



December 27, 2009
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From Genesis to Jesus: the Calling of God's People Exodus 19:1-8 & 1 Peter 2:9-12

Since the beginning of the Advent season we've been on a journey through the Old Testament - From Genesis to Jesus - learning about the epic story of God redeeming His world. It's a story that doesn't begin with Jesus in the New Testament, but rather begins with the first words of Creation. And did you know that the Creator knew the story before it was revealed? 1 Peter 1:20 says that Christ "*was chosen before the creation of the world.*" God knew that humanity would turn its back, God knew that the world would need saving from humanity's sinfulness, and God knew that it would require the sending of the Son to be the atoning sacrifice. Nevertheless, God chose to begin living out the story. Praise God! That's why the Christmas story is such good news, because it is God the Son come to earth amidst the grit and the grime to reveal to us the glory of God. But there is a very important part of the story that we haven't really discovered yet in our journey - that's what I want to talk about this morning.

Last Sunday we remembered the Passover - when families of slaves were huddled up in their houses hearing the horrible cries of death throughout the city - it was a crucial moment in God's epic story, but the action doesn't stop there. While it was still dark those families left Egypt not really knowing what was ahead of them but as they left they were becoming the people of God. And in the days that followed they saw this God, Yahweh, the all-powerful Creator, who they thought had all but forgotten them, continue to reveal Himself. When they were pinned in on one side by the Red Sea and on the other by the Egyptian Army, Yahweh opened the Red Sea and allowed them to pass through it unharmed and washed the pursuing army away. When they thought they would die of thirst and starvation in the wilderness, Yahweh provided water, manna, and quail. When they thought the Amalekites would surely kill them, Yahweh gave them victory. Yahweh was always faithful to them, even when the Israelites responded like immature whiners.

But in Exodus 19, our text for today, something remarkable happens - a new twist in God's epic story - something that will change this young nation to the core - even something that is changing our church right now. I've realized in a whole new way just how important this text is to our understanding of the story. If we don't understand its significance, we can't really understand why God called Abram in the first place. And, we'll never understand why we're gathered here today.

Please turn back to Exodus 19 as we ask the Holy Spirit to bring God's truth to light (Prayer for Illumination).

It had been three months since the Israelites were delivered from Egypt - three months of wandering - going wherever God led them. And now they camped at the bottom of an unimpressive mundane mountain called Sinai, but what God did there was of the utmost importance.

The Israelites hear the newest iteration of the blessing that God gave to Abram some 500 years earlier. And just like the blessing to Abram it **emphasizes the priority of God's gracious action**. When God blessed Abram He promised to do something that only God could do. (In Genesis 12) God said, "*I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.*" Who was the one doing the blessing? God was. Is this something Abram could have done on his own? No. The call, blessing and promise to Abraham were all because of God's gracious initiative. And the same is true here in Exodus 19. God is going to do something they cannot do: make them a people for his purposes in the world. ³ *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: ⁴ 'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.'*"

God, first, wants the Israelites to remember. You do that as parents don't you - try to remind your kids what you've done for them - give them a little dose of reality? One of my favorite lines from Bill Cosby about parenting is: "Remember, I brought you into this world, and I can take you out." God wants them to remember what He had done, what He had initiated, how He had delivered them. This is God's story.

Now, with the appropriate understanding of reality, the Israelites are being called to be God's people in God's story. Listen to what God says. ⁵ *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,* ⁶ *you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites."* I believe these are a few of the most important verses in the Old Testament. This is the first time that God is calling a people. He started with Abraham, then Isaac, then Jacob and his sons. Then after 400 years of slavery he calls Moses to come and participate in delivering the descendants of Abraham to make them into a nation.

This calling has a condition though – to obey God and keep the covenant. Do you see the words “*obey me fully?*” The original Hebrew says it a bit differently; it says “*listen to my voice*”. In other words, be in right relationship to me; don't just obey the boundaries I will set for you, but listen to me and know my voice. If you do that then you will enjoy the incredible privilege of my call on you as a people. They were already saved – already delivered from Egypt but now God says **if you want to be God's people you have to live my way rather than just any ol' way.**

Living God's way in God's world is the best way to live; it comes with great privilege and purpose. God says that out of the whole earth they will be God's *treasured possession*. Sometimes we wrongly think that God in the Old Testament was only present with the Israelites and only at work in them, but God says, “*the whole earth is mine*” – not just Israel, not just Abraham's descendants. So, amongst all of God's possessions, Israel will be treasured – they will belong to God. They have special relationship with God – the privilege of fellowship and covenant with God. But that special relationship isn't simply for their own good. They are chosen especially by God for God – to do with what He pleases or to be used for what He purposes. They are a people that God can call on to do whatever He wants.

