CHOSEN BEFORE THE WORLD BEGAN

Genesis 11:10-26

Let's pray – Lord God, Creator of heaven and earth, you are the One who chose us to be your own before the world began. Would you open the eyes of our hearts today and shine the light of your truth into our minds, illuminating the darkness with your very presence, so that we might understand ourselves better and surrender more fully to your will. In Jesus' name, Amen.

INTRO – Myra's Gift

About 30 years ago, I had the privilege of traveling into China several times with a group of teachers from Hong Kong. We went to a more underserved area of China where the resources were more limited. Our goal was to come alongside the teachers in a particular school there to give them a lift. Primarily we went to help train them with their English teaching.

We took very small gifts with us to give each of the teachers, but the main gift was the relationship and the time we spent together. The day we were leaving, the teacher I had invested the most time in and with whom I had formed a bond, asked me to wait while she went home to get something. She said she'd be back in about a half hour.

I agreed to wait there are the school. When she returned, she told me she wanted to give me a gift. So, she had gone home, looked around her apartment until she laid eyes on the most precious thing she owned. She held it up for me to see. "I chose this for you."

In case you can't see it in the back, it is a very large and beautiful seashell. She said she found it along the beach when she was doing her student teaching in another region of China. As she held it out for me to take, she said, "I want you to have this. It is my most precious possession."

You can't imagine the mix of emotions and thoughts that went through me. I was deeply touched by what she was doing, and at the same time horrified that she wanted me to take her most precious possession. What should I do? To refuse to take the gift she offered might feel shaming, and rejecting, even though it wasn't meant to be. But to accept it meant she would do without this precious item she cherished so much.

Clearly the fact that I am holding this today tells you what I chose to do.

I chose to accept the gift she was holding out to me with gratitude for what it symbolized. I told her I would cherish it and our time together for the rest of my life. And for 30 years I have remembered her and prayed for her and been humbled by her generosity and kindness.

TRANSITION – Jesus often taught in parables. A parable was an everyday story that contained a deep spiritual truth about God and His Kingdom. Today, I'd like to use this true story about the gift of Myra's seashell as a parable to talk about what God has done for us in Christ Jesus. There are 5 main parallels in her story that I'd like to unpack.

1. Myra selected her most treasured possession to give as gift. God has done the same for us.

The Bible says that God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believes in him, will not perish, but have ever lasting life. (John 3:16)

This may be the most famous and most quoted Bible verse there is. Often, we see people holding up posters saying, "John 3:16" when the cameras scan the spectators at football games.

But have you ever stopped to think what that means? God loved the world and each person in it so much that he held nothing back, not even his most precious possession.

When he looked around his home in heaven and his eyes landed on what he cherished the most, God chose his beloved Son, Jesus, to be the gift offered freely for you and for me, for the forgiveness of our sins.

God did this knowing that his son would be rejected, beaten and nailed to a cross by the very people he came to save. And yet God gave us Jesus anyway. And Jesus willing came. In Matthew 20:28 Jesus said the Son of Man came to give his life as a ransom for many. (Matthew 20:28, Mark 10:45, John 13:1-17)

Jesus was a willing participant in the plan whereby he would be the gift, the ransom, that would set us free from the powers of darkness and death, so that we could have everlasting life with him in heaven one day too.

The truly remarkable thing is that God made this choice to give us his Son as a gift, before he ever created the world.

In our call to worship this morning we read these words from Ephesians 1.

[3] Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

*[4] For he chose us in him **before the creation of the world** to be holy and blameless in his sight.*

In love [5] he[b] predestined us for adoption to sonship[c] through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will— [6] to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. [7] In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace [8] that he lavished on us.

Did you catch when these decisions were made? It says, **God chose us in Christ before the creation of the world! Before the words, "Let there be light," came out of his mouth, God predestined us to be his adopted children through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. Can you believe that?**

It's not that God created the world, and then things went sideways and took God by surprise, so he had to hustle and come up with a plan B. Sending Jesus to earth as a gift to save us from all the wrong things we do, was plan A from before the world was created.

Imagine with me for a moment the conversation God the Father and God the Son must have had before they created the world together. It must have started out really fun, as Father and Son talked about how cool it would be to make a beautiful world in which they would create people in their image to enjoy relationship with them and with each other and to rule the world as God's image bearers.

