14 June 2020 St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Pentecost 2 Vienna, VA

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"A Kingdom of Priests that Pray"
Text: Exodus 19:2-8; Romans 5:6-15; Matthew 9:35-10:20

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

You shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

Those are significant and important words. God's Word to His people, constituting them as a kingdom, a nation, and what kind of kingdom or nation they would be.

This is significant and important because these people had never been a nation before. They didn't know how to be a nation. When God chose Abraham, it was just him and his wife, Sarah. And it didn't look like a nation was coming from them since they were childless - Sarah was barren. They wound up having two sons, Ishmael from a maidservant and Isaac, who was a miracle child, but it wasn't an auspicious start. They were small and homeless, wandering and living in lands not their own.

Their son Isaac didn't fare much better. He also had two sons, twins, Jacob and Esau who were rivals almost their entire lives, Jacob having to flee for his life and live with his mother's family for a number of years. But while there Jacob had twelve sons, and when they began to marry and have children, the family grew in number to 70. But still not a nation. Still they had no land of their own.

And then Jacob and his family went down to Egypt to escape a severe famine. They probably thought it would be for only a few years. But a few years turned into 400 or so, and their numbers grew. Finally, God brought them out of Egypt in the Exodus, and a nation was born. But they had never been a nation before. They didn't know how, and they didn't know what they would be.

So the Lord, who made them a nation, and was leading them to a land He would give them, told them: ***You shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation***.

First of all, they were to be ***a kingdom of priests***. A priest is a mediator between people and God. A priest brings God to people and people to God. **Bringing God to people** means speaking His Word and telling of Him. What kind of God He is. Israel was to be a light for the nations, shining the light of God's truth and love on all people. But a priest also **brings people to God**, which involves sacrifices and prayer. Aaron and his sons

were chosen to offer the *atoning* sacrifices in the Tabernacle and later in the Temple, but the people, too, would be priests, would sacrifice - themselves, for their neighbor, in love. *Living sacrifices*, as the apostle Paul would call it later (Romans 12:1). And they would pray. They would bring the needs of others to God, whether or not, as Jesus would explain later, they were friend or foe. This is who they were and what they were to be and do: ***a kingdom of priests***.

And ***a holy nation***. A nation not like the other nations, but set apart for God. They were *His* nation - not because they were better or God was playing favorites - but because from them would come the Son of God in human flesh. This, too, was their purpose and calling. A very high calling which, as you know, they would not live up to. In fact, they would fail quite miserably.

Yet God would still keep His promise to bring a Saviour into the world through them, and so He preserved them - though their land would be taken away, though they were reduced down to only a remnant; a shadow of what they used to be because of their sin and unfaithfulness. When they decided to be priests of *other* gods, and a nation far from holy.

But God was faithful and kept His promise and a Saviour was born into our world. **His Son**. And a nation which started with but one man, Abraham, started again with the one man, Jesus, who is the King, the Priest, and the Holy One. Doing all those things Israel was supposed to do: offering *Himself* as the atoning sacrifice for our sin, *praying* for us, speaking God to us, and shining the light of God's love and truth on us.

And so it is not insignificant when Peter then uses the words we heard today from Exodus *again*, and *again* calls God's people *a royal priesthood, a holy nation* (1 Peter 2:9-10), and makes it sound an awful lot like Exodus redux, *deja vu*, all over again. He said to those early Christians:

> *But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*

That's who you are, too. A nation not with earthly territory or land, but with a heavenly home. A nation now scattered throughout all the nations of the world, to be God's royal priests, and holy. For you have gone through your own exodus - not from slavery in Egypt, but from slavery to sin. But through the death and resurrection of Jesus and your baptism into Him, you've been set free to live as His people. And not because you're better or God is playing favorites, because, as we heard Paul say today, it was ***while we were still sinners*** that ***Christ died for us***. It was while ***we were His enemies***, that we were ***reconciled*** and ***saved***. It is all gift. Pure gift.

So just as God chose Israel to be His ***kingdom of priests and a holy nation*** to shine the light of His love and truth to all the world, so now His Church. And just as God chose Aaron and his sons to serve in a special way, and yet all the people were His priests and holy, so too in the Church today pastors are called to special service, but you and all God's people are His priests and holy. Priests, to offer yourselves as living sacrifices in love for your neighbor, to speak and live God's Word and truth, and to pray - for both friend and foe alike. Or, to use the words Jesus used today in sending out His disciples: for both ***sheep*** and ***wolves*** alike.

For in the Holy Gospel, we heard that Jesus had compassion because He saw the crowds of people ***harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd***. That is, the wolves were having their way. He had come to be their Shepherd, and a good one at that. But not just for those who were His sheep then, but for those who would be His sheep in the future - *even if they were wolves now.* He came for, prayed for, and died for them. Giving Himself <u>for</u> all people to give Himself <u>to</u> all people. All gift. Pure gift.

