

*Sermon for Proper 6, Year A
by Fr. Garrin W. Dickinson
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Our Old Testament lesson requires some context. Most people know the story of the exodus, when God sent the plagues on Egypt, and brought his people out, and saved them at the Red Sea. After that, God led them through the desert, where they complained about not having enough water or food. And each time they complained, God provided. Water from the rock, and manna and quail from the sky. They have not received the law yet. There is no priestly caste or sacrificial system. God is just beginning to form his people and show them who he is and what he wants them to be.

Remember that this is a nation of people whose only real claim to fame is that they are fertile. They've produced lots of babies and not much else. In fact, they produced so many children that the Pharaohs got scared and instituted a population control initiative, infanticide.

But this is no great culture or civilization. This is a nation of slaves. The children of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel are used to being taken care of in Egypt. And in return for having their basic physical needs met, they did what they were told. They could complain about it in private, but they didn't really have to take any responsibility for anything, as long as they didn't rebel against their Egyptian masters. They didn't have to love the Egyptians. They didn't have to trust the Egyptians. They didn't even have to obey the Egyptians. All they had to do was not get caught disobeying. And for that they were taken care of.

Now here they are. They've been rescued from their Egyptian masters by an omniscient, omnipotent God. But inside, they are still slaves. They don't know how to take responsibility for themselves. They don't know how to love and trust God. They expect him to be like the Egyptians, only nicer. They hated the Egyptians, so they were glad to get away from them. Now they expect to despise, distrust, and complain about God, if he doesn't give them everything they want. And they fully expect to ignore him if a better offer comes along.

But God has other plans. "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 will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." God wants his people to relate to him as loving, trusting subjects, not as slaves. He owns everything, but they are his special possession, his treasure. And he wants them to be a royal priesthood and a holy nation.

This is what God has always wanted for his people. Over a thousand years later, St. Peter will write to the followers of Jesus Christ, “you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation”. And here in Exodus, the process begins. God begins with a nation of slaves and begins to turn them into a kingdom of priests.

So what does that mean? A priest stands before God on behalf of the people and before the people on behalf of God. He is a conduit, however imperfect, of the love and grace and truth of God to the people. And he gathers the people, however imperfectly, to worship and serve God. But here in this passage, there aren’t any individual priests appointed. There is no priestly caste among the people yet. Before God does that, he says that all of his people are to be priestly.

So we, as the whole people of God are to be conduits for the love and grace and truth of God to the rest of the world. We are to gather them in like a harvest, so that they too can worship and serve God. We stand before God for the world. In our prayers and in our actions, we must always be bringing to him those who do not know him. And we stand before the world for God. When the world looks at us, it sees the God whom we serve, whether that is the God who created the universe or some other, lesser god.

There are those of us who are called to be examples of this priestly ministry among you. But you may not simply expect us to do it for you. The larger task is ours together. And it will demand from each of us a life lived intentionally in the presence of God, learning from Jesus, who is our great high priest. It will take an effort to love, trust, honor, and obey God every moment of every day. And there is no short-cut.

God has been working out his purposes patiently ever since we twisted his creation in the Fall. His plan may have different stages, but the goal never changes. He is still forming his people to be this royal priesthood, set apart for his service. But I wonder how many of us are still slaves wandering in the desert. We’ve been set free of our bondage to sin by the blood of Christ and our baptism. But have we really learned to love and serve the Lord who freed us? Or would we still rather just know what we can get away with?