

20 October 2024

Strangers in a Strange Land: A Different Kind of Nation

Exodus 19:3-6; 1 Peter 2:9-12

After God led the Israelites out of Egypt, he took them to a mountain in the desert, Mount Sinai. We read today from Exodus chapter 19, verses 3-6:

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.’

God delivered the Children of Israel from Egypt partly because he had made a covenant with their ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but also because he had a plan for their future. As he says to Israel in this passage, “You shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples ... a holy nation.” In the world that had rebelled against God since creation, God wanted to preserve one people who would keep alive the memory of who God really is. To make that happen, in the very next chapter, God starts giving them the law, beginning with the Ten Commandments. In a time and place where all other nations were worshiping gods of their own invention, represented by carved idols, Israel was to worship one God, a God who would never be reduced to a graven image, a God who acted in the world out of love. But God’s plan was more than that. The people of Israel weren’t just to be a holy nation: they were to be a “priestly kingdom.” Now the role of a priest is to serve as an intermediary between people and God, so for Israel to be a “priestly kingdom” meant that God intended them to be a shining example of God’s truth to the rest of the world. They were to be the means by which the rest of the world also came to know the real God.

That plan had mixed success. On the one hand, throughout its history Israel continued to have prophets and wise men and singers and (some) priests who preserved the memory of the true God. Because of them, we have the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament. On the other hand, those faithful witnesses were generally a tiny minority in Israel, which was not a particularly holy nation most of the time, or an especially good witness to the living God. And by the time Jesus was born, they weren’t a nation at all, but a colony of Rome. And far from being a *witness* to the rest of the world, their religious leaders regarded the Gentile nations as foul and unclean and avoided them like the plague. The “holy nation and kingdom of priests” that God imagined before Moses and the Israelites in the desert was a *long* way off.

We turn now to the New Testament, to the first letter of Peter, chapter 1, verses 9-17:

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.*

¹¹*Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul.* ¹²*Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge.*

You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation ... Peter here is obviously restating God's words to Israel in Exodus 19, but there are some important differences. For starters, Peter isn't writing to a nation at all. He's writing to the early church: a tiny, scattered, persecuted minority faith that met in secret and included people from all nations. Nevertheless, he tells that group that they have the same task that was assigned to the Hebrews in the desert. They are to *proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you to light*. Peter also recommends a different method: they are to be *as aliens and exiles*. That is, they are not to be a nation set apart from other nations; they are to *conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles*.¹² So, using the language of Exodus, which was originally directed to a specific ethnic group tracing its lineage back to a common ancestor, Peter describes something very different. This new "holy nation" and "royal priesthood" is not to be based on geography or ethnicity but on a different kind of belonging. Peter is proclaiming not a new nation, but a new kind of nation.

Peter's not the only one who does this. Long before First Peter, Jesus had implied something similar. The scribes and Pharisees tried to discredit Jesus before the crowds by asking him if people ought to pay taxes to Caesar. Jesus took a coin, pointed out that it had Caesar's face on it, and said, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and give to God what is God's." Beyond just being a clever way to frustrate his enemies, this hints that we have two different but parallel loyalties: one to the earthly king and one to the heavenly king, and that the service rendered to each is quite different. Paul also suggests that we have two different nations. In Philippians chapter 3, he writes "our citizenship is in heaven." But Paul is not saying that we must renounce every other citizenship. He didn't. Paul was also a Roman citizen, and he was not at all shy about using that status as a get-out-of-jail-free-card when he thought it would work. So, Peter's not the only New Testament writer talking about parallel kingdoms.

But perhaps the most important teacher of this idea was the fifth century saint, Augustine. Now some of you may have developed a low opinion of Augustine, just because he was a misogynist with a fixation on sex who sort of blamed women for all the world's sin. Picky, picky. But if you can put all that aside – a big if, I know – there's more to him. And one of the most enduring of his thoughts is found in his great book *City of God*. Augustine lived during the earth-shaking events of the Fall of the Roman Empire – when Rome was sacked by the Visigoths and Ostrogoths and all the other kinds of Goths. To citizens of Rome like Augustine, it felt as if the world had fallen apart. But in that scary time, Augustine wrote that as Christians we are citizens of a greater city, the City of God. Taking the Latin word *saeculum*, which refers to the span of a human life, Augustine says that the secular life is only a shadow of the true life that lies beyond it. The secular city is but a pale imitation of the City of God. But the City of God is not just sometime off in the future, Augustine says; it is here now. It exists *alongside* the secular city, as a pilgrim community making its way through the same life and challenges as everyone else, but with different values, different purposes, different priorities.

[A brief historical aside here. Few thinkers have been as influential as Augustine, for better or worse, and this idea of the parallel cities has continued throughout Western thought. Even when Christianity became the dominant power in Europe, there remained a clear distinction between the "secular arm" and the "religious arm" of society. Rationalists sometimes say that the

concept of the separation of Church and State was invented during the Enlightenment, but Augustine handed the Enlightenment the template.]

So what does this mean for us today? First, we who follow Christ are part of two nations, one that is visible, and one that is beneath the surface. The secular city is loud and insistent and frantic and ultimately temporary; the City of God is patient with the patience of eternity. Our two nations are different, but they are not separate. We are part of both. We spend most of our lives in the secular city, but we find our meaning and purpose in the City of God. We exist in the secular city; we live in the City of God. In day-to-day terms, this means that we have secular jobs, but we go about them with integrity and compassion, measuring our daily lives not in terms of victories over others or benefits accrued, but in terms of lives touched and people strengthened. The old Gospel song goes, “This world is not my home, I’m just a-passin’ through,” and it’s right. In the secular city where we live and work and shop and eat, we are never completely at home, because we have another home, a home that something within us vaguely remembers and longs for, like a beautiful memory from a dream.

We balance two lives, then, but this balance is difficult to attain and all but impossible to maintain. We are always being enticed back into the secular city, always in danger of getting too entwined in it. As the poet Wordsworth put it, “The world is too much with us, late and soon / Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers.” When everyone around us is driven by greed or envy, it is hard not to share those dreams. When every speech and TV ad and cable news show and sponsored Facebook post and glossy mailbox flyer is filled with fear and anger, it is hard not to be pulled into that maelstrom. But we must maintain the perspective that only citizens of the City of God have: our hope is based on something more than the next election. Our meaning, our purpose lies beyond this present darkness.

It is dark, and as our nation becomes more secular, as Christianity declines in numbers and influence, it is only going to get darker. All people were created with the need to seek and worship something greater than ourselves – to paraphrase Augustine, “our hearts are restless until they rest in God” – but those who do not have the perspective of eternity have nothing to worship but the inadequate gods of fame, power, wealth, and revenge. They have no particular reason to show compassion to the weak or to tell the truth. The secular city has rules, but the rules have no foundation. The heightened anger and brazen lies that we have encountered this election cycle are not a temporary glitch. They are the new reality of a secular age, which makes it all the more important that we, who belong to a different kind of nation, be different. *Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul. Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge.*