption into this family. This is a marker that God has claimed you and sealed you and given you a divine calling on your life."

Yes, you, my friend, have been chosen and claimed by the Lord God – not because of anything you have said or anything you have done – but because of who God is in Jesus Christ. You have been chosen and claimed by the Lord God – not because of

where you come from or who your people are, not because you are better or more worthy than anyone else, but because for reasons known only to God, God has claimed you and marked you as God's own, because God intends to work out God's purpose of blessing all the families of the earth in and through you.

And precisely because you have been chosen and claimed and marked as God's own forever through Jesus Christ, you will experience hardships and challenges. Jesus did not say to his followers, "If you're my disciple, life will be easy." No, he said, "Being my disciple means you're going to end up carrying a cross." He didn't say it would be easy. He only promised that it will be worth it.

I know that this has been a hard year, my friend. I know that you may really be struggling right now to hold onto hope. I know you may be really struggling to trust that God is still working out God's plan for the blessing of all the families of the earth. I know that right now it seems like meanness and darkness and chaos and hopelessness are the only forces at work in our world. I'm struggling, too.

And so I'm hoping that at some point this week, God will tap you on the shoulder and invite you to step outside and look up at the stars and remember who and whose you are. I'm hoping that at some point this week, God will speak to you again the most common commandment in all of Scripture – Do not be afraid. I'm hoping that at some point this week, God will remind you that there is indeed a divine purpose to the order of things, that there is a divine intention of the blessing of all the families of the earth, and that you have a vital role in that plan, and that you will believe it and act on it.

V

But of course, God's call and claim isn't just on you as an individual – it's on us, as a community of faith, in this place we call First Presbyterian Church.

We are marking our bicentennial year, looking back on two centuries of mission and ministry in the name of Christ in this community. But this church doesn't exist just so we can say we've been here a long time. This church doesn't exist just so we can be caretakers of a beautiful, historic building.

No, we have a higher calling. God has a plan for blessing all the families of the earth. Not just the families who look like us, or vote like us. Not just the families that live in the United States. God's intention is the blessing of *all* the families of the earth, and God has chosen to work out at least a part of that divine purpose in and through First Presbyterian Church of Athens.

May we remember who and whose we are, and what we are about, this day and every day. Thanks be to God. Amen.