

A KINGDOM OF PRIESTS, A HOLY NATION

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Exodus 19

A VERSE TO REMEMBER

“Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.” (Exod. 19:5b–6)

Daily Bible Readings			
M	Feb. 24	Rev. 1:3–8	We Are Priests
T	Feb. 25	Ps. 106:36–48	Give Thanks to God’s Holy Name
W	Feb. 26	Lev. 19:1–10	Be Holy
Th	Feb. 27	Lev. 19:11–18	Love Your Neighbor as Yourself
F	Feb. 28	Rev. 20:1–6	Priests of God and Christ
Sa	Mar. 1	Mic. 6:1–8	Do Justice, Love Kindness, Walk Humbly

STEPPING INTO THE WORD

In his book *Bowling Alone*, sociologist Robert Putnam described how social capital in the United States was declining.¹ Social capital is the network of relationships among people that lets a society function. Putnam pointed to the decline of bowling leagues. He observed that just as many people were bowling as they had been decades earlier, but they weren’t joining leagues. He noticed the same phenomenon in service clubs, community organizations, and churches.

Nevertheless, human beings are social creatures. We need connections. One way we understand who we are is through our relationships. Over the last quarter century, many people have sought connection in on-line communities. For all the benefits that Facebook groups and Instagram feeds provide, they usually engage only a portion of who we are, such as our interest in a particular topic, without providing ways to engage with one another that help us grapple with life’s most pressing issues. Additionally, these communities can be polarizing. There’s often not the kind of accountability for our words and actions that is found in communities where people gather face to face.

1. Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

Today's Scripture passage describes the formation of a community that is grounded, not in a shared interest or a common ideal, but is called into existence by God. The basis of this community is the One who created the heavens and the earth. The community is formed to partner with God's continuing work of redeeming creation and inviting human beings into life-giving relationship.

Exodus 19 describes the rituals that God used to form this community. These may seem strange to us, but they remind us of God's incomprehensible greatness. God reaches out to human beings and cares about us. How amazing it is that this God would one day live among us, die for us, and invite all people into covenant community.

Awesome God, you reach out to your people and claim us as your own. Prepare us to renew the covenant that you have made with us in Christ. Amen.



SCRIPTURE

Exodus 19:1-14

19:1 On the third new moon after the Israelites had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that very day, they came into the wilderness of Sinai. ²They journeyed from Rephidim, entered the wilderness of Sinai, and camped in the wilderness; Israel camped there in front of the mountain. ³Then Moses went up to God; the LORD called to him from the mountain, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob and tell the Israelites: ⁴'You have seen what I did to the Egyptians and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. ⁵Now, 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, ⁶but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.' These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites."

⁷So Moses went, summoned the elders of the people, and set before them all these words that the LORD had commanded him. ⁸The people all answered as one, "Everything that the LORD has spoken we will do." Moses reported the words of the people to the LORD. ⁹Then the LORD said to Moses, "I am going to come to you in a dense cloud, in order that the people may hear when I speak with you and so trust you ever after."

When Moses had told the words of the people to the LORD, ¹⁰the LORD said to Moses, "Go to the people and consecrate them

Note: Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

today and tomorrow. Have them wash their clothes ¹¹and prepare for the third day, because on the third day the LORD will come down upon Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. ¹²You shall set limits for the people all around, saying, ‘Be careful not to go up the mountain or to touch the edge of it. Any who touch the mountain shall be put to death. ¹³No hand shall touch them, but they shall be stoned or shot with arrows; whether animal or human being, they shall not live.’ When the trumpet sounds a long blast, they may go up on the mountain.” ¹⁴So Moses went down from the mountain to the people. He consecrated the people, and they washed their clothes.

THE CALL TO BE A COVENANT COMMUNITY

Exodus 12–18 tells the exciting story of the Israelites’ exodus from Egypt and their first months of freedom. We learn how God delivered them from slavery, drowned Pharaoh’s army after parting the sea, and guided them by a cloud during the day and a pillar of fire at night. Throughout those months, God prepared them for the long and arduous journey that was before them. God assured them that they would receive manna for food each day. When they complained of thirst, God provided water from a rock. God gave them victory when they were attacked by the Amalakites, an assurance that they could rely on God when they encountered resistance from the people who confronted them along the way. Moses’ father-in-law Jethro helped Moses set up a system to resolve disputes and govern the people.

