

Sermon 6-14-26
Pastor Ray Lorthioir
Trinity Lutheran Church
W. Hempstead, NY

Based on the First Lesson for The 3rd Sunday after Pentecost, Exodus 19:2-8

Holy Nation, Royal Priesthood

In his book, “The Unseen Realm” the late Dr. Michael Heiser laid out a picture of world history from Scripture. One part of this picture answered a question that has always puzzled me. According to Scripture, eight human beings emerged from Noah’s Ark to repopulate the world. All of them were saved from the flood by Yahweh. All of them knew Yahweh. Why, then, did their descendants in the following generations abandon Yahweh for gods of their own creating? Why did they subsequently worship statues — the works of their own hands — as gods?

To answer the question, Heiser starts with the all-important but easily missed command Yahweh gave to the eight people who stepped off the ark. Genesis 9:1, “And God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.’” Have kids and descendants, lots of them. You and your descendants are to spread out and inhabit all the earth — all of it. That was the command.

Heiser then takes us to the Tower of Babel narrative in Genesis 11:1-9. So we read in Genesis 11:1-4, “1 Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. 2 And as people migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. 3 And they said to one another, ‘Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.’ And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. 4 Then they said, ‘Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth.’”

In the narrative about the tower, it’s easy to miss what the problem was. Yahweh had commanded Noah and his descendants to inhabit all the earth. But multiple generations removed from the flood, they refused to obey. Instead, they built a great city with its great tower exactly so that they wouldn’t have to disperse over the face of the whole earth.

There was an enormous consequence to this disobedience that affects humanity to this day. We read in Genesis 11:5-9, “5 And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built. 6 And the LORD said, ‘Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. 7 Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another’s speech.’ 8 So the LORD dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. 9 Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth. And from there the LORD dispersed them over the face of all the earth.”

And so, from that one location groups of people speaking languages that only they could understand dispersed to the far reaches of the earth. Some of them learned how to thrive in the polar latitudes; some in the equatorial latitudes; many in the latitudes in between. Some navigated the oceans long before Columbus and populated islands and even distant continents.

However, there's another important piece to this puzzle that Heiser fits in place. It's found in Deuteronomy 32, a part of Scripture where Yahweh speaks to Israel through a song He gave to Moses. Deuteronomy 32:7-9, "7Remember the days of old; consider the years of many generations; ask your father, and he will show you, your elders, and they will tell you. 8 When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance, when he divided mankind, he fixed the borders of the peoples according to the number of the sons of God. 9 But the LORD'S portion is his people, Jacob his allotted heritage."

When did Yahweh divide mankind? When did Yahweh create nations out of humanity? He did so at the Tower of Babel. Now, there are several massively important statements in these verses that are easy to miss. First, nations having land borders is not a human idea. It's Yahweh's idea. We've accepted that idea, and so wars are fought over borders to this day. But borders are a reality — Yahweh's reality. Therefore, the present ideologues who want a world without borders are in full rebellion against Yahweh, whether they know it or not. And I think they do know it.

Second — and this is most important — when Yahweh gave the nations their borders, He put them under the authority of the "sons of God." Your bible may say "sons of Israel," but this is now recognized as a later corruption that entered the original Hebrew text. The oldest Hebrew text of Deuteronomy that we have comes from the Dead Sea Scrolls, copied sometime between 100 and 200B.C. That text says "sons of God." So does the Greek translation of the Old Testament made about 300B.C.

So, just who are these "sons of God?" First, the name "sons of God" tells us that these are creatures — sons — that Yahweh created. Second, they predate the creation of the heavens and the earth. We read in Job 38:6-7, "'On what were its bases sunk, [meaning the earth] or who laid its cornerstone, 7 when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?'" This means that the sons of God were already present when the earth was created. We also know from the first and second chapters of Job that the sons of God sometimes gather before Yahweh as the congregation around His heavenly throne.

We also know from Genesis 6:1-4 that a group of these sons of God visited the earth before the flood of Noah. They somehow had children by human women — the Nephilim, the giants. We learn from the apocryphal book of 1 Enoch that the sons of God who did this were punished for their rebellion by Yahweh. Their punishment is confirmed in the New Testament books of 1 and 2 Peter and Jude.

However, we're not told what kind of creatures these sons of God are. Do they have bodies made out of matter like ours? We don't know. But somehow they were able to impregnate human women. Are they spiritual creatures? For sure. And apparently they are transdimensional. While having tremendous influence among us, nevertheless, they hide from us in the unseen realms. And one thing is for sure. Deuteronomy 32 tells us that they definitely have tremendous influence on human nations. This is also corroborated in Psalm 82 where Yahweh judged the sons of God for not ruling His earth with justice.