So what is it that He wants to do with them – what is His purpose in creating them as His people? God says, “*you will be for me a kingdom of priests*”. You should underline the words “*for me*” in your bible. This is so important. The word priest means one who is a servant for God and one who is mediator for God. The Latin word for priest is *pontifex* which means bridge-builder. We get that because we understand the role of priest in today's Roman Catholic Church who helps to bridge the gap between God and the people. But if Israel is to be a whole kingdom of priests, and a kingdom of priests who are for God, then toward whom are they building bridges for God? Yes, the rest of the world. If they're all priests, they don't necessarily need to be priests for each other. No, the reason that God saves them and the reason that God calls them isn't just for their own benefit; it's to be a kingdom of priests for God to the world – which God loves.

Being a “*holy nation*” has the same implications. To be holy means to be set apart; they are a nation that is set apart. But set apart for what? Set apart for God's special purpose for them. Remember this is God's story; it isn't Abraham's story or Israel's story. But Israel is called as a people – not just a bunch of individual families – to do God's will in the world. They are not called to simply enjoy God's favor while the rest of the world perishes. The call of God's people is show the world who the Creator is and how to live the Creator's way in His world. The Creator is Yahweh, not the sun or the moon or anything else the people of the world might have worshipped. And the Creator knows every person in the world, he loves them, he longs for them, he wants to be gracious to them, and save them just as he has Israel – even though they don't know it and don't care. God wants them to know him and love him back. So, how does Israel help the world know the Creator? They do that living in covenant obedience to God – not only so that God won't smite them or send them back to Egypt, but, as God's people, to be a kingdom of priests to the world for God.

Hundreds of years before, God told Abraham that he would be blessed, and because of his blessing “*all peoples on earth will be blessed through you*” (Gen 12:3). Remember that? Well now we see how God plans to do that. He's going to take Abraham's descendants and make them into a nation by delivering them from slavery and call that nation, Israel, into special service for Him to help accomplish the mission that God has for the world – the mission that began to be revealed while God walked in the garden calling for Adam and Eve while they ashamedly hid behind the trees. **The mission is to deliver all of creation from humanity's sinfulness.**

Did you know that this mission is still in full force? Did you know that this epic story is still unfolding? The troops have not been withdrawn. The final chapter has not yet been lived out. But the story has taken a dramatic turn - it turned 2000 years ago when a descendant of Abraham was born in Bethlehem – a boy whose name, Jesus, meant the Lord saves. Jesus' perfect life fulfilled the covenant that Israel failed miserably to keep. And His perfect life perfectly revealed to the world who the Creator is and what it means to live the Creator's way in the Creator's world. Jesus' death on the cross was

the perfect sacrifice for humanity's perfect ability to screw things up. And in His resurrection, ascension and sending of the Holy Spirit there is life for those who believe and receive God's grace.

And now the people of God are working in a new way, empowered by the Holy Spirit to be God's mission agent in the world. But who are the people of God? Listen to what Peter writes in his first letter (turn to 1 Peter 2:9-12). *"⁹But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. ¹⁰Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. ¹¹Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. ¹²Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us."*

The Church, this ragtag group of Jews and Gentiles, slaves and masters, women and men – who once would have been separated by race, economics and gender now are called the people of God. Beloved, we the Church are called not simply to be a tribe that celebrates its deliverance as if it were all about us. We, the people of God are called, by God's lavish grace, to be a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God for God's glory not our own. Now we are called through Christ to be God's mission agents in the world – to show the world who the Creator is and how to live the Creator's way in the Creator's world. We, the people of God, are called to participate in the God's epic story of redemption that one day will be completed when Christ comes again in glory.

That's why things are changing around here. That's why Mark has been saying over and over again that we are a church without walls – that we are a church that is turning outward – a church that is about giving ourselves away. Leaders define reality – Mark is defining a new reality among us as we more fully live into being the church Christ calls us to be. It's because of what the Holy Spirit is teaching us in these passages that we must continue to make this shift. We are, through Jesus, descendants of Abraham and Sarah, recipients of God's promises to bless us and to bless the whole world through us, we are God's people for God's world. How good is that? We have more than a heavenly destiny; we have a heritage that stretches back 4,000 years through Jesus and Abraham and all the way back before the universe was created. And, we are part of something big—really big: what God is doing to save the world he loves.

Last week Mark asked us if we were willing to mark our own doorframes so that we would be saved. This week I'm asking, **are you willing to be God's people? Are you willing to live His way** – not just so you can be saved and go to heaven, but so that you can help others be saved – so that you can participate in the epic story that God is telling in the world? May it be so among us.

Let us pray – (A Prayer for the People of God)

Sermon Discussion Questions

1. Read Exodus 19:1-8 and 1 Peter 2:9-12.
2. Why do you think Peter so blatantly uses the language of Exodus 19 in his letter?
3. What does it mean to be a kingdom of priests or a royal priesthood? What are the implications for Chapel Hill? What are the implications for you, as part of Chapel Hill?
4. Why do think it was so important for God to create a nation? Why didn't he just call a family?
5. How does a proper understanding of these passages impact our view of church and what church is all about?
6. How are you participating in God's story of salvation?