

## I

Over the course of my life, I've been known by several titles. Around here, I'm known as Dr. Baer or Pastor Ryan. Out at the Holland Youth Sports Complex, I'm known as Coach Baer or Coach Ryan. To the PTA at Clarke Middle School, I'm known by the title, "Amy's husband," and to one little boy who lives at the end of our street, I'm known simply as "Joshua's dad."

## II

All of us, play many different roles in our lives, and depending on the context, all of us are known by a variety of names and titles. Each of those names or titles or nicknames says something about us, and about the nature of our relationships with others.

But what titles does God give us? And what do those unique names and titles reveal about who we are, and who God is, and what we have to do with each other? Those kinds of questions are at the heart of our reading this morning from the Book of Exodus.

## III

This fall, we are reading and preaching our way through some of the key stories of the Hebrew Scriptures, more commonly called the Old Testament. We're not going verse by verse or even chapter by chapter, but we're tracing the broad arc of the relationship between God and God's people as told by our ancestors in faith. So let's review briefly about where we've been so far in the story.

In a story from the Book of Genesis last month, we read how God called to a 75-year-old man named Abram and his wife Sarai and promised to make of them and their descendants a great nation, and that in and through this one family, all the families of the earth would be blessed.

And that promise unfolds through the remainder of Genesis, and the family does indeed grow into a nation. But as Genesis begins to draw to a close, God's people find themselves living not in the Land of Promise, but in the land of Egypt. We read about a man named Joseph, one Abraham and Sarah's great grandsons, who, despite all kinds of trials and setbacks, nevertheless rose to become the Egyptian king's most trusted advisor. And for a time, God's people lived in Egypt side by side with their Egyptian neighbors.

But the book of Exodus opens on an ominous note. It says that after Joseph died, a new Pharaoh rose to power, and this Pharaoh did not know Joseph. And this Pharaoh looked upon the Hebrews and did not see them as a group to be welcomed, but rather as a threat to Egypt that must be exterminated.

And so through a long set of circumstances, the Hebrews became enslaved by the Egyptians, and they cried out to God in their bondage and pain. God heard their cries, and God saw how the Egyptians mistreated them, and God acted. Last week, we read the story of how God parted the waters of

the Red Sea, and the people of God walked through on dry ground, and as Pharaoh's chariots gave chase, God caused the sea to return to its normal depth, and Pharaoh's mighty army was no more.

But the people did not go straight back to the Land of Promise. They wandered in the desert. And when they complained that there was no food, God provided. Each day, the ground was covered with a fine, flaky, sweet substance, which the people named Manna.

And when the people complained that there was no water, God instructed Moses to strike a rock with his staff, water came gushing forth in the desert, where there had been only dust and barrenness before.

And three months to the day that the Israelites had crossed through the sea on the dry ground, they come to a mountain called Sinai. And that's where we pick up our story for today.

I invite you now to listen for a Word from God from Exodus chapter 19, verses 3-7 and Exodus 20, verses 1-17.

*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." 7So Moses came, summoned the elders of the people, and set before them all these words that the Lord had commanded him.*

*Then God spoke all these words: 2I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; 3you shall have no other gods before me. 4You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. 5You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, 6but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments. 7You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name. 8Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. 9Six days you shall labor and do all your work. 10But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. 11For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the*

*Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.*

*12Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. 13You shall not murder. 14You shall not commit adultery. 15You shall not steal. 16You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. 17You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.*

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

So often in our modern culture, when we think of the Ten Commandments, we tend to imagine that they fell out of the sky and landed with a thud on the courthouse lawn. It's easy to forget that the Ten Commandments are part of a much larger narrative, and that narrative tells us much about who God is, and who we are, and what we have to do with each other.

For it would paint a very different picture of God if, when God's people cried out for deliverance from slavery and cruelty and bondage in Egypt, God had said, OK, I tell you what, here are my laws. Follow them, and I'll bail you out

It would paint a very different picture of God if, when the people were crying out for their daily bread, for their very basic human needs, if God had said,

OK, I tell you what, here are my laws, follow them, and I'll get you something to eat and drink.

But God's grace precedes the law. First God delivers God's people. Then God provides for their basic needs. And then God gives the law.

Listen again to these words:

"You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now 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, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation."

You shall be for me a priestly kingdom.

In our Presbyterian way of being the church, we have shied away from the title priest. By definition, a priest mediates God's presence on earth, and as heirs of the Protestant Reformation, we take Scripture seriously, and we believe that Scripture is clear that Jesus Christ is the one and sufficient mediator of God's presence. Jesus Christ is our High Priest.

However, there's something right about the idea that those who obey God's voice and keep God's covenant will be a priestly kingdom. The natural, logical result of obeying God's voice and keeping God's covenant will be that the presence of God will be mediated upon the earth.

## IV

And so here's what that means for you, my friend. In the waters of baptism, you were ordained into the priesthood of believers. When you were baptized, you were named as God's treasured possession.

And of all the titles that you bear, of all the roles that you play, the title of priest accompanies them all, for God be a bearer of God's presence and the good news of the gospel everywhere you go.

When you are in the office, you are God's priest. When you are in the classroom, you are God's priest. When you are at the ballpark, you are God's priest. When you are at the dinner table, you are God's priest. In all of your relationships, in all of your roles, you always bear the title of priest, as the bearer of good news for a hungry and hurting world.

The commandments that God gives are not meant to be a burden, but rather an anchor point. For Lord knows that as you go into the world, as you work to be God's person in and for the world, there are storms and tides and winds that seek to pull you in a thousand different directions. The law is there to help you remember who and whose you are. The law is the foundation upon which God is building you into a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.

## V

And my goodness, friends, does the world need the church to be God's

priests these days. My goodness does the world need the church to be bringers of God's good news. My goodness does the world need the church to be the church.

The world needs the church to shine the light into the darkness, to testify to the truth, to lift up the least and the lost, to stand for righteousness and justice.

So may we have the courage to be holy. May we have the courage to be faithful. And may we remember that the God we worship and serve, the God revealed to us in Jesus of Nazareth whom we call the Christ, is able to deliver. The God we worship and serve is more powerful than any empire or army. Indeed, the whole earth belongs to God, and God calls us God's treasured possession, God's priestly kingdom, God's holy nation.

So may we believe, and so may we live, this day and always.

Amen.