

God's Election
Isaiah 42:1-9; Matthew 3:13-17
January 13, 2008

Anna Carter Florence was sharing her images of Jesus' baptism around the family dinner table one evening. She spoke of how lovely it would be to have a bright white dove gently alight on Jesus' shoulder, signifying his election as God's Chosen One. She made graceful wing motions with her hands. Her eleven year son interrupted her. "Wait a minute, Mom. That's not how doves fly. Doves *swoop*. They're *fast*. When they want to catch something they don't flutter down lightly. They zoom like a hawk: *BAM!*" He demonstrated, helpfully. Catching the milk glass before it splattered, Anna said, with disappointment in her voice, "Oh, I didn't know that about doves. Thanks." Another pastoral image bites the dust!

As she pondered this new information, she was led in a very new direction in her reflections on Jesus' baptism. Jesus as the Spirit's *prey*?! Baptism as an act of spiritual target practice?!

We tend to consider baptism as a choice on the part of the believer: we choose to receive the sacrament of baptism, or to have our children receive it. But baptism as an act in which the Spirit *targets* us, even descends upon us as a bird of prey, is an entirely different approach. It calls into question our choice in the matter. What choice does an object of prey have? It doesn't choose to be hunted; it is chosen.ⁱ

Perhaps this is why Jesus insists on being baptized by John, even when John tries to switch their roles. "I should be baptized by *you*," John says, for he knows that Jesus is the greater of the two, the one whose arrival he had been announcing. However, Jesus knows that he has been targeted by the Spirit. He can only submit to his baptism, to the proclamation that he is God's beloved Son.

How might our lives be different if we saw our baptism as an act of election rather than choice? It is in God's nature to hunt us down, to find us, and include us in God's warm embrace. The Spirit has targeted us and will surely swoop down to gather us into the family of God.

After he rises up from the water, Jesus will enter the wilderness, which is where the real choice begins: the temptation to believe that he is not a beloved child of God. But the sacrament of baptism itself requires very little human choice. It is simply a fact: we are loved by God, through no act of our own. It is in God's nature to love. It is in our nature to be sought, over and over again. We tend to be so good at hiding in the brush, like small wild things, that the Spirit continues to hunt for us, with the speed and force of doves.

This understanding of baptism is consistent with John Wesley's concept of prevenient grace. This is the grace of God that is active in our lives even before we are aware of it. From the moment of our birth God is aware of us and seeks to reach out to us. It naturally takes us awhile to become aware of God's presence in our lives. We are elected, we are chosen by God, we are claimed as part of the family of God.

Isaiah enlightens the people Israel and us about what it means to be elected by God. We are claimed for a life of service. In the prophetic tradition, servants of God are chosen to tend to the basic needs of society's powerless. God's servant will not brush aside the bruised and hurt, but will empower them to burn brightly. The chosen one will not disregard the small and

insignificant, but offer a healing, strengthening presence. To execute God's justice means to give rights to those who have no rights, to help those who cannot help themselves. The servant's gentle strength sees to it that both unjust persons and those hurt by injustice will receive justice. The baptized are agents of God, those through whom God is active in the world, bringing blessing, light, and justice.

Robert Fulghum tells about Coach Price, the coach of a junior high basketball team. One year he finally had a team of promise.

Five eighth-grade boys whose height and physical skill and intelligence had arrived early enough and settled down enough to make team play a real possibility....

And then there was 'The Kid.' The youngest member of his class, deranged by puberty-in-process, and legally blind without his glasses....Without his spectacles he could barely see the basket, the ball, or the other players of either team.

The Kid did have his virtues. For one thing, he was determined to play basketball. He was small and fast, and when he dribbled down the court he had the erratic, unpredictable moves of an alarmed jackrabbit in full flight. Furthermore, he was a tenacious ball handler—unwilling to give up possession to any player, no matter which team they were on.

On the negative side, he seemed dyslexic in the face of diagrammed plays, reliably doing the opposite of any play devised. In short, he brought chaos to the court. And not even in practice had he ever put a ball through the net. He didn't care. He came to play.

As the varsity squad was trimmed of the truly inept, The Kid remained....Coach had a crazy idea....He began to see The Kid as a secret weapon. The kid's vision-impaired eagerness could bring total confusion to the court. If inserted into a game when the opposing team was on a roll, The Kid might completely disrupt the flow of play. Coach thought that, in a close game, The Kid could be a living, breathing, fire-eating psych-out—one-man myopic mayhem.

In the kindest terms Coach explained these matters to The Kid and the team. He promised The Kid he would award him a team letter and a letterman's jacket if he would stay the season, whether he played or not.

'I need you. The team needs you,' said Coach. And that was more than enough for The Kid....

He only practiced. He never played. The team won without him.

But it was enough for him to know that at any given moment Coach might say, 'Take off your glasses and go in and drive them crazy.'...

The team won the city championship, defeating the other three junior highs. At the team banquet Coach declared The Kid 'Most Valuable Player.'

'You never played, but you never let us down,' said Coach.

And The Kid never forgot that affirmation.

He was probably not the first or the last weird kid for whom a place was found during the career of Coach Price. The man had a gift for turning a loser into a winner. He had a gift for getting a team to appreciate oddball players. And he had a sense of humor....

This story is not about basketball. This story is about great teaching.

It's about the imagination it takes to respect kids and find a place on the team, even for the least of them. This story belongs to Coach Price, and I've often wondered how he might have told it. But I am certain of the long-lasting effects of the story.

Fulghum says, "I was The Kid. I remember." ⁱⁱ

Coach Price was a servant who understood his mission as igniting the flame of a dimly burning wick. The Kid and many other kids struggling through adolescence, feeling like misfits, were the recipients of the grace given by Coach Price. They had the blessed experience of being chosen and claimed as valuable members of the team.

The promise of baptism is that we are God's elected, God's chosen ones, precious and beloved in God's sight, claimed for service in the name of Jesus Christ. Remember your baptism, and rejoice!

ⁱ Anna Carter Florence, *Lectionary Homiletics*, Vol. XIX, No. 1, Jan. 2008, pp. 56-57.

ⁱⁱ Robert Fulghum, *What On Earth Have I Done?* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2007), pp. 240-243.

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