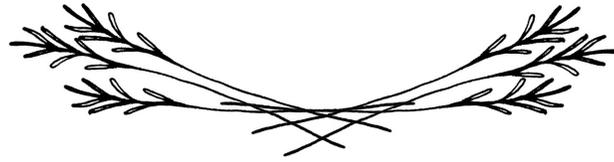


WEEK 8

A HOLY NATION



BRAD MCKINNON

As I'm writing this chapter, the President of the United States has just concluded his State of the Union address. There are few spectacles that highlight the complexities of the modern nation-state more than this annual speech to Congress. The House and the Senate, the Supreme Court, the Executive Branch—all represented in this rather strange interplay of often disparate voices within the nation. So, what is a **nation**?

We may picture the modern nation-state with its complex government bureaucracy, powerful military, and market economy. Or, we may simply think of a people bound together by a common history, ethnicity, language, culture, religion, or even an idea.

It wasn't complex bureaucracies that brought Israel together in the hot and arid Sinai Peninsula at the base of a rugged mountain in Exodus 19. Rather, it was a common history and culture centered around an idea: that the Lord was Israel's God and that he had acted on their behalf as a people. Along with these blessings came certain expectations. Listen to how both these blessings and responsibilities are described: "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” (Exod 19:4–6; NRSV).

Several built-in points seem apparent in these brief verses. First, the concept of **covenant** stands out. A covenant can be defined as a formal agreement between two or more parties in which each promises to act in certain ways. But *which* covenant? Was it the covenant God had made with Abraham in the past or a covenant that he was about to make with the people moving forward? It’s probably safe to assume here that this is a case of both/and, rather than either/or. In Exodus 2:24–25, we are told that the basis for Israel’s salvation from Egyptian slavery was that God remembered the covenant that he had made with Abraham. That covenant is described in Genesis 12.

In short, God would make of Abraham a great nation, bless those who blessed him, and through Abraham bless all nations. Therefore, Israel would keep the covenant by remembering that as the special children of Abraham, they had certain responsibilities to become a blessing. The subsequent laws that formed the basis for these responsibilities are naturally described as “the book of the covenant” (Exod 24:7). Thus, as God promised to bless Abraham, he was continuing to do so through the nation of Israel, and expected them to respond appropriately.

Second, the text describes what should be their **motivation** for such a response: they were to remember what God had done for them (Exod19:4). The Exodus was the great salvation story for Israel. Ingrained in their minds from generation to generation through the annual Passover feast, when the people of Israel thought of salvation, they instinctively thought of communal redemption.

Likewise, as the church, we shouldn’t forget that while we have an individual responsibility to God, this cannot be detached from our responsibility to each other in

community. Rather, seeing after each other follows the example of Christ and connects us to God more deeply. Notice how Paul connects our vertical relationship with Christ with the horizontal relationship we as Christians have with each other: “Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus” (Phil 2:4–5). The “**eagles’ wings**” imagery in Exodus 19 would be used later in Israel’s history in a context of captivity and redemption (Isa 40:31).

The notion is clear: God had acted and would continue to act to help Israel rise above its difficulties, even when those difficulties were, at times, of their own making. Importantly, these promises were conditional based on certain expectations: “if” you obey my voice and keep my covenant (v. 5). This underscores the humility of God. While he could force people to bend to his will by brute force (as in the Exodus), Israel had the freedom to choose to serve him or not.

This service had a **mission** component as well, it seems. It wasn’t just Israel that belonged to God, but rather “the whole earth” or “all the peoples.” The text describes Israel’s national function as that of a priest (“priestly kingdom”). Israel was to be a means through which other nations could relate to God. These values were to infuse all aspects of national life (“holy nation”). Their religion, culture, economy, and even politics were expected to be holy. **Holiness** indicates that something or someone had been dedicated for sacred use.

Soon after the Exodus experience, the concept of holiness took on strong moral connotations too. Leviticus 20:7 exhorts the people to “be holy; for I am the Lord your God.” What did that necessitate? Observe the statutes: don’t kill; don’t steal; don’t curse

father and mother; don't commit adultery (Lev 20:9ff.). These expectations would see Israel through victory and defeat; conquest and captivity; generation after generation.

Now fast forward to the time of the early church. First, Peter argues that Abraham's covenant fulfilled in Israel was continuing in the church: "... 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" (1 Pet 2:9). The first half of the verse is a quotation of Exodus 19:6. Just as Israel had come to Sinai after fleeing Egypt and had received divine instructions, Peter sees his Gentile readers ("you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors"; 1 Pet 1:18) as ready to take their place in God's story that had been established "before the foundation of the world" (1 Pet 1:20).

A modern evangelical emphasis on individual salvation sometimes causes us to read into the biblical text a bold distinction between personal and communal holiness that was not obvious in a first century context. So what does Peter have in mind when he refers to his readers as a "holy nation"? What does that look like on the ground? Certainly, this included **personal holiness**. Peter exhorts his readers to be holy in all their conduct by rejecting their former desires (1:13–15). But he also expects **social holiness**. They were to conduct themselves honorably within the society that they lived (2:11–25). Finally, he sees the importance of **communal holiness**. They were to rejoice in righteous suffering together as part of **the household of God** (4:12–19).

As the household or family of God, Peter sees the church as part of the continuing story of what God is doing in this world. The church highlights the sovereignty of God. Just like he chose Israel for his purposes, he has chosen the church

as his people. As God's people, we are called to live out God's reign: "Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt 6:10).

It isn't unusual around the Fourth of July holiday to see the first half of Psalm 33:12 ("Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord") posted on church signs or quoted from pulpits. The implication is that if the United States will once again make the Lord its God, then it will be happy or blessed. Unfortunately, this sort of interpretive approach doesn't take into account the second half of the verse which includes the parallel statement: "... the people whom he has chosen as his heritage." This is the equivalent of "my treasured possession out of all peoples" in Exodus 19. That nation was ancient Israel and continues in the church as the reconstituted people of God today—a nation without borders, you might say. This myth of American sanctity sees national prosperity as an indication of righteousness, thus understanding economic, political, or military power as a sign of divine favor. On the contrary, seeing ourselves as "exiles" as 1 Peter suggests (2:11) allows us, no matter the political landscape in which we find ourselves, to proclaim the power of God, who called us from darkness to light (v. 9).

Questions for Discussion

1. How does the concept of a “holy nation” help us see ourselves as part of the larger story that God has been telling for millennia?
2. What dangers are there in seeing covenant passages through the lens of American political, military, and economic power?
3. In what ways can the Reformation sentiment of universal priesthood (“the priesthood of all believers”) inform our ideas of what it means to be the people of God today?
4. How well do you feel today’s church is fulfilling its purpose to be a “holy” nation?