

Rev. Luke C. Werre  
Peace, Sun Prairie  
July 2, 2017  
Pentecost 4

Exodus 19:2-8a

YOU ARE A KINGDOM OF  
PRIESTS FOR THE LORD

I wonder how it must have felt for Moses to be back where he started. This was a profound event because the moment he stepped foot on Mount Sinai he knew God's promise had come true. You see, back when Moses encountered the burning bush, before the parting of the Red Sea and the drowning of Pharaoh's army, before the mass exodus of the Israelites out of Egypt, before the unfolding of each of the Ten Plagues, before his numerous confrontations with Pharaoh, before his many assemblies and emancipatory conversations with the Israelite people, God had said to Moses, "After you have led the people of Israel out of Egypt, you will return here and worship me on this mountain." And there they were and so it was!

God had special plans for that nomad nation of Israel. As they were camped out, spread all across the desert floor at the base of Mount Sinai, God was about to enter into a holy contract with the Israelite people. Here in Exodus 19, God declares that they were to become for Him a kingdom of priests. Be aware that God declares the same thing about you and me and all New Testament believers. 1 Peter 2 says, *But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood.* Let's ponder what it means to be a kingdom of priests for the Lord.

Exodus 19 sets the stage: *After they set out from Rephidim, they entered the Desert of Sinai, and Israel camped there in the desert in front of the mountain. Then Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain and said, "This is what you are to say to the house of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: 'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.'"* So often here in America your faith, your religion, your relationship with God is portrayed as something whatever you decide to make of it, as though you are the determiner of the god you worship and the way to serve him. But Scripture never ever talks that way. It never makes you the determiner. It never portrays the true God as dangling a carrot in

front of you and leaving it up to you. God says to the Israelites, “I carried you on eagles’ wings,” and “I have brought you to myself.”

God instigated this entire relationship. God sent them Moses. God rescued them from the Egyptians. They had been powerless slaves. Now God had brought them to Himself. God had led them on dry ground through the Red Sea. God had gone before them in the pillar of cloud by day and pillar of fire by night. God had sweetened bitter water for them to drink and when no water could be found, he had caused it to gush from barren rock. God had fed them with the meat of quail and with manna in the morning. God had given them a smashing victory over the armies of Amalek. God did it all independently, uncoerced, out of grace and sheer kindness. It would have been ridiculous for the Israelites to pat themselves on the back and take credit for bringing themselves here to Mount Sinai.

In the same way, if you are believers in Jesus, if you are one of God’s people, it is not because you determined this for yourself or because you made all the right choices. That would horribly rob God of His glory and steal the credit from Him for saving you. You are here because God brought you. He intervened in your life

and used your parents to carry you here as an infant to the waters of Holy Baptism. Or if you were baptized as an adult it is because God intervened in your life by using someone to bring His Gospel to you. It was because the Holy Spirit convinced you by His Word. If you remain a believer to this day it is because He has governed your life in such a way to bring you back to Himself and the Holy Spirit continues to sustain you through Word and Sacrament. It is a gift of His grace. It is out of independent, uncoerced love that God determined to make you His treasured possession even as He did for the Israelites.

But God has made you His treasured possession for a purpose. And that purpose is to be a kingdom of priests for the Lord. Listen again to what God said to the Israelites on Exodus 19: *Now, if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.*

This should have instantly sounded strange to the Israelites. You see, God set things up in such a way that out of the twelve tribes of Israel, only men from the tribe of Levi were permitted to be priests in God's

temple. They served as the go-betweens, the mediators between God and His people. They would bring the people's sacrifices and prayers to the Lord, but they were also the teachers and proclaimers of God's Word to the people. God was setting up this contract, this agreement with the Israelites. If you follow me with your whole heart and follow all my laws and decrees, then what the priests of Levi do for you as a people, you as a nation will do for the whole world. All of you together will represent me and bring news of my salvation to the rest of the world. In this way you will be a kingdom of priests. The whole world will get to know about the true God and the promise of a Savior from the nation of Israel.

There was one problem though. This contract did not last long. Not because God didn't hold up His end of the bargain. The Israelites didn't follow God with their whole heart, not even for a little while. No sooner had Moses gone up Mount Sinai to get the Ten Commandments than the Israelites were worshiping a golden calf.

That's how fickle our hearts are too, aren't they? No sooner do we witness Christ's miraculous presence in the Lord's Supper than our hearts go right back to base

impulses of lust, or greed, or resentment, or fear or self-righteousness. Even after God pledges Himself to us with grace and love our sinful hearts continue being sinful.

If God wants us to be His holy nation, He is going to have to provide us a forgiveness that is broader and higher and deeper and all-encompassing and more powerful and more infinite that every fiber of our body and our soul and our entire being. It's going to have to be a forgiveness that continues to pour out and gush and cover and wash and erase and cleanse and flood and renew. He's going to have to provide us a forgiveness that is not dependent on our ability to remain faithful, not even for an instant. Such divine forgiveness would only be possible at an infinite, all-encompassing price. Such a price was paid by the greatest Priest of all, Jesus Christ. He offered Himself to death on the cross as the one sacrifice to God on behalf of the people He represented -us, you and me. You and I are forgiven, top to bottom, inside and out, in every way.

By virtue of Christ's atoning sacrifice you are God's treasured possession and you are a kingdom of priests for the Lord -not by virtue of a failing contract like with Old Testament Israel, but by virtue of God's grace. But

to make a similar comparison... Christ only calls some into the public ministry of the Gospel to be pastors or teachers or Sunday School teachers, or whatever. But what the pastor or teacher does for you the people of God, you, all of you together do for the whole world. Through you the world finds out and learns about salvation in Jesus Christ. Through you the world gets a taste of Christ's love and sees His light in your good deeds and gives glory to the Father. You, dear priests, perhaps without consciously thinking of it were performing your duty today as you sang and urged us all to taste and see that the Lord is good. You openly declare who the true God is and the deeds He performs as you recite together the creed.

Independence Day is in two days. Often we find ourselves wishing we could do more for the good of our nation. Most certainly we can pray. We will be doing that very thing shortly. But the most good you can possibly do for your nation is to keep fulfilling the role God has already given you and made you to be: a kingdom priest. First, keep coming to hear the Word of God yourself. Encourage each other in the truth. Give God the first and best part of your paycheck in your church offerings. Look for opportunities to help and assist with time and talents. Invite friends and people

you know to hear the message. Encourage a young person to study for the ministry. Live in such a way that people notice you're different. Don't be afraid to talk to people. The one thing satan wants more than anything is for you to be afraid to talk to people -maybe someone in crisis, maybe someone who's merely questioning.

In this way God's plan is to reach out to the world. It is not a meagre plan. For His Word and His Spirit are powerful and He has created for Himself a kingdom of priests.