God the Father and God the Son must have had fun designing it all, talking about the math and physics of how they would have to space all the planets exactly the right distance from each other so they didn't crash into each other or burn up by being too close to the sun. And how the gravitational pull of the moon would affect the tides on earth. I can imagine them smiling together as they talked about putting stars in the sky that humans would one day see twinkling from earth and so be filled with wonder and joy. I can imagine the fun they had discussing what plants to make for food and what animals to give them as pets, or to run in the wild.

But I imagine the mood might have then turned somber when they began to discuss how humans would be led astray by the dark spiritual forces that also exist in the cosmic realm. The Bible makes it clear we have an enemy the devil who wants to tempt, deceive, kill and destroy us.

Creating humans with the ability to love God and each other would mean God had to give humans the freedom of choice. But having freedom of choice would mean that humans would often make the wrong choice. They would not always trust God's voice or choose God's path.

There would be times in each person's life when they would stray away and follow the voice of the devil or their own selfish desires. Without knowing what they were doing, humans would choose to become part of the kingdom of darkness and death instead of remaining in God's kingdom of light and life and love. Many of them would even forget the God who created them and they would turn their backs on him. They would hurt each other, and they would hurt God the Father and God the Son in the process.

I don't like pain. I don't like to get hurt. I don't imagine you do either. If I was God and knew all the evil that was going to happen and what the implications of all that evil meant, for myself and my beloved Son, before I created the world, I might have put these dreams of creating the world onto the best left forgotten shelf.

It's a good thing I am not God, or there is a good chance that none of us would be here today. Thank goodness God does not operate the way I do in terms of self-preservation.

Hebrews 12:2 tells us that "for the joy set before Him, Jesus endured the Cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right of the throne of God."

So, as God the Father and God the Son discussed together their plans to give humans the freedom of choice, they both knew in advance that humans would turn away from God's path in rebellion.

Knowing in advance that the only way to save them would mean that Jesus had to come to earth and enter into death on their behalf, Father and Son in unison, moved ahead with their plan, anticipating the joy that awaited them on the other side of the cross.

And so, before the world began, God the Father and God the Son agreed to a plan whereby the Son would take on human flesh (John 1:1-14) so that he could save us from our sin and our waywardness.

Hebrews 2:14 says,

> "Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death."

We've had 3 members of our congregation pass away this year. Death is a real thing we deal with. But the good news is that we don't need to fear death anymore. Before the world began, God the Father and God the Son came up with a plan to deal with our sin so that we could move through death into eternal life with God.

The plan was the gift of Jesus, God's most precious possession, given to die for the sins of the world.

If we believe in Jesus, if we believe that Jesus is the Son of God and we ask him to forgive our sins, then death is simply a doorway into his home, heaven, where there will be no more death, no more crying, no more pain, for He will wipe all our tears away when we arrive.

Romans 10:9 ff says this -

> **9** If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that
> God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. **10** For it is with your heart that
> you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith
> and are saved. **11** As Scripture says, "Anyone who believes in him will never be
> put to shame."[e] **12** For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the
> same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, **13** for, "Everyone
> who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."[f]

To sum up this point, my friend Myra chose her most treasured possession to give me as gift. In similar fashion, God chose to give us his son, Jesus, that we might have eternal life.

The second parallel I want to unpack (and don't worry, they won't all be as long as the first) is this -

2. There was a period of waiting between when Myra told me she needed to go home and get something and when she returned with her actual gift. She knew what she was going to do, but she didn't tell me all the details. She left me with an air of mystery and anticipation about what was going to happen as I awaited her return. The same is true for God. When he first made a promise of a deliverer to come, he didn't give a lot of details in the moment. He left people with an air of mystery and anticipation in the waiting period before he unveiled his gift.

This year we have been discussing the book of Genesis together. Genesis means "beginning." In Genesis we read of the beginning of the world that God created and the events that transpired in the Garden of Eden that gave the devil, that talking serpent, the power of death over us.

If you remember, God had commanded Adam and Eve not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. He warned them that the day they ate of it, they would surely die.

When they chose to disobey the voice of God and instead followed the voice of the serpent, they gave the devil power over them. It was the power of death we just talked about.

But in the moment when God confronted Adam and Eve and the Serpent, with what they had done, God made a promise to Eve. The promise was that a descendant of Eve would someday come and crush the serpent's head but be injured in the process. We read the words of that promise in Genesis 3:15

> God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this…I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel."

At the time Genesis was written, nobody except God knew that this was his plan to save us. Nobody knew God was promising here to send his own Son Jesus to die in our place and rise again and break the power of death over us. In what other major world religion, does an almighty, creator God choose freely to come to earth to rescue his wayward creation by dying for them and rising again? This would not have occurred to them at the time Genesis was written. It wasn't until after Jesus came thousands of years later, that people looked back and began to understand this was what God had been talking about from the very beginning.

