

# A people with a mission

A sermon in the "what is church" series

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## Introduction

Welcome everybody. I hope you all enjoyed your coffee. Especially welcome to those of you who are here for the first time. My hope, and our hope, is that you will feel at home, and that you would like to come back.

Last Sunday we began a new series of sermons on the theme "What is church?". PM promised four sermons on this, and he started off with church as a hospital. When I was given the opportunity to speak today, I found this theme very inspiring. So, in addition to PM's promised four sermons, you will get a bonus one today. Today's title is "A people with a mission".

By the way, my name is Ola Wingbrant, and I am given the opportunity to preach in this church from time to time.

## What is church?

What is church? Peter, one of Jesus' closest disciples, addresses this question in a letter written to several churches in the area of present day eastern Turkey. He is writing in the 1:st century AD, and is using a temple as a metaphor when he talks about the congregation. In 1 Peter 2:4-10 we read

4 As you come to him [Jesus], the living Stone - rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him - 5 you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

He quotes a couple of Old Testament passages and then continues

9 But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. 10 Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

So, by faith in Jesus you and I can become part of a God's people. But this belonging also comes with a mission to be a holy priesthood, and a holy nation.

Now, some of you are going like "Time out! TIME OUT!". Where did Peter get that? And what does it mean? These are good questions!

## **The beginning of God's people**

Let us start with God's people. What does it mean to be part of the people of God? In order to answer that question I would like to back up another 1600 or so years and relocate to Mesopotamia. This brings us into the Middle Bronze Age in what is roughly the northern part of present day Iraq. The piece of text we are going to read is Genesis 12:1-4, i.e. the first verses of chapter 12 in the first book of the Bible. It says:

1The Lord had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you. 2"I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. 3I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." 4So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran.

Abram is the same person as Abraham, a name given to him a while later by God. To understand the significance of this text we have to put it into its context. If we read the previous 11 chapters we see that God's creation has been marred by man's sin and disobedience. Chapter 12 is a turning point. God launches a plan to redeem and restore his creation.

*God is a god on a mission.*

Out of pure grace he calls Abraham to participate in this mission. The text more or less says "Go, be a blessing, and all peoples on the earth will be blessed through you". Abraham is also promised to become a great nation.

*This is nothing less than the beginning of God's people.*

God is a faithful god, and Abraham, through his son Isaac, and Isaac's son Jacob, becomes the father of the people of Israel. It is clear from the text that the election of Abraham is *not* solely for his sake alone. The goal is universal blessing. It is an election of one for the sake of many.

*God's people is people with a mission to bless others.*

## **Royal priesthood, holy nation**

Through a series of events, the people of Israel end up in slavery in Egypt for 400 years. When God saves Israel out of this slavery, he makes a covenant with them and reveals more of what it means to be part of his people. In Exodus 19:4-6 he says

4 'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. 5 Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, 6 you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

"A kingdom of priests, and a holy nation." Here we meet the temple metaphor again. A temple was understood to be a holy place, i.e. a place set aside for God. It was a place for meeting God. Priests served in a temple as mediators between God and man, to enable man to come before God.

So what God is saying in these verses is that Israel will be a people, set aside for him, to serve him as priests. I.e. their mission is to be mediators, they are to enable man to come before God. Remember, God is god on a mission to restore his creation. Specifically he is on a mission to restore his relationship with humanity. *All* of humanity.

*His liberation of Israel is a liberation from slavery into a freedom for mission.*

As his people they are to bless others, and act like priests. This mission is then repeated in various ways throughout the history of Israel. Two examples from two of the great prophets in the Old Testament are Jeremiah 29:7:

"Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper."

and Isaiah 49:6

he [God] says: "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth."

## **Fullfillment**

God fulfills his promise to Abraham, that all people will be blessed through him, by sending Jesus. Jesus was a descendant of Abraham, through Isaac and Jacob. Through Jesus life, death and resurrection, God offers a new covenant. A covenant open to all. By believing in Jesus, and accepting his offering of forgiveness through his death on the cross, anyone can become a part of God's people.

## **Implications**

We are now in a position to better understand Peter's words. Through the new covenant, believers in Jesus become part of God's people. Believers who gather together form a "temple". It is a community or fellowship where people can meet God. Their mission, and thus our mission, is to bless others, enable people to meet God, and participate in God's mission to restore and recreate his creation. Indeed, the very last thing Jesus tells his disciples after his death and resurrection, but before his ascension to heaven is this:

18 Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

"...go and make disciples... baptize them... teach them..." i.e. Jesus is calling his disciples to enable people to meet God, and become part of his people. As we have seen, this is not a late afterthought. This mission has been with God's people right from the beginning with Abraham.

Friends, church is not a building. Church is believers gathering together.

*Church is a people with a mission.*

We are all invited to participate in that mission. We are invited to bless, restore and recreate. You and I are invited to be agents of change.

*God says GO!*