

**CHOSEN**  
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January 8, 2017  
Baptism of the Lord Sunday  
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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**Isaiah 42:1-9**

*Here is my servant, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon this one who will bring forth justice to the nations.*

**Matthew 3:13-17**

*When Jesus was baptized suddenly the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."*

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Thirty-five years or so ago on a cold January morning while standing up here preaching, a young man bolted up from his pew, strode up to the pulpit, wagged a finger in my face and said quietly but sternly: *God is a consuming fire. Preach the gospel or else.* And then he returned to his pew.

At the time, the thought of a gun never entered my mind. Today it would.

That young man was a Shepherd student and attended here often enough to know I wasn't preaching what he considered the gospel. He explained later that he wanted me to urge people to accept Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior so they would go to heaven rather than hell when they died. *People must choose Jesus as their Lord and Savior, he said, or they'll be damned for eternity.*

That young man wasn't the first or last to push that gospel upon me. Over the past 40 years, I've had people call me on the phone, stop me on the street, send emails and confront me in Food Lion with similar warnings. But, alas, I don't consider that the gospel. I just don't.

Once upon a time I did. But that was before my epiphany, before my eyes were opened, before I saw something in the Bible I'd not seen before.

Here it is from Ephesians (1:4). *We were chosen in Christ, the Beloved, with every blessing of the heavens before the world began.*

Did you hear that: *chosen in Christ BEFORE the world began.*

It had been there all the time; I just hadn't seen it. So I began preaching that gospel.

That young man was right. There is an existential choice to be made. But guess what: *God made it for us.* We are all in. No one is excluded. We are all conceived in original blessing not original sin. Before time began love already anticipated us, formed and embraced us.

One Sunday soon after that incident I happened to say from the pulpit: *whatever heaven may be, we're all in. So get over it and start living like it!* I was younger then

and may have said it more flippantly than I should have. But that's what I believed and so I said it. Often.

Eventually several members complained because, as they put it, *that's not the gospel. Only those who choose Christ go to heaven. Those who don't are condemned to hell. It's what they deserve. They are left out and left behind. And if you don't preach that, they told me, we're leaving.*

I invited them to tell me more. One evening I sat with them and listened. But I didn't change my mind or my preaching. And so they left.

The gospel, as it turns out, is a revelation, not only that Jesus is the Beloved and the Chosen one, but that all of us are. We are all Beloved. We are all Chosen.

The Virgin birth, as it turns out, is true of everyone born. We are all more than the sum of biological parts. We are more than sperm and egg. We are more than genes and genealogy. We are conceived by the Holy Spirit.

And we are all baptized—one way or another—into heavenly blessings. We are chosen—chosen in love before the world began.

The trick is to not let it go to your head but rather to your heart. You don't want to be the target of this bumper sticker: *God, please save me from your chosen people!*

To be chosen is not to be given status, rank or merit. To be chosen is to be given a vocation of service. As the prophet Isaiah put it:

*I have called you. I have taken you by the hand. I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open eyes that are blind, to bring out of prison those who sit in darkness.*

Which is to say: *let your little light shine.*

The heavens are always open and the voice never stops saying: *you are beloved. I love you. In life and death you belong to me.* Whether we believe it or not, we are beloved and chosen before and beyond time to be a light in the darkness.

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**Hymn 69**  
"Here I Am, Lord"