

Building with Purpose: A People of Faith, Vision, and Courage

3rd Sunday in Lent – March 14, 2004

Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passage (NRSV)

Exodus 19:1-6

On the third new moon after the Israelites had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that very day, they came into the wilderness of Sinai. ²They had journeyed from Rephidim, entered the wilderness of Sinai, and camped in the wilderness; Israel camped there in front of the mountain. ³Then Moses went up to God; the LORD called to him from the mountain, saying, “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: ⁴You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. ⁵Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, ⁶but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites.”

1 Peter 2:9-10

⁹But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

¹⁰Once you were not a people,
but now you are God’s people;
once you had not received mercy,
but now you have received mercy.

This week, we continue the series: Building the Kingdom. Last week, we saw that God chooses and shapes a people through whom his work would be done. Today, we consider what it truly means to be God’s people and how to find our purpose in this.

Thoughts of “purpose” are on the minds of many Christians these days. “What am I here for?” “Where ought I to be headed?” Our scripture passages today are about our true purpose in life . . . a purpose, a vocation, that is found not by turning inward, but by turning toward God.

Worldly power and holy purpose

In last week’s passage from Genesis, God chose Abraham to be the father of God’s people, the ones through whom God’s creation would be restored. In today’s passage from Exodus, God’s people have fled slavery in Egypt and, only a few months later, arrived at a mountain in the great Sinai wilderness. There, God gives them an extraordinary vocation. They are to be a *kingdom* and a *nation* (political) that is *priestly* and *holy* (sacred). In them, worldly power and holy purpose are to converge.¹ Such a purpose will require people unlike any that had ever lived.

The Book of Exodus

The Book of Exodus begins the story of Moses, who is called by God to lead God’s people out of slavery in Egypt and into Canaan, the land promised hundreds of years before to Abraham.

Moses is raised in the house of the Pharaoh, but flees after killing an Egyptian who has beaten a Hebrew slave. In the Sinai wilderness, Moses marries and builds a life. One day, he sees a bush that burns without being consumed. When he goes to inspect the bush, he is confronted by God, who reveals his name, YHWH, and gives Moses his vocation. Moses is to confront Pharaoh and lead God’s people out of slavery in Egypt. It is only after a plague kills the first-born of Egypt that the Pharaoh allows the Hebrews to leave. Moses leads them across the Red Sea and into the Sinai peninsula where they head for Mt. Sinai, the mountain where Moses first met God.

The second part of the book lays out the covenant between God and his people. God tells them what it means to live in right relationship with him and with each other. God also spells out the consequences of not living in this way, the way of loving God and neighbor. God gives them instructions for building a large moveable tent, a tabernacle, within which will be kept the Ark of the Covenant containing stone tablets inscribed by God with his law. This tabernacle would be God’s dwelling place with his people.

¹from Walter Brueggemann’s commentary on Exodus in the *New Interpreter’s Bible*, Abingdon, 1994.

It is vitally important to grasp that the vocation of ancient Israel is our vocation as well. They were to be “purpose-driven.” We are to be “purpose-driven.” Why? Because we are God’s people no less than the ancient Hebrews were God’s people. What God asked of them, he asks of us. We may live in this world, but we do so with a holy purpose – to build God’s kingdom, to make disciples of all nations. More than a millennium after Moses, the apostle Peter would understand this well.

Proclaiming mighty acts

In our passage from 1 Peter, he writes to Christians who feel like aliens and exiles in their own lands. Echoing God’s word brought by Moses, Peter encourages them by reminding them of their place among God’s people. Like the ancient Israelites, these Christians *are* a “royal priesthood” and

1 Peter

Writing from Rome in the early 60’s AD, Peter encourages the Christians in Asia Minor who “have had to suffer various trials” (1:6) and are living as “aliens and exiles” (2:11). He reminds them that they are “a chosen race, a holy nation, God’s own people” called to “proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (2:9).

These Christians are not exiles in a literal sense; rather, as Achtemeier et al write, they are “people whose commitment to the lordship of Jesus Christ have led to transformed attitudes and behaviors that place them on the margins of respectable society. They have become victims of social ostracism, their allegiance to Christ having won for them slander, animosity, reproach, scorn, vilification, and contempt.”¹

As difficult as such ostracism might be in our world, it was much more powerful in the NT world, a social world driven by status and community. In the face of these trials, Peter urges Christians to “rejoice insofar as you are sharing in Christ’s sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed”(4:13). . . . Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called – that you might inherit a blessing” (3:9). Surely, Peter is calling them to be people of faith, vision, and courage.

