The Chosen: “I Have Called You By Name” S1E1 Memory Verse: Isaiah 43:1b

September 10, 2023 Scripture Reading: Isaiah 43:1-7

**SLIDE 1: TITLE**

 Today we begin a bit of a different sermon series as we are following along the Gospels as laid out by this smash hit miniseries entitled “The Chosen”. “The Chosen” has been a phenomenon. It has over 110 million viewers through the Angel Studios app and has been translated into 600 languages! The show is now going into its fourth season, so we are a little late to jump onto the bus, but I don’t love to engage with popular things simply because they are popular. Sometimes popularity indicates that something is devoid of meaning, and when it comes to depicting Jesus, the very best we can do is fall totally short. But I do believe this series is as well done as any other movie I have seen. I do believe the filmmakers have approached the Gospels with the utmost respect and have tried to remain true to the source material. Above all that, I think it the show provides us an easy, low-pressure way of learning about who Jesus is, what he did and said. This alone is worth the price of admission (which is free)! The title, “The Chosen” refers to the 12 disciples who were chosen by Jesus to follow after him. As disciples of a rabbi, they were supposed to imitate Jesus; to speak as he spoke, do as he did and think as he thought and love as he loved. In fact Jesus summed up the whole bible in one phrase: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all you mind.”

**SLIDE 2: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all you mind.”**

 Jesus loved God. He obeyed his Father God in everything he did. He never sinned, never failed. And that is why we need Jesus. That is why we are still making popular mini-series about him 2000 years later. Because we can see pretty clearly that we are not perfect, we do fail…in fact, we are quite broken.

But the story we saw did not begin with Jesus. I was expecting a standard Christmas story with a pregnant Mary giving birth in a stable full of hay. Angels and shepherds and wise men and all that. If you were telling the story of Jesus, you would probably begin there, but this story is called “The Chosen” and it begins with fear. It opens with a father trying to comfort his little girl. I think trying is the key word. As parents, we can only try to meet the various fears of our children. From fear of bullies at school to fear of what might be lurking in the dark, kids have a whole menu of things to be afraid of, and please know, they are reading that menu. Kids growing up today have more anxiety then ever before and we are talking about a generation that has not experienced war or lived under some dictator regime. But we live in a culture that can make a profit from fear. And what about the unending list of things adults should fear: health issues, money problems, unstable political realities… It is a scary world, fear is not always unfounded. There is a reality out there that is dark, that is scary, that a wise person would stay away from. But can I tell you one of my pet peeves? I know you want to know. This happens especially in movies…something terrible is going on and the woman says “I’m scared” and then the man grabs her by the shoulders and says, “Everything is going to be okay, I promise.” Ohhh okay, problem solved right? The building is no longer caving in, or the boat is no longer sinking or the burglar made his exit now that you have promised that everything is going to be alright. Maybe I am just not a good comforter. There have been times when my wife will tell me about something that is bothering her, something about the kids that worries her or, every once in while, an aspect about our marriage that she thinks we ought to discuss, and I am pretty quick to go to my normal line: “Worry is a sin.” I mean well. Right? What I mean is, “God is in control, he loves you. I love you. We can trust in him. Why don’t we say a prayer right now and tell him about our worries.” I guarantee you my wife would fall over if I said that to her. The problem is, that is a lot of words to say, so I shorten it a bit and quip, “Worry is a sin.” Which just demoralizes her and dismisses her concern. I need to adjust my response to my wife’s anxieties. But I can’t fall back on Hollywood’s vacuous line that everything is going to be okay because I arbitrarily promise it will. However, maybe they are on to something when it comes to the promise part. I must say, I love this father’s response. He claims a promise, though it is not his own. He points his little girl to the scriptures, to the words of the great prophet Isaiah.

**SLIDE 3: “But now says the Lord – the one who created you, Jacob (which is another name for God’s people), the one who formed you Israel (which is the most used name for God’s people): Don’t fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.”**

In chapter 43 it says, “But now says the Lord – the one who created you, Jacob (which is another name for God’s people), the one who formed you Israel (which is the most used name for God’s people): Don’t fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.” In a blunt sense this verse is saying “Worry is a sin”. But it also gives us a little more information as to why. There is no need to worry because our God has claimed you as his own…not as a slave, not as a member of the masses, but as a child who is redeemed, who is named. Everything is going to be okay, because you are God’s child…he knows your name…he promises.

