

MOSES: The Promise of a Nation Among the Nations to Declare the Glory of God

Series Title: Promises to Keep

Theme: The Old Testament nation of Israel finds its fulfillment in the New Testament church. The church is a people formed through the death and resurrection of Jesus as sealed in communion.

Texts: Exodus 19:1-8; I Peter 2:9

During the month of January we are exploring the theme "Promises to Keep". The only hedge we have against an uncertain future is to keep our promises. As Lewis Smedes has said it powerfully, "We are most like God when we keep our promises."

Last Sunday, we began to explore the dominant biblical motif for the way that God has chosen to have a relationship with us. We noted that the imagery of covenant shapes and forms the nature of way God relates to us and we to Him. In covenant God binds himself to His people in love, likened to that of a mother's love for the fruit of her womb.

This morning we shift from God's covenant with Abraham to His covenant with Moses. God began to form a people with Abraham, with Moses they became a nation. The historian Paul Johnson provides this helpful summary, "If Abraham was the ancestor of the race, Moses was the essential creative force, the moulder of a people; under him and through him, they became a distinctive people, with a future as a nation."¹

I want to pick up the story of Moses after the exodus when the people have been led by God to gather around Mt. Sinai. It is near Sinai, the mountain where the Lord appears to reside, that He states why he has made a covenant through Moses. As we shall see, the images used to describe the kind of people God intends the nation of Israel to be will lead us right to the communion table this morning.

First, let's look at the setting for the covenant with Moses. We read in **Exodus 19:1-2**: "In the third month after the Israelites left Egypt—on the very day—they came to the Desert of Sanai. After they set out from Rephidim, they entered the Desert of Sanai, and Israel camped there in front of the mountain."

The people of Israel are led right back to the place where it all began. This is familiar territory to Moses. From the time of Abraham to the time of Moses, God seemed to have stayed off stage for over 500 years. At the invitation of the

¹ Paul Johnson, *The History of the Jews*, p. 27

Pharaoh, Abraham's descendants had migrated to Egypt. But an unfriendly Pharaoh, fearing the growth this people, turned them into slaves for 400 years.

The Lord decided it was time to set his chosen people free. Suddenly, unexpectedly the Lord revealed Himself in barren wilderness to a shepherd named Moses. A desert bush ignited in flames, yet strangely it would not be consumed. This got Moses attention. Moses has lived the second forty year period of his life in obscurity tending his father-in-laws flocks. The first forty years held out great earthly promise having been reared in the Pharaoh's household as heir apparent to the throne, until his patriotism got the better of him and he killed an Egyptian who had been attacking a fellow Hebrew. The wilderness was his refuge. Sinai was his territory.

The Lord spoke to him there on this hollowed ground from a burning bush. Moses was informed by the Lord that he had heard the cries of his people and it was his intent to liberate them from captivity in Egypt. You can almost peer into Moses' thought processes, "That's nice to hear, Lord, what has that got to do with me? Why are you letting me know about your compassion for your chosen ones?" "I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring the Israelites out of Egypt" (Exodus 3:10). There has never been a more reluctant liberator. Moses doesn't think this is a good idea at all. "I am no talker; I stammer and stutter." "Who am I that I should go?" (Exodus 3:11) What qualifications do I have to go the leader of the most powerful nation in the world and tell him that he should allow his cheap labor force to up and leave?

Just as Abraham needed assurance that God would fulfill his promise of an heir, so Moses wants to know who this stranger is that is calling him to take on this impossible task. "What is your name?" (Exodus 3:13) Who are you? What sort of God are you? Who should I say sent me? I need some credibility here.

The Lord gives an enigmatic response. The Lord's self identification is mysterious because all we have are the Hebrew consonants, transliterated YHWH. Hebrew was written without vowels. The name of God was considered so sacred, that it was never pronounced. Scholars have only been able to give a best guess of what the vowels must have been. The consensus is "Yahweh". It is a form of the verb "to be". Most translations have it, "I am who I am...Tell them I am has sent you." Meaning I am the only being who is self-existent, derived from nothing else. I am eternal. Another way to hear that is, "Moses, it is none of your business, for you can't control me by invoking my name as if I am one of your household gods. I am the Uncontrollable One." But I believe the best translation in the context of Moses needing assurance is this: "I am the one who will be there with you, the God who has made a commitment to you and intends to keep it."

