

A Redeemed People

In the name of him called “Jesus” because he saves his people from their sins, dear friends in Christ: I’d like to begin with a few questions for you to think about – questions regarding your self-identity and the way you see yourself in the world. The questions are these: *Who really* are you? *What* are you? I don’t mean what other people would say about you, or how you would explain yourself to them; no, I mean from your own point of view, at the most foundational level, how do you understand yourself in relation to everything and everyone else? And take it step further here: what for you is the reference point or center of gravity of your self-understanding? What’s the point of origin for the way you see yourself? If you could name an event in history or something that happened in your life that sort of anchors you and forms the frame of reference for how you see reality and understand your place in it, what would that be? I want you to chew on those questions a bit, because we’re coming back to them. But right now, if I were to hazard a guess, I’d say that the answers that you have to those questions would be all over the place and that few of you would say the same things.

But if were to ask any Jewish person – provided he was one of the few who actually believes the Jewish faith and practices it – to answer those questions, I’m almost certain how he would respond. He’d tell me that he was one of God’s chosen people. And if I pressed him to tell me what single event in the past he considers to be the foundational moment in history for Jews like himself, the event that made them the people they are and defines them even today, I’m pretty sure that the answer would be the giving of the Law by God to his people at Mount Sinai. For a Jewish person that episode is absolutely central to his or her self-understanding. In their view, what took place at Sinai was the definitive experience for Israel, for there the Lord God came down in a fearful and visible way, and he met with his people, and he gave them his own Word—not just the Ten Commandments, as is often supposed; but so much more than that. I mean the instructions and teachings that make up the bulk of what are the book of Exodus and the entirety of Leviticus – all those ordinances and decrees that were to shape and form every aspect of the lives of God’s chosen people: how they were to dress, what they were to eat, what was forbidden to eat, how they were to organize their families and society, whom they could marry, how they were to administer justice, how they were to handle questions of property and possessions and employees, what festivals they were to celebrate and when and how ... all that and much more; but especially how they were to live as God’s chosen people and relate to him through the worship practices that the Lord himself prescribed. In the Jewish mind, it’s all that divine instruction, that *Torah* as they call it, which makes them who and what they are. The way they see themselves, they are first and foremost the people of God’s Law or people of the Book – the one people chosen by the Lord above all others to receive and to live according to the Word that he handed down to them from heaven.

And that, my friends, is a pity; because that’s *not* how the Lord God intended for them to see themselves. No, instead, all those instructions might be thought of sort of like giving directions for how to get to a certain place. It’s like somebody calls you up with their cell phone from their car and asks you how to get to a particular location. And you say, “Okay, proceed north for several miles until you come to a four way stop, then turn right, go two miles or so, take a left once you’re past a big white house, and then three more miles and you’re there.” Those instructions might be perfect—provided, of course, that you knew for sure what the starting point was. If the person calling you was lost and misrepresented to you where he was to begin with, then your instructions wouldn’t help him one bit. That’s the way it was and still is today with the majority of practicing Jews. They don’t know who and what and where they were to begin with, so all those directions the Lord gave them at Sinai don’t get them where they hope to be.

And again, that’s because in a mentally foundational sort of way they begin their story with the giving of the Law – that’s anchoring point of their self-identity. But it’s the wrong place to start. You see, even before they got to Mount Sinai – in fact, even before they left Egypt by passing through the Red Sea, the Lord gave them specific instructions designed to impress upon them their *true* starting point. We see it in this morning’s Old Testament reading where the Lord orders his people to begin a practice intended to

reinforce upon their collective consciousness exactly who and what they are and what event in their history defines the way they should think about themselves. It's not what happened at Sinai; but instead, it's the tenth and most terrible plague that resulted in their release from Egypt that he wanted them to focus on. And with that as their point of reference, what they were to think of themselves before and above everything else is that they were a people *redeemed* by God.

That's the message that comes through loud and clear in the passage we heard from Exodus. There the Lord says, "I want you to remember this day in which you came out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; and how I brought you out by the strength of my mighty arm. And to cause you to keep this event foremost in your mind, you are to consecrate to me all the firstborn of men and animals." God told the people that they were to set aside the firstborn for him. The reason for this is that's what the price of their redemption was. Recall that the Egyptians (and especially their Pharaoh) didn't want to release their grip on God's people. And it's easy to see why. With the Israelites on hand the Egyptians had a cheap and subservient workforce at their disposal. They could be set to hard work, fed slops not fit for pigs, threatened and beaten if they fell short in their quotas, and they could even be put to death if they complained or were disobedient – and no one in Egypt would care. In fact, since the Israelites were breeding like rabbits, they actually took measures to decrease the slave population by killing off their infant boys.

Life for the Israelites in Egypt was no life at all. It was instead a miserable, prolonged death designed to extract as much effort from them as could be wrung out efficiently before they expired. And there was no foreseeable end to it. They were born slaves, they lived a slave's hard, bitter existence, and they died prematurely as slaves, all the while helpless and without hope that their situation might improve. And that's where they would have remained had not the Lord intervened to rescue them. But the Lord heard the cries of his pathetic and powerless people, he had compassion on them, and he reached down from heaven to save them.

That's what their redemption was all about. To redeem something means to buy it back or to ransom it from captivity. And you know the story: the Lord sent Moses to ask nicely for the people's release. The Pharaoh not only said no; but he increased their burdens in order to drive silly notions of going free out of their heads. The Lord responded by inflicting upon the Egyptians a series of nine plagues, each one successively more troublesome and costly than the one that preceded it; and though each new plague made the Pharaoh flinch and promise to set the Israelites free, as soon as the plague was over he changed his mind and tightened his grip. Finally, the Lord said that he was through fooling around (that's something of a paraphrase, by the way). He sent Moses to the Pharaoh to say, "Look here: the nation of Israel is my beloved firstborn son. If you don't give me back mine, I am going to take yours from you."