And then, as we heard, He tells His disciples to pray. For that's what priests do - one of the things: they pray. ***Pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest***. You do that. We, as a congregation, pray for our seminarians and support our seminarians, one of whom, Brodi, was ordained yesterday. But I think it is significant and important what happens in the very next verse <u>after</u> Jesus tells His disciples to pray: **they become the answer to their own prayer!** Jesus tells them to pray for laborers and then He sends <u>*them*</u> as the laborers out into the harvest. At first, it is only ***to the lost sheep of the house of Israel***, but that's not because Jesus was racist! It just wasn't yet time to send them out into the world. He needed to go to the cross first. But once He did, <u>*then*</u> (as we heard last week), He sent them out into all the world. To speak and live and give this truth: that the Saviour had come with forgiveness and life for all.

Now, this has been a rather long introduction to get to <u>*this very point*</u> that struck me this week: that **just as the twelve disciples became the answer to their own prayer, so too maybe you**.

We are living in a world that <u>needs</u> a kingdom of priests and a holy nation desperately. People are living in fear of their own lives - from a virus they can't see, and from rioting they can. There are people being devoured by wolves, hungry only for their own power and purposes. There are people who are confused about the truth and if there even is truth. There are people harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. There are people abandoned and alone. All these, people for whom Jesus died. Every single one. Both those devouring and those being devoured. Sheep and wolves. Jesus died for them all that all might be His. He has gifts for all and loves all. But the light of His love and life and truth so often gets drowned out by other noise, darkened by the sin and death in the world, and obscured by the half-truths and untruths so often spouted as gospel truth.

Even sometimes by us when we live unholy lives.

So repent, O people of God. There is forgiveness for you. But also pray, O kingdom of priests! For others. For those in desperate need. And I know that you do. For peace, for harmony, for love, for life, for the truth, for the spread of the Gospel, for so many people and so many needs. We have a long prayer list that we pray from every week here and in Morning Prayer during the week, but the list is really endless. What a privilege we have to bring people and their needs to our Father in heaven.

But as you pray, know this, too: that as with the disciples, **maybe you too will be the answer to your own prayer**. That what you pray for, God will use you to accomplish. That's why the Church, as a holy nation, is scattered through all the nations of the world. To bless. To be living sacrifices of love for our neighbor. To speak and live His love. And the peace, harmony, love, and life you pray for for others, *perhaps He will use you* - in a way big or small, noticed or unnoticed - to bring.

And lest you think yourself not up for that task or unequipped or inadequate, I'm sure the twelve thought the same. And I *know* pastors - like the one standing before you - often think that too! And I'm sure that those whom God has used to bless and be a blessing to *you* thought the same as well. **But your Lord does not ask what He does not first give**. So as He gave the twelve what they needed and promised to provide, so He does for you. He has given you a pastor to care for you and give to you. And so the Word you need is here. The forgiveness you need is here. The life you need is here. The strength you need is here. You are baptized, you are absolved, you are fed with Jesus' very own Body and Blood. You are ***a royal priesthood, a holy nation.*** This is His *doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes* (Psalm 118:23). All gift. Pure gift. For you.

And *through* you for others! And the results, the success, is not up to you - that's the Spirit's work. As we heard, some would welcome the disciples and their Word and work, and some would not. It wasn't going to be all sunshine and rainbows for them, and it certainly isn't for us. We're going to have to ***be wise and serpents and innocent as doves***. And like the twelve, maybe it will all even come at the cost of our own life. **But the life Jesus gives cannot be taken away from you**. He has given you a new life for a new heavens and a new earth - which obviously isn't here yet! That's why the new life you now live seems so out of step with the world. It is! But the day is coming. The new day. With no more viruses, rioting, sin, death, or wolves. Only sheep, with their Shepherd. The good one. In His kingdom. Forever.

The readings that we hear on this first Sunday of the long, green Pentecost season often set the tone for the entire season. And these readings for today, coupled with what is happening in our world, I think do just that. And in a powerful way. For we really are living in a world that needs a kingdom of priests and a holy nation *desperately*. That desperately needs their Saviour and the hope He brings. So people of God, chosen by

Him and precious to Him, kingdom of priests and holy nation, filled with hope and knowing your future, be who you are in Christ. And pray, O people of God! Pray, O kingdom of priests! The Lord will provide. For you and through you as He lives in and through you. For so He has, and He won't stop now. And then, as Israel at the Red Sea in their exodus, and the disciples on that first Easter in their exodus . . . *be prepared to be amazed*.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.