

## God's Own People

1 Peter 2:2-10

May 7, 2023

First Presbyterian, Luling

I may have told you this before, but it's worth repeating. Reformed Theology, the branch of theology where Presbyterians are nested, can be summed up like this: God acts, and we respond. God's acts come first, and our response comes afterward. God isn't waiting on us to do something—God reaches out in freedom, and we respond in kind.

So God chooses the people of Israel and extends a covenant to them. They respond by living up to their end of the covenant—keeping the law. They mess up countless times, but the actions of God don't depend on their response. God continues to choose them, and forgive them, and give them another chance. So there is an action and a response, but they aren't from equal parties. God's action is primary, and our response or lack thereof can't undo God's action.

We're dipping into 1 Peter this morning. It's been in the lectionary for a few weeks in this Easter season, but we haven't done anything with it, so let's get a little background. It's almost certain that this was intended to be a circulating letter—not written to any particular congregation, but meant to be passed around among congregations. And it's also almost certain that it was written to Gentile Christians—that is, to Christians who had not been Jewish first.<sup>1</sup>

However, the author of the letter grounds these Gentile Christians' identity right in the Israelites' scriptures. "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people." Surely it won't surprise you when I tell you that the "you" is most definitely plural. Together, these churches are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people. "Royal priesthood" and "holy nation" come straight from Exodus 19, where Moses is talking with God on Mount Sinai. God says to Moses to tell the Israelites that they will be a priestly kingdom and a holy nation, and they will obey God's voice and keep God's covenant. And in language similar to 1 Peter, God says they will be "the treasured possession out of all the peoples." God's own people. Isaiah 43 uses the "chosen" language, and the concept runs throughout the Old Testament.

It seems clear to me that these four phrases are intended to be roughly parallel to each other, and portrayed as synonyms. Chosen race. Royal priesthood. Holy nation. God's own people. They are all different words in Greek: race, nation,

---

<sup>1</sup> Harper Collins Study Bible, NRSV, introduction to 1 Peter, pg. 2060.

people. This is the only time in the New Testament where they all appear in the same verse.<sup>2</sup> There are some nuances: one describes people with a common origin; or the same customs; or a common goal.<sup>3</sup>

By using all three in one verse, plus “God’s own people” the author of this letter is intending to communication to these groups of Christians that they are one. They are bound together, in all the ways a group of people can be bound together—origins, customs, goals. And that it is God that is doing the binding. They aren’t a club or an interest group or even a family. They are God’s people.

The next verse, verse 10, makes that even clearer. “Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people.” God has acted.

God acts in this same way over and over. You are my people, God says. Even when you do that, you are my people. Yes, even when you do that same thing again. You are my people. Let’s try setting this up differently. You’re my people. Oh, you are endlessly creative at messing things up. You are my people. Then God becomes one of the people in Jesus Christ, and the people send Jesus to the cross. Even then, God says, you are my people. God acts to make us a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s very own people. That’s who we are, because God has made it so. We can’t choose ourselves or make ourselves royal or holy. All of that is God’s act.

But that’s not the end of it. It’s the biggest part of it, the part that makes our response even possible. But God still calls us to respond. Here it is in this passage: “in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” You’re God’s people, *in order that* you can proclaim what God has done. Our response is simply to tell and show that we are God’s people, that God has acted and claimed us.

As I was writing yesterday evening, the news was coming in about yet another mass shooting right here in our state. Eight people died, plus the person doing the shooting. That information may not be accurate or have already changed. These shootings happen so often that I can feel myself having to turn aside, because it’s too much pain and grief to take in. It’s hard to tell that we’re God’s people, that we’re a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation. And by “we” I’m not really referring to the United States, but to the church. This is one of those things I’m working out as I’m saying it to you. It’s hard to feel like we’re much of anything special when we can’t seem to live out our identity as God’s own people within our culture in a way that makes it a place where life is valued.

---

<sup>2</sup> Annotated Jewish New Testament, footnotes, pg. 504

<sup>3</sup> Goppelt, Peter. A Commentary on 1 Peter. Trans. John Alsup. Eerdmans, 1983. pg 148

We are God's own people, we have received God's mercy, and we'll definitely need to receive God's mercy again. All of that is God's doing, God's act. Our response is to proclaim, in word and deed, God's marvelous deeds.

I was at a memorial service earlier yesterday, with this sermon tumbling around in my brain. The deceased person's granddaughter spoke, and she said her granddad had been the first to tell her that she had a little light and to let it shine, referencing the "This Little Light of Mine" song that I expect you learned when you were a little child. And I thought—yes, that's it! We are God's people—we have a little light. And our response is to let it shine. God has called us into light, and we let that light shine, let it shine, let it shine.