So Scripture tells us that Yahweh divided humanity at Babel because of the deliberate human refusal to obey His command to fill the earth. Yahweh punished us by dividing our language and culture and then dispersing us. Yahweh also punished us by divorcing the new nations He had created and putting them under the authority of the sons of God. Yahweh would no longer directly be the leader of the nations. The sons of God would be their leaders. The task of the sons of God would be to rule the nations under Yahweh's authority and lead the nations to worship their Creator God. In this they rebelled and taught the

nations to worship them as gods. So the nations fell into bondage to the sons of God. This is the answer to how the paganism of our Gentile ancestors arose. And if we're not careful that paganism will reassert itself.

But let's go back to Deuteronomy 32:8-9, "8 When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance, when he divided mankind, he fixed the borders of the peoples according to the number of the sons of God. 9 But the LORD'S portion is his people, Jacob his allotted heritage." When Yahweh divorced the nations, He kept a portion for Himself. Who is that portion? Jacob, better known by the name Yahweh gave him and his descendants, Israel.

Jacob was the grandson of Abraham, the man Yahweh called out of the nations. Yahweh made many absolutely important promises to Abraham. And not only to him and his descendants, but to all of humanity through Abraham. Yahweh repeated those promises to Abraham's son, Isaac, and then to one of Isaac's two sons, Jacob. Yahweh's promises then were inherited by all twelve of Jacob's sons, whose descendants fathered the twelve tribes of Israel.

One of Jacob's sons, Joseph, was chosen by Yahweh to rule Egypt under the authority of Egypt's Pharaoh. Joseph was also chosen to preserve Jacob and his family from a great seven year famine. And so Jacob — renamed Israel by God — and his family moved to Egypt. Over the centuries they became a great nation within Egypt, and were eventually enslaved by the Egyptians. In time, Yahweh chose an Israelite named Moses to lead His people out of Egypt and into the land promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Throughout the centuries since Babel, all the nations of the world had been led astray by the sons of God. The sons of God had set themselves up as the gods of the nations, and this was true of Egypt. In Egypt, it seems that even the Israelites were led astray by these false gods. However, they were Yahweh's portion and were enslaved. Therefore, Yahweh claimed His own through His servant, Moses.

Moses raised no army. He didn't have to. Yahweh Himself made war on the false gods of Egypt. Israel merely stood by as Yahweh defeated the gods of Egypt with the Ten Plagues. None of the Egyptian gods could rescue that land from Yahweh's hand. Then after ruining the land of Egypt and humbling its Pharaoh, Yahweh led powerless slaves out of Egypt by His own great power. Then, Yahweh not only defeated but destroyed the Egyptian army at the Red Sea, as He safely conveyed former slaves out of Egypt to His holy mountain in what is today northwestern Saudi Arabia.

In today's first lesson we read of Israel finally arriving at the holy mountain of God, Mount Sinai. So we read in Exodus 19:3-6, "3 . . . Moses went up to God. The LORD called to him out of the mountain, saying, 'Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel: 4 "You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. 5 Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; 6 and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.'" These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel."

On eagles wings. This is a poetic way of Yahweh saying, "I brought you here by my own great power. You didn't lift a finger to get here. I brought you here to myself." To myself. These are words of loving intimacy — the words of a Father bringing His children safely home. You no longer are slaves to foreign gods. You are my treasured possession. You are now here safely with me, the Creator God, the God of all the earth, the God of all righteousness.

In return for all of Yahweh's mighty actions on their behalf, all Israel had to do was obey Yahweh's voice and keep His covenant with them. However, this proved to be very difficult for Israel because of Adam's Original Sin that afflicts all of humanity, us included. Therefore, because of Original Sin, intimacy with all-righteous Yahweh actually proved very dangerous for Israel. They were punished for disobedience.

Nevertheless, Yahweh made marvelous promises to Israel, "you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." Let's pull this apart. A kingdom has a king — in this case, it's Yahweh. And a king has loyal subjects — in this case Israel. That's promise number one. And, if your king is the very source of righteousness in all of creation, then you are most blessed to be one of His subjects. You live in a blessed realm.

And if you live in this blessed kingdom under the King of Righteousness, He has called you to the all-important work of representing Him on earth to all the nations. That's promise number two. So, you will be a holy nation — meaning a divine template, a holy example for righteous living on earth. Indeed, Yahweh's laws define righteous human behavior both toward Yahweh and toward people. Therefore, those who obey Yahweh's law become a divine template, a holy example for all to follow. That was Yahweh's promise to Israel. And as we'll see, Yahweh builds on this promise for His Church.

Then we get to promise number three. You will be a kingdom of priests. Yes. The Aaronic priesthood was over Israel. But, Israel itself was meant to be a kingdom of priests to the nations. Therefore, what is a priest and what do priests do?

