

Saint Anne's Adult Forum
The Christian Spiritual Tradition

Notes for Week 2 (August 23rd)

“Chosen by God” - The notion of COVENANT, the formation of IDENTITY, and the reality of SUFFERING.

1. A brief recap of the story of God's call to Israel.

Abraham, Isaac, Jacob (Israel), Joseph, the twelve tribes of Israel, Moses and Exodus, into the promised land, the emergence of Israel / Judah as kingdoms, on to eventual exile.

God chooses Israel:

Exodus 19: 5-6 -

Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine,

Amos 3: 1-2-

Hear this word that the LORD has spoken against you, O people of Israel, against the whole family which I brought up out of the land of Egypt: You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.

The character of this call is what we speak of as the covenant between God and Israel.

But what does it mean to be chosen?

Other religions have the same language of being chosen by a deity. (**I was unable at the time to pull up the article with references that I thought I had lined up, but if you'd like to see a list of such references, see

J. M. Powis Smith, "The Chosen People," *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* Vol. 45, No. 2 (Jan., 1929), pp. 73-82.)

Usually it's the self-aggrandizement of a nation that's at play in claims of being chosen by a god. This may have been the case - or the understanding - from the outset (see Judges, Samuel, Kings, etc.). But instead of military might, Israel seems to have a different destiny and the covenant plays out differently.

A covenant is initiated by a more powerful agent who creates a relationship with a lesser. The lesser agent is then meant to show obedience, gratitude, loyalty; and to meet the expectations of the more powerful agent. So from the outset, it's a relationship of obedience.

2. Identity: Israel's covenantal obligation is to listen to God and to do justice. This becomes the defining feature of the people of Israel.

Hosea 2: 19 -

And I will betroth you to me for ever; I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy...

Micah 6: 8-

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

But being chosen means being subject to God's judgment.

Amos 2: 6-7

Thus says the LORD: "For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of shoes— they that trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and turn aside the way of the afflicted;

Prophetic witness is full of this kind of language.

It highlights the undeserving characteristic of Israel's chosen-ness.

The people don't live up to the standard, but God still loves them:

Hosea 3: 1 - 'And the LORD said to me, "Go again, love a woman who is beloved of a paramour and is an adulteress; even as the LORD loves the people of Israel, though they turn to other gods and love cakes of raisins.'"

But never is mercy and forgiveness and reconciliation lost sight of. The focus is always on God's restoration of Israel in spite of their backsliding.

Amos 9: 14-15

I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel, and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine, and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit. I will plant them upon their land, and they shall never again be plucked up out of the land which I have given them," says the LORD your God.

3. **Suffering** becomes a feature of Israel's identity as they suffer repeated setbacks and political defeats. All of these are couched in terms of divine displeasure at the people's sins. But again, hope is never lost.

4. Issues with the idea of Jewish chosen-ness in Christian history:

(from James Parkes)

- Judaism was nothing but a preparation for the coming of Jesus. Once Jesus is revealed, Judaism becomes irrelevant. Outmoded. Supercessionism.

- It's a fossil - an incomplete form of what became complete in Christianity. A quaint historical curiosity but not a living faith. "We're the true heirs."

- Judaism as a distortion of the true faith that was fulfilled in Christ. Law v. Grace, with Jews representing only the rigidity of the Law, and the Christian tradition representing Grace. Even St. Paul goes down this road.

Universality of election.

Buber on the difference between Judaism and Christianity: Judaism involves acceptance of the fact of membership in a community which is in covenanted relationship, and Christianity involves belief gained as the result of a conversion (not necessarily an accurate portrayal of Christianity, but sufficient for a large swath of it).

Christians can and have cast others out of the community for a host of reasons. In Judaism, excommunication is exceptionally rare.

Midrash story of the lemon. (once again, I was unable to pull up the resource that I thought was open on my desktop. If you'd like to see the full story, see pages 54-55 in the article by James Parkes in *The Georgia Review* Vol. 9, No. 1 (SPRING - 1955).

Questions to ponder:

Do you view your relationship with God as being one of covenant? Does the concept of obedience strike you as outmoded when thinking about your faith?

Do you see your own identity being grounded in God? Is participation in your own faith community an “optional extra” even if you enjoy belonging to it?

Have you ever seen suffering or frustration as vehicles that can bring you closer to God? Have you ever thought, “Can’t you ‘choose’ someone else?!”