

How would you write your personal story? You might choose to write your life as a memoir- that deals with your feelings and perceptions, or as a biography that tends toward a more historical and objective accounting of your life. But with either style, you would be examining your life from a certain point of view; and if you began right now, today would be your perspective, the vantage point, that looks back at your days and interprets the events that led you to this place. And you might see life-changing moments that shaped you, at an early age or later on- mistakes and victories, sorrows and successes- so that you became you; you could recall events that took you down various life paths, so that you are here. And perhaps only now, from the vantage point of experience, can you see what it all meant.

If you read the great biographies, you will see that authors often recount a tale of the young hero that foreshadows his character, so that you can see from the beginning he is being made ready for the big challenges ahead. Since we are in church, we might think of the first time we met these biblical heroes: little Jesus in the Temple astounding the teachers with his wisdom and insight; or baby Moses,

hidden away to save him from Pharaoh's edict to kill every Hebrew son; or David, the beautiful boy who was brought in from watching the sheep.

But if you were to write the history of your people- your clan or your nation, you would have to go back further than your short span of years; and to make it interesting and meaningful, you would want to do more than simply organize the chronology of events that started at one point and has come at last to this point. We would have to find a vantage point- the crucial intersection of time and persons and destiny (or God!)- that helps us to know how and why things happened, and how and why things will happen. Just so, is the story of Israel, the people called by God, and who much later than this story in Exodus 19 became the Jews. We can write a history of the Jews, but to understand that history we must start here, and not somewhere else, because this is the place at which they come to see themselves as God's chosen people- God making covenant, the people receiving the Law: in this is the origin of Israel's explanation of itself. Not back at the first pages of the Bible, the creation story and Adam and Eve; not even with the call of Abraham; or entering the Promised Land; or when David ascended the throne; not with the writings of the prophets or the exile in Babylon. All those events and stories find their meaning from this moment at the foot of the mountain, and God

making himself known to the people and making covenant with this crowd of refugees and calling them his “own possession among all peoples” of the earth.

Here is the place and the time where the children of Israel become a people, and begin to create a history as God’s chosen people; here they begin to understand God, for God reveals himself to them. God shows himself to all the people, makes a covenant, and gives them rules to live by. So that forever after, they will be known as the people of this God.

And it is important for us to realize Israel’s history begins here: this is the vantage point that explains all that comes later, and that makes meaning of the stories and events on the previous pages of scripture. From this moment of revelation and grace and covenant, we can make sense of God’s history in the world. So, if we want to understand what “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” means; if we want to find the meaning of Noah and the flood and the destruction of the world, we start here; if we want to understand the real meanings of Abraham’s call, and Sodom and Gomorrah, the adventures of Jacob and his children, the story of Joseph in Egypt, and the birth of Moses and the exodus out of bondage: we begin here. From this vantage point the biblical writers looked back and composed history as the expression of God’s grace. Thus, when

God says, “You saw what I did to the Egyptians, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you here”; when God says, “If you will obey my voice, then you shall be my people”; and when they reply, “All that the LORD has spoken we will do”: that is covenant, and it is the point at which the people *become* something else, no longer a nameless tribe of slaves, but God’s chosen people. From this moment on, they are given a new outlook, so that when we read the scriptures they wrote, we understand it as faith’s response to God’s mercy and constant presence. And we, too, may gain a new perspective, and a better hope for our lives in this world.

So three months after the flight out of Egypt, the Israelites come to the mountain, and in the following verses of the chapter and into chapter 20, they see God come down in a cloud of darkness, with fire and smoke and thunder and lightning, and the sound of a loud trumpet. They feel the earth shake beneath them. They hear Moses speak, and they hear God answer; and they hear God call Moses to come to the mountaintop; they hear God speak the 10 commandments. That’s a good place to begin your life as a people.

As believers in this same God, all these centuries later, we could ask what is our beginning as a people. I think most of us would find our beginning at the

crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. Yes, but what is our vantage point from which we understand the cross and the empty tomb? Pentecost: the descent of God's Spirit, with tongues of fire and loud noise and strange languages; and the witness of the apostles. Pentecost. It is where the disciples of Jesus saw themselves called out to become a people, and not just a band of followers, and the point at which they began to tell the continuing story of God among the peoples of the world. It is the origin of the church's explanation of itself: Paul writes to the young churches after Pentecost- filled with God's Spirit and with Pentecost faith; and the gospels look back at Jesus' life from the perspective of Pentecost.

What about us? We are joined together with a faith passed down by the apostles, believing in a Lord who has shown us this very God revealed on the mountain to Moses and the people, the Lord who calls us to faith and to faithful action. From the vantage point of today- and in the spirit of hope and fellowship and joy- let us answer as did they, "All that God has spoken we will do."

God calls Israel "a kingdom of priests." What does that mean? It is quoted in 1 Peter and in Revelation, an important phrase, I think, that we usually interpret in an individualistic sense: that each of us by faith becomes a priest, and not bound to the dictates of a sometimes corrupt clergy. That's how the Reformers of the 15th

and 16th centuries saw it. But I doubt that was the meaning here, or for any ancient people, where the priesthood alone could perform the rites of worship and act as agents for the nation's gods.

I see two more likely meanings for this phrase. The first may be a "kingdom of priests" in place of a "kingdom of kings," a government ruled and guided by the priesthood. And if you don't like kings that may sound like a good deal, but theocracies never work out well for broad portions of a society. I think we can do better with the second choice. For Israel in this passage and for us today- believers in the God of Messiah Jesus- it must mean only this: that we all are priests who worship and act for God *for the sake of the world*. There are priests and ministers- ordained, chosen, called, use what word you will- they are those that teach, who re-enact the liturgy, lead congregations in worship, pray on behalf of their churches. But a "kingdom of priests" signifies the entire population of believing disciples working to tell the good news of God's love, and living as examples of God's grace: not just half-hearted faithfulness to God's call and command and letting someone else do the heavy lifting, but living lives devoted to God, and proving- with a humility that matches their confession- God's steadfast love for all every person. God forgives and loves and makes us his, and our part of

the covenant is this, that we “priests” return that love in the compassion we give to others. In that is God’s grace to us, “spread abroad” for everyone to know.