A priest is a human being who stands as an intermediary between the great Creator God, Yahweh, and His creatures. So, as an intermediary, what does a priest do? When we examine the role of priests in the Old Testament, we see that priests have multiple jobs. First, and foremost, they are the teachers of Yahweh's righteous ways not only to Yahweh's people, but to all the earth. Second, they declare Yahweh's righteous judgments not only to Yahweh's people, but to all the earth, so that those who have transgressed Yahweh's righteous law can know that they have done so. Third, when those who have recognized their transgressions and are repentant desire reconciliation with Yahweh, the priest is there to bring reconciliation through atonement for sin. For without atonement and reconciliation, all sinners face nothing but the righteous wrath of the holy God who has been sinned against. For to sin against the people around us is to sin against the source of all righteousness, Yahweh Himself.

In the Old Testament, there was a prescribed method of atonement and reconciliation through animal sacrifice and ritual, first in the Tabernacle and later in the Temple of Yahweh. In this way sin could be forgiven and righteousness restored. The priest was in the middle of it, between God and man. But the Second Temple was destroyed in 70A.D. and there has been no priesthood and no animal sacrifice since then.

Now, the reason we've examined all this history this morning is that when Messiah Jesus appeared and completed His work, everything changed. Multiple pieces of prophecy went into effect that describe Yahweh's plans and purposes even to this day. Isaiah 49:1-7 made it clear that the long divorce of Yahweh from the nations ended when Messiah Jesus appeared. Isaiah 52:10-53:12 made it clear that Yahweh Himself made perfect atonement for sin through Jesus. Jeremiah 31:31-34 made it clear that Messiah established a new covenant. It is a covenant based on forgiveness of sins instead of merit gained by performance of commands. Isaiah 8:13-15 made it clear that when Messiah Jesus came, Israel would be

divided for and against Him, just as Israel had divided over the prophets who came before Jesus.

The New Testament properly interprets all these prophecies and many more. And so, Yahweh's plan was put into effect to call to Himself a new Israel, His new portion, not only from the people of Abraham but from all the nations of the world. This is Messiah's Church.

So, listen carefully to what is said about the church in the New Testament. 1Peter 2:9-10, "9 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. 10 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." Revelation 1:5-6, "5. . . To him [Jesus] who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood 6 and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen." Revelation 5:9-10, "9 And they [the saints in heaven] sang a new song, saying, 'Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, 10 and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.'"

Did you notice that the promises spoken to Moses are repeated in these verses? Yahweh has called Messiah's Church His own people. He has called us to be for Him on this earth "a holy nation" — a template for righteous living. He has called us to be a royal priesthood standing between God and humans, and leading people to the rescue from their sins and eternal damnation that is only found in Messiah Jesus.

But let's check something out. In today's first lesson from Exodus 19, Yahweh made promises to Israel about being His holy nation and His kingdom of priests conditional. Israel had to obey His voice and keep His commandments. On the other hand, did you notice in the passages we just read from 1Peter and Revelation that there is no mention whatsoever of keeping commandments and covenants? Instead we saw words like these "you [God's people] have received mercy" "[Jesus] who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood" "you [Jesus] were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God. This is the grace of God.

Grace is the power of Messiah's cross proclaimed to the world. For it is only by the gracious forgiveness of sins alone that Messiah's Church can be made a holy nation and a kingdom of priests. It is by Messiah's work on the cross alone. For only Jesus was able to undo Adam's sin by resisting the temptation to grasp at equality with God. Jesus did so through multiple temptations and especially when He was taunted to come down from the cross.

Therefore, we can add absolutely nothing to Jesus' work. All the good works in the world can't add a thing. And warning. Trusting in our own good works in any way before Yahweh can only be interpreted by Him in one way — as rejection of His perfect, righteous Messiah whose grace alone is sufficient for the likes of you and me.

One last thing. As a holy nation and a kingdom of priests, Messiah's Church is the new Israel. Now, Yahweh promised in the prophets that Abraham will have identifiable physical descendants until the end of the world. However, Scripture also tells us that the cross of Christ will remain an offense to the end of the age. And it will remain an offense not only to Jews but to all nations. Therefore, the only way those who hear Jesus' call to follow Him will

be able to do so is by the power of Lord Holy Spirit. This is entirely the grace of God. And it is true for both Jew and Gentile. It's the only way anyone can become part of the new Israel.

So, Yahweh's plan is to reconcile all nations to Himself through the sacrifice of His Son, and to put the words He spoke to Moses into effect. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, then they are His Church. Together with all His chosen, they are Yahweh's holy nation and His kingdom of priests. The forgiveness of sins makes all this possible. For where there is forgiveness of sins, only righteousness remains — the righteousness of Messiah Jesus in His holy nation and His kingdom of priests. May this be true among us. Amen.

All Bible quotes are from the ESV.