That is why Ephesians 1:8 says:

> With all wisdom and understanding, 9 he[d] made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, 10 to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment…

Before Jesus came, there was mystery and anticipation around who the promised savior would be, just as there was mystery and anticipation as I waited for Myra to return.

This brings us to the 3rd parallel in the story of Myra's seashell.

3. Myra had only 1 seashell to give, so she had to choose 1 person out of all the teachers who came to help at the school to be the recipient of her gift.

In similar fashion, God had one only Son to give, so he had to choose one woman to give birth to his son and that woman had to come from one family. Out of all the nations of the earth God had to choose one family through whom to deliver his promised gift.

Most of the book of Genesis focusses in on the branch of the family tree through which God's promised savior will come.

But often we see that Genesis first outlines what happens in the branches of the family tree that are not part the line through which the promised savior will come. For example, we read of Cain's family line before we read of Seth's line of descent. We read of Ham and Japheth's lines before Shem's line. As we continue, we will come to Ishmael's line before Isaac's line. Then we will read of Esau's line before we read of Jacob's line[i].

There is nothing wrong with not being in the branch of the family tree through which God's promised savior would come, because as we'll discover, God is also at work and involved in those other lines as well, moving through them to accomplish his purposes in the world as well[ii]. It's just that God had one son to give and so he had to choose one line of descent through which that son would be born into the world.

Last week we read the story of the Tower of Babel. There we saw humanity banding together to establish a path to salvation on their own and make a name for themselves through building a tower that reached to the heavens so that they would not have to spread throughout the earth as God commanded. They relied on human power and pride in defiance of God's word. So God had to come down to confuse their languages so they would indeed be scattered throughout the world as he wanted them to be.

Immediately after that story, Genesis moves the focus of the story from the scattering of the nations, to a single family line. It is the rest of Shem's line that began before the Babel narrative and now is completed after it.

I promised last week if you tuned in today, I'd tell you why Shem's line was divided like this.

The reason is that Shem's great grandson Eber had 2 sons. One was named Peleg, which means divided, and the other was Joktan. The line leading up to the Tower of Babel was traced through Joktan and ended in the Tower of Babel story.

The other line, traced through Peleg is the line we will read right now. And that fact that it comes second, cues us in to the idea that it will be through Peleg's line not Joktan that God's promised deliverer will come.

After we read this, we'll see that from this point on Genesis will turn the focus onto this one line of descent through which God's promised Messiah will come.

So, let's look at this genealogy now. I know how much you love reading these genealogies with me ;-).

As we read, I would invite you to think about the contrast between the people who were working to make a name for themselves by building a tower at Babel, and God who we see here working faithfully and quietly behind the scenes to preserve this line of descent and bring a savior to us in fulfillment of his promise to Eve in Gen 3:15.

Genesis 11:10-26

10 This is the account of Shem's family line.

Two years after the flood, when Shem was 100 years old, he became the father[d] of Arphaxad. **11** And after he became the father of Arphaxad, Shem lived 500 years and had other sons and daughters.

12 When Arphaxad had lived 35 years, he became the father of Shelah. **13** And after he became the father of Shelah, Arphaxad lived 403 years and had other sons and daughters.[e]

14 When Shelah had lived 30 years, he became the father of Eber. **15** And after he became the father of Eber, Shelah lived 403 years and had other sons and daughters.

16 When Eber had lived 34 years, he became the father of Peleg. **17** And after he became the father of Peleg, Eber lived 430 years and had other sons and daughters.

18 When Peleg had lived 30 years, he became the father of Reu. **19** And after he became the father of Reu, Peleg lived 209 years and had other sons and daughters.

20 When Reu had lived 32 years, he became the father of Serug. **21** And after he became the father of Serug, Reu lived 207 years and had other sons and daughters.

22 When Serug had lived 30 years, he became the father of Nahor. **23** And after he became the father of Nahor, Serug lived 200 years and had other sons and daughters.

24 When Nahor had lived 29 years, he became the father of Terah. **25** And after he became the father of Terah, Nahor lived 119 years and had other sons and daughters.

26 After Terah had lived 70 years, he became the father of Abram, Nahor and Haran.

Often when we read genealogies like this, they may seem boring, and we are often tempted to just skip over them. But to the author of Genesis, the genealogies were a way to establish the faithfulness of God through many generations and to show that God was more than able to keep his promise to send a deliverer, born of a woman, no matter what was happening in the world.