And the Lord did keep his commitment. Let's go back to Exodus 19:3-4: "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 eagle's wings and brought you to myself.'" The images the Lord uses to describe his relationship with Israel to this point confirm His initiative of covenant love. God had a track record of protector and defender of the people by hatching their escape from Egypt. "You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt." The Lord is true to His name.

Then the Lord turns more tender in covenant love with the next phrase. "I carried you on eagle's wings and brought you to myself." Israel is likened to an eaglet learning to fly under the protection of the mother eagle, Yahweh. When an eaglet gets to the age and strength for their first flight, the mother eagle uses the sink or swim, or otherwise known as the free-fall method. The mother pushes the baby out of the nest. As the eaglet flaps his wings for the first time while hurtling to the ground, the mother swoops down and catches the free falling object on the pillow of her wings.

The God of the covenant is a defender of his people yet with the gentleness of a mother's love. It is in this context of relationship that the Lord issues his invitation to covenant: "Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant...(Ex. 19:5) you will receive the following blessings. A better translation would be "if you voluntarily enter into covenant with me, then you must obey me fully." "Here are the grounds for a special relationship, you are free to accept or reject it." But if you do accept, this is what is required. You can't earn my love, that is a given. But if you want to be mine, here are terms.

For the moment we will skip over the purpose of the covenant as stated in v. 5-6. Since the covenant God issues must be ratified with a response, we read in v. 7-8 that Moses gathers the elders as representatives of the people and lays out before them the terms of the covenant. v. 8 says, "The people responded together, 'We will do everything the Lord has said.' So Moses brought their answer back to the Lord.' This is the covenant formula, "I will be your God and you shall be my people." And the people reply, "We will do everything that the Lord has said."

The Covenant Identity (Exodus 19:5-6; I Peter 2:9)

What is the Lord's purpose in having a people for Himself? What was he attempting to accomplish in forming a nation? God's intent is summarized beautifully in Exodus 19:5-6: "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 a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation. These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites."

We note that these images of treasured possession, kingdom of priests and holy nation that were originally applied to the geographic nation of Israel find their fulfillment in the New Testament understanding of the church, which is a spiritual community that transcends any geographical boundary. The apostle Peter sees God's work with the nation of Israel now fulfilled in and superseded by in his New Covenant people, the church. Speaking of the church of Jesus Christ Peter writes, "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (I Peter 2:9)

Let's look at these wonderful images that describe the church which were originally applied to Israel.

1. "You are...a chosen people" (race)

Where do we first find this notion of a chosen people or literally race? This image initially referred to God's selection of the Hebrew people to be his favored people from all the people's on the face of the earth. Speaking to the Israelites, Moses says, "For you are a people holy to the Lord your God; the Lord has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession" (Deut. 7:6) If we were the Israelites listening to Moses that day, we might have responded, "Moses, why us? There were not many of us." Moses answers, "*The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples,. But it was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your forefathers....*" (Deut. 7:7,8a) It was as if Moses was anticipating Israel's sin of arrogance that turned their chosenness into pride. Why us? Because we are special and unique? Absolutely not. For a reason only known to God he has chosen to bestow his love on this little tribe. As one poet put, "*How odd of God to choose the Jews.*"

How odd of God to choose bestow his love and favor on the likes of you and me. That is why I like to refer to his church "why me" people. "Why me"? Why should I have the good fortune of being known by God? Because I am smarter, wiser, more insightful, than those who don't? No. For a reason known only to God Himself He has bestowed upon us the love of His Son. Pure grace.

2. "You are...a royal priesthood"

The nation of Israel was chosen to be a "kingdom of priests" (Ex. 19:6). What does that mean? The role of a priest is two fold. A priest is a go-between, an

intermediary. The priest represents God to the people, and the people to God. The nation of Israel on the world scene was to be intermediary. They were the vehicle to declare the fame of God to the nations. A nation among the nations.

Peter says that we are **"a royal priesthood"**. When we think of a priest most of us most likely think of Roman Catholic or Episcopal holy man. I can immediately tell when someone is from a Roman Catholic background, because they call me **"Father."** In the Reformed tradition of which we are a part we can be just as priest focused as those from the Roman Catholic setting. Oh, we say we believe in the **"priesthood of all believers"**, but we too have our professional holy men and women who are to represent us before God. Don't we give to the church, so that the pastors can take care of all things spiritual so that we can go on with my daily life? No, a thousand times. The church is not to be like a football game with 50,000 people in the stands in desperate needs of exercise, who watch 22 people on the field in desperate need of rest. We are priests to one another, Peter is saying. I am your priest, you are my priest. I bring God to you, and you bring God to me. To the extent that we pay people to be our priest we have destroyed the New Testament understanding of church.