 So this episode begins with fear and the promises of God in answer to that fear. Then we jump ahead 28 years.

**SLIDE 4: Mary Magdelene**

The girls is now grown and what do we find? More reasons to fear. The Romans are in charge. They get to do what they want. They have the upper hand on God’s people. They control what happens and, as this episode makes very clear, they impose heavy handed taxes. The Jews hate to pay money to a corrupt and Godless empire. They know that this is not the way it is supposed to be. But Rome is interested in peace. As long as the Jews stay in line and follow orders, they are allowed to have their synagogues and rituals and function by their own set of laws. But even given this certain amount of freedom, everyone knows who is calling the shots. So where is this God who removes fear? Where is this God who redeems? Women particularly have cause to fear as we saw indicated by a solder assaulting this woman. She breaks down in tears, at the end of her rope. We come to find that she is also possessed by demons. Where is this God who makes promises?

 Now, I have to say that I was rather impressed with this part of the film. Demon possession is not an easy topic to talk about let alone depict in a movie. Producers could have easily concluded that it might be better to shy away from this part of the Gospel story, after all, the idea of demons is not easily digested by Westerners. Or they could have opted to turn that scene into a full-fledged horror movie. But I think they maintained true to the text and portrayed it well. Is was not a Hollywood caricature. Demon possession is real simply because demons are real. We can’t see them, we can’t detect them scientifically, but the bible speaks of the reality of our enemy, Satan, the devil, the father of lies. He works to steal, kill and destroy. He works to attempt to thwart God’s plans. You may have heard the famous quote, “The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn’t exist.” Though that quote comes from a movie about a liar, the truth of those words remains applicable. We want to dismiss demons and devils and other supernatural beings. It helps us make sense of the world. It’s easier to stick to what we can observe right in front of us. The supernatural realm remains beyond us, beyond our control and so in many ways it remains beyond our belief. We relegate it to the stuff of legend and horror movies. We turn it into entertainment. But, I would argue, that just as every lie has a hint of truth, every fear, every horror does as well. Why would we fear something that is completely fabricated? The truth is, our fear serves as a clue. So we should not deny the presence of demons among us. That is not to say they lurk around every corner, but it is to come to grips with the fact that there is a realm that we cannot understand or control but that can, nonetheless, affect us. Demonic influence, demonic possession is one of those effects. It plays out differently in different cultures or eras. Here in the West, we see demonic oppression come more often in the form of depression or addiction, some physical or mental ailments. In other parts of the world, places that readily accept the existence of demons, it looks more like the accounts we read about in scripture. I have read some testimonies that included possessed people speaking out in different voices or languages, even of someone levitating off of the floor. These are not scientifically explained because they are affects of the spiritual realm. Again, it is beyond us and so it can be scary.

 The woman who suffers from these demonic attacks is referred to as Lilith. “Lilith” is not a term used in the bible but as a name it literally means “belonging to the night” or “demon”. We don’t want to confuse it with the name “Lilian” which is related to the flower and means beauty. So the woman in the story is known for her bouts with demons and becomes known to others as one who is possessed. That is her identity now. She thought there was a God out there who knew her name, but no one seems to know her name. No one can help her. No one cares. She tears up the promise that was written on her small scroll. She is done – resigned to her fate.

**SLIDE 5: Nicodemus**

 The episode also introduces us to Nicodemus, a great teacher of Israel. The Bible does tell us that he is a member of the Sanhedrin, sort of like a supreme court justice in our context. He is very learned, and highly revered. I don’t know if he would have had the rockstar status that he seems to receive from the peons that he visits in the episode, but I think he has been portrayed well, as his MO, the thing that makes him tick is authority. He was a keeper of the Law of God. He taught it, he lived it, he enforced it. He was the authority for interpretation and implementation of the very laws of God. He was important, crucial to the wellbeing and ongoing existence of God’s people. There is one problem: Rome. At every moment Nicodemus feels the tension between the God-given authority that is supposed to belong to him, and the actual authority that belongs to those pagans in the goofy red helmets. He knows too well where the real power lays.

