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Pentecost 4 – Exodus 19:2-8a – Be Who You Are!

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For much of its history, the United States has prided itself on being a Christian nation. One nation under God; God bless America – they're some of our favorite catchphrases. And especially nowadays when that heritage has come under attack, we see all kinds of pictures and banners in frames and windows and social media from people who are fighting back. That's still a moniker that an awful lot of people don't want to give up on, and that's a good thing.

But it's important for us to understand that while this nation may have been founded on Christian principles, that doesn't make the United States of America God's chosen people – as if we're the new Israel, God's own people for a newer generation. What's important isn't where we live; it's what's in our hearts. God's chosen people are those who believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior from sin, whether they're from America or China or Venezuela or Nigeria, and what God said to the Israelites in our first lesson for today still applies to us as well. No matter who you are, no matter where you're from, God makes great promises to his believers, and along with those come great privileges and responsibilities as God's representatives here in this world. Now sometimes that might seem a little intimidating – who are we to represent God? How can we possibly do that justice? But remember that what God wants from you is exactly what he has already made you and gives you the power through his Word and Sacraments to continue to be. What our God told his Old Testament people he also tells you today: be who you are!

It's really so simple, but it's so easy to lose sight of. That was a problem that time and time again Israel just couldn't kick. Whether they were turning their backs on God or trying to do whatever they could to earn their way back into his good graces, they just didn't understand that they were God's chosen people not because of what they did, but because of his grace. That was true even from the time of Abraham 600 years before, when God first promised that the nation of Israel would be his specially treasured possession, and ever since then God kept on proving that to them. He proved it to Abraham when he brought him to Canaan. He proved it to Jacob when he brought his family to Egypt. He proved it by bringing his people back out of Egypt after 400 years in slavery, by leading them through the Red Sea on dry ground, and by being constantly there for them to care for them, to protect them, and to provide for them, and he proved it countless more times along the way.

By the time these Israelites came to Mt. Sinai after their exodus from Egypt, they knew very well that what God said to them was true: *“You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and*

*how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession.”* Like an eagle teaching her chicks to fly, God was there for his people when they most needed him to keep them close to himself and to give them shelter and safety. When the Israelites wanted to turn back and turn away, when it seemed like things were about to fall apart and they were about to go down, God lifted them back up and he showed them that what he said here was already true: they *were* already his treasured possession, and he was just proving it to them.

At Mt. Sinai the Lord made this covenant, this official agreement with his people that they should follow all his laws and commands not so that they could earn God's love and care in the first place; they already had that despite themselves, purely because of his grace. No, this covenant was about God giving them safeguards so they wouldn't ruin it for themselves and throw it all away. They already *were* God's chosen people, his most precious possession – his part of the deal was guaranteed! But if they turned their back on him in sin or unbelief, they could forfeit that and all the blessings that went with it. God made this covenant with them to protect them and preserve them as his people, and to keep them dedicated and close to him. After all the great things God had done for them throughout their history, he gave them this covenant to solidify their relationship with him and to give them an opportunity to respond to his love with love of their own in return.

But this was a relationship with a purpose. This was a relationship that would bring the Savior into this world so that God could have a people for himself not just as a political nation, but as a kingdom one day in heaven. There was a lot more riding on this relationship between God and his people than just obedience. Salvation and eternal life, *your* salvation and eternal life, hung in the balance. Through that covenant between God and his Old Testament people, he brought you to himself and made you his most prized treasure – not because of anything they or you did, but because through that covenant God brought Jesus into this world. God reconciled you to himself and he redeemed you to be his child through your Savior Jesus Christ, and now there is nothing in this world more precious to him than you. You are his most treasured possession; that's a done deal that Jesus signed in blood for you on the cross and now your God wants it to stay that way for all eternity. He wants us to be who we are – to be his ransomed people, to be free from sin and the power of the devil, to enjoy the blessings of our relationship with him, to let him care for us like an eagle with her chicks, and to trust that no matter what happens in our lives, nothing can rip us out of his hands or make him forget us because we mean far too much to him to let that happen. He has a place for us in heaven where he is going to bring us to himself for eternity and keep us at his side forever, because not only is he our most precious possession, but we also are his.