3. "You are a...holy nation" "You will be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation..." (Ex. 19:6) Out of all the nations, the Lord chose a nation to reflect his holiness. The terms of the covenant of the nation of Israel are found in the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20. **"You shall have no other gods before me...you shall not murder, commit adultery, steal, lie, covet, etc."** As you live out of my holy character, says the Lord, you will be a people who live differently than any other people on this corrupt and sinful planet. You will be signpost, a light to the world.

When this is applied to the New Covenant people the church, this holy nation is now no longer a geographic entity. The church is a universal people who transcend borders. Better yet, the church is a nation without borders. We cross all man-made, artificial geographical boundaries. We are a part of God's kingdom called reflect his heart of love and his character of purity centered in the person of Jesus Christ. In 1986 my wife, Lily, my 10 year old daughter, Aimee and I had the privilege of being in Amsterdam for the Billy Graham Conference for Itinerant Evangelists. We had arrived at the Amsterdam airport and were standing around the baggage carousel awaiting the arrival of our luggage. Suddenly, the airport was transformed with the rhythmic sounds of black African pastors arriving for the conference. They had organized themselves side by side in two rows and were dancing and singing their way into the baggage area giving praise to Jesus. In that moment I had more in common with them because of our love for Jesus than I would have had with a secular American who spoke my lingua franca. We had a language of the heart that united us. You are a holy nation.

4. Finally, **“You are a...people belonging to God”**. The Lord said of Israel, **“You are my treasured possession”** (Ex. 19:5) This is the most amazing truth of all. Deuteronomy 32:9 says, **“The Lord’s own portion is His people.”** Did you know that God has an inheritance? What does a God who has everything give to himself? Our Lord bequeaths to Himself--us. We are the Lord’s inheritance.

Why did God form a nation through Moses and create the church? He has the same two-fold purpose for each: 1. The Lord forms a people whose lifestyle is to be the signpost to the nations that God is creating something new. These are the “you are” I Peter 2:9a...**chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God”**. We are “to be” so that we “can do”. 2. The second purpose has to do with our task: Resound the glory of God to the nations—**“that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light”** (I Peter 2:9b)

Following WWII when the communists took over Poland, Stalin built a village called Nowa Huta or “New Town.” This was to be the perfect communist city, the model community. They would construct a new town with a shiny factory, spacious apartments, plentiful parks, and broad streets as a token of what was to follow. This was the future of Poland breaking into the present reality. This is what Peter is telling us the church is God’s scheme is to be. We are to be the “new town.” The future breaking into the present.

We come finally, to the seal of this covenant. We have come to anticipate that the covenant would be sealed in blood. In Exodus 24 Moses together with with the elders of Israel puts before the people the terms of the covenant. An altar was erected upon 12 stone pillars representing all the tribes of Israel. A sacrifice was made and the blood collected in basins. The blood represents life. The blood was thrown on the altar as a symbol of God’s part in the covenant. Then after the reading of the Book of the Covenant, the people responded, **“We will do everything the Lord has said; we will obey.”** Moses then sprinkled the people with blood and said, **“This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words”** (Exodus 24:8).

The co-mingling of the blood representing God and the people meant that their life was inseparably intertwined. The seal of the New Covenant is found in the meal of God’s people. When Jesus held up the bread and cup saying, “This is my body broken for you...this cup is the new covenant in my blood shed for you”, his sacrifice opened the way to God. But this meal also means we are inseparably tied to each other as well. We are a part of the church, the people of God and are called to reflect a new way of life together. It is at the table where Jesus presides that we find the ongoing grace and strength to be what this new community of a restored humanity. Jesus is creating through us a new kind of people.

As we come to the table of our Lord, this morning, to take the meal of sacrifice sealed in Christ's blood, think about how we are roped together in this common union.

Humorously Gerhard Frost put it like this in a poem entitled *Hezekiah 6:14*,

“The reason mountain climbers
are tied together
is to keep the sane ones from going home.

With a mountain of mercy behind me
And a mountain of mission ahead,
I need you, my sister, my brother,
I need to be tied to you,
And you need me to.”