 Yet as a teacher of Israel, Nicodemus in summoned to the Red District, a place of sin and disrepute. Not a place recorded in the bible, but it makes sense that there would be a rough part of town. Such a respected Rabbi ought never to be found in the Red District. But there was a problem and if anyone can help, it would be a man of God like Nicodemus. He is brought to Lilith to confront the demons. This is not a normal experience for Nicodemus, but the filmmakers assume that he has encountered such things before. He goes into the confrontation with a battle plan, and that plan is what? To drop some names. He goes in speaking the names of angels: Micheal and Gabrial and Rapheal. He speaks the name of *Adoni,* the God of the heavens, he speaks the names of the great patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the prophets Moses. Yet Nicodemus is bested, he must walk away in defeat. His authority, what he perceived to be the authority of God, had failed. He had appealed to the most powerful names he knew; angles in heaven and men of faith, teachers who walked with God, but there was one name he did not know…the name of God’s own Son, the One in whom God became man, the Savoir of the World, the provider, redeemer, the exorciser of demons: Jesus Christ, name of above all names. Nicodemus did not know that one, and once again, his supposed authority comes into question.

**SLIDE 6: Simon and Andrew**

 We are also introduced to a few men who will soon become disciples of Jesus. We have the struggling fisherman brothers, Simon and Andrew. They are dreading the coming of tax day knowing they could lose their boat to the authorities. Simon seems to be constantly coming up with ideas to make a buck while Andrew continually disapproves. We get a glimpse, however fictional, of Simon’s home life as we meet his wife Eden. Though he is headstrong and prone to hairbrained ideas, his wife sees something different. She refers to him as purposeful and stoic. A dirty peasant? A failing fisherman? With purpose? We shall see won’t we.

**SLIDE 7: Matthew**

 We also meet a young man named Matthew, a Jew, a wealthy one at that, who has raked in the riches in service to the cursed Roman regime. Matthew was a tax collector, extorting his own people and benefiting the enemy. As we saw from his loyal chuffer, Matthew was a pariah. He was seen as human garbage, a traitor and no longer a child chosen by God. Those promises Isaiah spoke of? They did not apply any longer to someone like Matthew.

 Finally, in what is basically a Jewish saloon, Lilith, the demon woman, begs the barkeep for something strong to drink. She is out of hope…the promises do not apply to her. But as she reaches for her drink, a hand moves into the frame interrupting her intention. She recoils and immediately exits. But the unknown man follows her and speaks directly to her heart. But he speaks in words she had heard before, words she has known all her life. Words she had treasured, put her hope in and longed to come true. That old verse: “I created you - I formed you. Don’t fear I have redeemed you. I’ve called you by name. You are mine.”

**SLIDE 8: “I created you - I formed you. Don’t fear I have redeemed you. I’ve called you by name. You are mine.”**

These were old words, but coming out of the mouth of this man they carried a new authority, these words were somehow fulfilled. She was redeemed, she was known, she was named: Mary.

**SLIDE 8: Mary Magdelene**

 Jesus comes to us as a new and final revelation of God. Paul says that Christ is the image of the invisible God, the supernatural made natural, the heavenly made on earth. Jesus does not come to bring a different message or to write a different script. But he brings fulfillment to the old words of God. Nicodemus was right when we pondered is maybe the law of God is blurry, maybe it was not the whole picture. His wife accused him of blasphemy when he asked, “What if it is (that is the law, the story of God) is more beautiful and strange than we could ever imagine?”

SLIDE 10: **“What if it is (that is the law, the story of God) is more beautiful and strange than we could ever imagine?”**

The message here is, you bet it is. Paul let’s us know later on in the New Testament that God’s ways are foolishness to humans. It doesn’t make sense to us, but we see God clearly when we see Jesus. We see God’s promises fulfilled when we see Jesus.

 Jesus speaks the words of God, he fulfills them. He speaks directly to our fears, directly to our literal demons, directly to our bad ideas, to our sin, to our doubts, to our brokenness. It is my deepest honor and privilege as a modern disciple of Jesus to declare to you this morning, the very words of God, fulfilled by the authority of Jesus, “But now, says the LORD – the one who created you, Andrew/Cassi/Lars/Sue/George…etc. the one who formed you Church: Don’t fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine.” Amen.