And that, of course, is exactly what happened. To secure the release of his people, the Lord extracted a terrible price from Egypt: the death of an entire nation's firstborn – both of man and beast. And that's what the Lord is saying to his people in the passage we heard. He's saying, "I purchased you and brought you out of living hell by the deaths of multitudes. The cost was enormous and caused untold anguish and suffering. I never want you to forget that. And to ensure that you won't forget, you are to sacrifice the firstborn males of your livestock, and redeem by sacrifice the firstborn males of your children." It was to be ongoing memorial and a device for teaching future generations. The idea was that children would ask, "Why are we killing all these animals? Why not keep them and raise them? It seems to be a terrible waste." And the answer was to be, "Because we are a people redeemed by God: that's who we are. We were ransomed from endless misery by the death of a nation's firstborn. We sacrifice so that we don't forget who we are."

At the beginning of this message, I asked you to consider *who* and what *you* are. And of course, I can't read minds, but I'm willing to bet that many of you thought of your name, "I'm so and so": but a name is only a label, it isn't *who* you are. Maybe you thought of your place in a family, "I'm the son or daughter of these folks" or "I'm a father, a wife, a grandmother, a child"; but again, that's simply how you're related to others. It's your placement in the social structure. It's not *who* you are. Maybe you thought of defining yourself by an occupation: a student, a farmer, a businessman, a teacher; but that's what you do. It isn't *who* you are. Now, maybe, since it was the pastor asking the question, you knew you should try to come up

with some kind of religious answer because that's what I'd be looking for. And so maybe you thought, "I'm a Christian. I'm one who believes in Jesus and tries to live according to his teachings. I try to keep the commandments and the golden rule: doing unto others as I would have them do to me." Perhaps you thought something like that; but if so, you made the same mistake that Jewish people who find their identity in the giving of the Law make. You're starting in the wrong place.

I won't put you on the spot by asking for a show of hands, but I wonder how many thought, "I am a person redeemed by God. *That's* who I am. And the event that anchors my identity is the crucifixion and death of God's Firstborn – His Only Begotten Son – on my behalf. He did that to ransom me from my hopeless, futile life of sin and an eternity of misery in hell. By God's amazing grace and his boundless love for me, *that's* who I am."

My friends, whether or not that's what you were thinking, that *is* who you are. And the Lord wants you to remember it and keep that thought first and foremost in your mind at all times. And to help you keep your center of identity there, he's given us means to impress and reinforce it upon us – precisely so that we do not forget. No, we don't have to make sacrifices of our firstborn male livestock or redeem by sacrifice our firstborn children as he instructed his people of old to do as a method of remembering what was once done for them. He has a much better solution for us. Now he provides ways for us to receive again to ourselves the *actual sacrifice* he made for us. That's what happened to you in your Baptism. In the water and by the Word of God you were brought into Jesus Christ and made a participant with him in his death, burial, and resurrection. His sacrificial death that took place two thousand years ago for you was made present tense and applied personally to you. And in the water Jesus drew you into his arms and said, "Let me tell you who you are: you are one that I have redeemed." He said the same thing to you earlier in this service when you heard me pronounce the words of his forgiveness. When I said, "As a called servant of the Word I forgive you all your sins", Jesus was saying to you through me, "I gave my life to free you. You are redeemed from sin's power and oppression." Likewise, a little later in this service, kneeling at this altar you will receive to yourself the sacrifice Jesus made for you. There he will say, "This is my body and blood – the body and blood of God's Firstborn offered up for the price of your redemption. Take them. Consume them. And by touching, smelling, and tasting my sacrifice for you, know that you are free. Know that I have redeemed you."

... And not just redeemed you, but also empowered you. Let me explain: God freed the Old Testament Israelites from slavery in Egypt; but by forgetting to place their redemption first and making the mistake of defining themselves by the Law, they made themselves slaves again. That is, I must obey the law and do what it commands in order to be a person of the law. If I don't, then I have to admit that though I have the Law, since I don't keep it, by definition I am a law breaker and under its curse. The same thing happens if I define my life as a Christian by what I do and how well I follow the teachings of Jesus. If that's the way I think of myself, I have to admit that since I really don't love my neighbor as myself, or love my enemies as I ought, or keep the golden rule, then I must be no Christian. And no matter how hard I work at it, I never will be.

Ah, but if I start in the right place, if I start with God's assurance that I am already a redeemed person and that sin and death no longer have power over me, then I understand that the teachings and instructions Jesus gives me are not given to *make* me one of his, but rather to guide me in his way since *I am* one of his. It's in this light that we read a passage like today's Epistle lesson, where Paul says, "Since *you are* God's chosen ones, holy and beloved" – because that's what Christ made you when he redeemed you – "put on compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving each other" and so on. The instructions are only good and helpful if you start at the right place.

And since today is the eve of a new year, it's an especially opportune time for us to think about starting in the right place. So, this time I will ask for a show of hands: raise your hand if you'd like to do better this year than last in your walk with the Lord Jesus. Good. We're agreed then. Let's make it a New Year's resolution. And let's make it knowing that ability to keep it lies not in trying harder to be what we cannot make ourselves, but rather by knowing who we are in Christ Jesus: that is, a redeemed people, forgiven of sin, washed in his blood, and raised with him to a new and holy life. Each and every day let's

begin there with the knowledge of who we really are, and he will empower us by his Word and guide us by his Spirit to live lives that show forth what he has made us. God grant it to us for Jesus' sake. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!