1. Achtemeier, P.J., Green, J.B., & Thompson, M.M. 2001. *Introducing the New Testament: Its Literature and Theology*.

a “holy nation” upon whom worldly power and holy purpose converge.² They have been called out of the darkness for a reason, a purpose. Peter states this purpose simply. Christians are to “proclaim God’s mighty acts.”

What kind of people does it take to proclaim God’s mighty acts . . . to handle this convergence of worldly power and holy purpose . . . to build God’s kingdom?

Only a few verses before today’s passage, Peter tells the Christians that they are to rid themselves of all malice and pretense, envy and hurtful talk. Like babies at their mothers’ breasts, these Christians are to drink the milk of God’s kindness so that they might grow to maturity and wholeness, having received a foretaste of God’s full mercy. Peter urges them to be like “living stones” built into a spiritual house, a house of strength that rests upon Jesus Christ, the cornerstone and foundation of this house. Peter writes, “Therefore, prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you . . . love one another deeply from the heart” (1:13,22). Later in the letter Peter writes, “Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received . . . whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies . . .” (4:10-11).

In much of his letter, Peter paints a picture of a people, God’s people, who can do the work of the kingdom, who can “proclaim God’s mighty acts.” Christians are to be unified and disciplined. We are to love one another. We are to serve one another. Peter reminds us that we are to be agreeable, sympathetic, and humble. We are not to retaliate when wronged.

As we make a new beginning for St. Andrew, yet again pushing forward with renewed purpose, we can hear Peter calling us to be a people of deep faith pursuing a holy purpose with love, joy, discipline, humility, and courage so that we may extend to others the priceless gift God has extended to us.

²There is an important difference between the passages from Exodus and 1 Peter. Moses brings a promise from God that is conditional: “If you obey my voice and keep you my covenant, *you shall be* . . .” In contrast, Peter simply states a fact: “You *are* a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation . . .” The covenant-keeping has been done for us by Jesus!

Daily Bible Readings

(passages from 1 Peter)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Day 1 1 Peter 1:13-25 Being holy	Day 2 1 Peter 2:1-10 Being God's people
Day 3 1 Peter 3:8-22; 4:12-19 Faithful suffering	Day 4 1 Peter 4:1-11 Good stewards of God's grace
Day 5 1 Peter 5:1-11 Caring for the household of God	Weekly Prayer Concerns

Sermon Notes

Spring Bible Academy begins the week of March 28th

Bible Academy classes begin the week of March 28. We've got a great array of classes this spring: *All I Ever Wanted to Know about 'The Da Vinci Code' that my Sunday School Teacher Never Taught Me*, *1 Corinthians: You think you've got problems!*, *Methodism is NOT for Dummies*, *Introducing the New Testament*, *Messy Spirituality*, *Galatians & Ephesians*, and *The Workbook of Living Prayer*.

You can pick up information about the classes and a registration form at the information counter in the Narthex.

Register on-line now -- go to www.standrewumc.org

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Fueled by Rick Warren's book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, questions about "purpose" are swirling around many churches. "Worldly power and holy purpose" . . . this phrase is from the work of Martin Buber, an important 20th-century theologian. You might reflect upon and discuss your own understandings of our "holy purpose" as disciples of Jesus Christ. How might this purpose shape our lives as individuals and as a community of God's people? What ought to be the purpose of St. Andrew? How are we to use our "worldly power" to shape our "holy purpose." What are the dangers in our exercise of worldly power? How can we guard against these dangers?
2. In his commentary on 1 Peter, David Bartlett writes, "First Peter 2:1-10 reminds us that difference between Christians and non-Christians is not that we see different things but that we see the same things differently." What do you think he means? What sort of persons can see things differently? Bartlett writes that the difference between the two ways is faith. How does our faith in Jesus Christ shape our way of seeing? How does our faith help to shape us into the people of love, joy, discipline, humility, and courage that Peter urges Christians to be?