And everything God says to his people here has that special promise, that Gospel truth as its background. Jesus Christ has saved us from our sins and won for us eternal life in heaven with him, so that hope changes who we are and changes our whole purpose here in this world. Since we are God's most treasured possession in all creation, he says to us: "*Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.*"

Four important words here give us four important aspects of our relationship with God: kingdom, priests, holy, and nation. God's people may not look like much here in this world – in fact, most often the world scoffs at Christians for being so lowly and so different. But our God has promised his people a kingdom – and not just that we'll live in one one day, but that we're going to reign in one along with him. We may not mean much to this world, but we are a kingdom that has divine authority at our back and working through our prayers every day, we are a kingdom ruled by the King of kings and Lord of lords who has our best interests in mind in everything that happens, and we are a kingdom that anticipates the grand and glorious heavenly kingdom that's waiting for us in everlasting paradise.

And where there is a kingdom, there is always a cause to fight for and a battle to win, and that's no different for us. That's why God calls us priests. Back in those days, priests were the go-betweens, the mediators between God and the people. They would make sacrifices and prayers and offerings to God on behalf of the people, and they would bring God's Word and promises on that basis back to the people. Normally, that was a job specially reserved for just a chosen few, the descendants of Moses' brother Aaron. But here God is saying that all his people will play that role between God and the nations of the world. That means that our God has given us the special dignity of taking his saving truth to people who don't know it, and it's through us and the Gospel message we share that others will come to know God and have faith in him as well. As God's priests, his go-betweens, his representatives to the world, we get to play an integral role in bringing sinners to salvation, and it is for that special role that God sets us apart for service, witness, and prayer.

And that's exactly what God wanted when he said that his people would be a holy nation. As God's people, we don't serve ourselves, we don't gratify our sinful natures, and we don't revel in guilty pleasures. We don't strive to be who we are *apart* from Christ, broken sinners headed for hell; no, we strive to be who we are *in* Christ – God's children who have been made holy through Christ's cleansing blood. For the Israelites, they needed to be set apart as holy so that they could protect the family line of the Savior down through the generations until he came, as well as the true knowledge of God and his work against anything that would corrupt or contaminate it. For us, God wants us to be holy as a way of *honoring* our Savior and the true knowledge of God and his work in this world; as a way of showing him our thanks and praise in return for making us his children and giving us an inheritance in heaven;

and he wants us to be holy because that's how we show the world around us our God's goodness and glory, the blessed hope we have for eternal life, and the special peace and joy and fulfillment there is in everything we do here until we get there.

And because striving to be who you are in this sinful world can be such a grind, God also has made his people into one *nation*, he says. If it is true that America claims to be one nation under God – at least under God's power and providence – then it is so much more true that Christians are one nation under God's grace and blessing. For those times when our own sinful hearts or the world around us tries to oppose our faithfulness to Christ, God gives his people a special solidarity, unity, and togetherness so that we can share with each other the priceless gifts of fellowship, encouragement, and support. We have the unity of one Lord, one faith, one baptism – a truer unity than you can find anywhere else in the world! – not united in one land or country, but united under the banner of Christ's love and salvation for us. And as great as it is to live in this free country and to have all the liberties that we do (and we do still have them!), there is nothing greater than the blessings we have from being God's very own most treasured possession, a kingdom of priests in his service, and a holy nation united under his Gospel cause.

*You are... so be.* There's really nothing complicated about that concept. Be exactly who you are, God says, the people your Savior redeemed you to be. It's just like the apostle Peter said some 1,500 years later: "*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*" (1 Peter 2:9). Don't look at the covenant and the commands God gives you and think restriction, like so many people do – think fulfillment for your lives, the best and most blest way to live in this world. Think freedom of your spirit and conscience, the greatest freedom you can have by far. Love God's law because you love God, because God loves it when you keep his commands, and because you want to show him how much he and everything he's done for you means to you. Your God has made you his people through faith in Jesus Christ, so holding firmly to his promises of salvation and looking forward to opportunities to serve him, let's say gladly with the Israelites, "*We will do everything the Lord has said.*" Amen.