The physical line of Shem produced Abram through whom the nation of Israel would rise. So, this genealogy is not just about ancient history or ancient ancestry. It is the physical lineage that directly establishes the link to Jesus Christ, in the New Testament, God's promised deliverer.

Luke 3 identities these exact same names linking Jesus back to this chosen family line of descent.

This family line functions as a literal vehicle of God's grace, mercy and blessing for the world.

[I couldn't find the reference to this quote as I was going to preach, but I found it afterwards and have noted it in the endnote.]

"Genealogies in the Bible are far more than mere records of ancestry. They are theological constructs that reveal God's unfolding plan of redemption, affirm the identity and heritage of His people, and establish the credentials of Jesus as the promised Messiah. Through them, the Bible communicates profound truths about God's faithfulness, sovereignty, and grace across generations.[iii]"

The Tower of Bable might have seemed like an exciting story in comparison to reading a long list of names that spanned through generations. And yet, in that seemingly boring list, we see God's faithfulness from on generation to the next in his chosen line of people.

Thousands of years later, the apostle Paul would look back at this family tree and tell us God's motivation behind it all – God had an eternal plan to choose a people not just based on blood lines but according to his grace. Ephesians 1:11ff

> **11** In him we were also chosen,[e] having been predestined according to the plan
> of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, **12** in
> order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise
> of his glory. **13** And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message
> of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in
> him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, **14** who is a deposit guaranteeing our
> inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the
> praise of his glory.

In Jesus Christ, the definition of what it means to be part of the "chosen line" widens. We do not need to be defined by our physical biology or earthly lineage, but we can be defined by spiritual adoption into God's family. Anyone who puts their faith in Jesus, instantly becomes part of this eternal family story. Part of God's chosen people. Part of God's family.

The line of Shem carried the promise of a deliverer to come, but the blood of Jesus paid the price that opened that promise to anyone who believes, through redemption and the forgiveness of sins.

This is good news. The good news of God's plan to bless all the peoples of the world through the gift of his son Jesus. His plan was conceived long before he ever created the world. He chose you to be part of this family long before the words, "Let there be light," ever came out of his mouth.

4. This leads me to another parallel with Myra's story. I had to open my hands and take hold of the shell to be a recipient of her gift. The same is true with the gift that God holds out to us in Jesus. It's very easy to receive God's gift. We simply have to believe in our heart and confess with our mouth that Jesus is the Son of God, that he died for our sins and rose again. That's all it takes to be a recipient of his gift. But we must open our hearts if we are to receive God's gift as I had to open my hands to receive Myra's shell.

5. The last parallel I want to draw with Myra's story is this. As the recipient of Myra's one seashell, I have had the privilege today of today of telling you the story of what she did, with the hope that it has been a blessing and touched you in some way. In the similar fashion, there is a blessing for others when those who received God's original gift share the story of what he has done for them.

So I have a couple of questions.

If you have never believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, are you ready to receive his gift? If so, it is quite simple. Believe in your heart and tell somebody today that you believe.

If you have received and believed and been adopted into God's family, will you share the good news of what God is doing in your life with others.

CONCLUSION

Today, you can rest in the knowledge that the God who preserved the chosen line of Shem unbroken through to Jesus Christ is the same God who holds all your days as

well as your eternal inheritance safely in his hands. As he chose the line of Shem through whom to send our savior, he also choses you to be part of his family. The appropriate response to being chosen is to worship and declare God's praises, and to share the good news with others.

Understanding that we have been chosen by God should bring deep gratitude, which leads us to do good works and worship out of a heart transformed by God's love. Being chosen comes with privilege and responsibility - to honor God, to declare his praise and to point others to the hope we have in his gift, his most precious possession, his Son, Jesus Christ.

Let's pray – Lord, thank you that you thought of us before you ever created the world, and that you made a provision for our waywardness. You chose before the world began that you would come to earth and die for us so that we could live in your home forever. Help us to believe. Where we have doubts, strengthen our faith. And where we have tasted of your goodness, the goodness of God, would you give us the courage to share with others what you have done. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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[i] Goldingay, John. *Genesis for Everyone, Part One. Chapters 1-16*. Page 82
[ii] Goldingay, John. *Genesis for Everyone, Part One. Chapters 1-16*. Page 82
[iii] The Role of Genealogies. https://biblehub.com/topical/t/the_role_of_genealogies.htm