Once they reached the wilderness of Sinai, the Israelites got down to business. It was there that God had summoned Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt by speaking to him from a burning bush. After giving Moses his assignment and describing how the Israelites would be freed from Pharaoh’s clutches, God told Moses how he would know all of this was God’s doing. You would think that all the plagues and miracles associated with the Exodus would be enough evidence that God was behind it all. But no; God said, “this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.” (Exod. 3:12)

So there they were, at the foot of Mt. Sinai, ready to receive the sign God promised. They were there to worship God. In their worship, they received their mission statement, the purpose for which God had delivered them. “The whole earth is mine,” God

said, “but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.” (vv. 5, 6) God reaffirmed and extended the covenant made with Abram that his descendants would be a blessing and in him “all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:3).

There, in the worship of God, the community received its identity. It was not something they fashioned for themselves. The intricate preparations for their encounter with God emphasized that this was not a meeting of equals. The foundation of this covenant community was much deeper than any shared interest or common heritage. It was the call of God.

 **How do the communities you belong to shape your life?**

 **What difference does it make to you that you belong to the community that is the church?**

JOINING IN GOD’S RECONCILING WORK

Imagine that God, after making the universe and entrusting this planet to human beings, stepped back from all the entanglements in which we find ourselves. But this is not the nature of God. God is not a solitary, isolated being. The very essence of God is in relationships. This is expressed in the way we understand God as Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit existing in a unified relationship with each other, one God in three persons.

The climax of the creation story in Genesis 1 is when God creates humankind in the image of God so that we have the capacity to relate to our Creator. But there is more. In Genesis 2, God observes, “It is not good that the man should be alone” (v. 18). God created another human being so the two could work together to tend the earth God entrusted to them.

Freedom is essential to any loving relationship. Genesis 3 describes how human beings abuse the freedom God gives us. Even though we are made in God’s image and receive all we need from God, we try to live as if we can get by on our own. The Bible recounts how God draws us back into the loving relationships for which we were made.

At the foot of Mt. Sinai, God explained to the Israelites the role they have in God’s design to restore the creation. Through them, God would draw all people into a life-giving relationship with our Maker. God told the Israelites that they would be “a priestly kingdom and a holy nation” (v. 6). As priests, they would be

God's spokespeople to the world. As a holy nation, they would demonstrate for all what it looks like to live faithfully for God.

One aspect of holiness is being set apart for a special purpose. God instructed Moses on how to consecrate the people so that they were ready to receive the instructions for how to live as God's people. These instructions are summarized in Exodus 20, what we know as The Ten Commandments. The first four tell how to relate to God. The last six tell how to relate to one another.

For over 400 years, Israel had found its identity in its lineage from Abraham. Now God took their community to a new level of connection and purpose. Their community was now based on more than common ancestry or shared experience. They were bound together in a relationship, a covenant with God.

 **How do you prepare yourself to encounter God?**

 **What difference do your preparations make in the way you relate with God and with others?**

STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

In many ways, the covenant that God made with ancient Israel at Sinai was like other covenants in the ancient world. Those covenants listed the good things a king had done for his subjects and laid out what they were required to do in return. The covenant at Sinai was unique in that the more powerful party, God, gave the people of ancient Israel a role in the divine plan.

Today's church has similarities with associations like bowling leagues and service clubs. We form valuable relationships, and we do good work. Churches follow practices of good governance and financial management that are common to most non-profit organizations. Unlike other organizations, the church inherits the covenant God made with Israel. We are called to be priests, representatives of Christ in the world.

Like ancient Israel, our calling grows out of our encounter with God in worship. Church councils and committees prepare long-range plans and budgets that reflect their priorities, but their purpose is to help us live into the identity God gives us when we are shaped by prayer, praise and worship and grounded in Word and sacrament. As individuals, we set goals and prioritize tasks, but our guiding principle is to do what Jesus would have us do to show God's love to the world.

God gave ancient Israel the covenant in a place set apart. When the people stood at the foot of Mt. Sinai, it was as if they were in the place where earth and heaven met. It is in places like that where we often meet God. We take care to make sure that our places of worship are special, holy, set apart. Some worship in grand cathedrals with soaring arches. Others worship in store fronts or auditoriums designated as holy by things as simple as a table with a loaf and a cup or a banner with the sign of the cross. Exodus 19 reminds us that we are not to take our encounters with God lightly. Wherever we meet God is a holy place. Knowing that we are in a place set apart, we can prepare ourselves for what we are about to receive: an encounter with God.

Not only does worship strengthen our relationship with God, it also binds us more strongly with our fellow worshipers. Unlike other organizations that exist to support shared interests or points of view, the church is bound together by the Spirit of God. What we share transcends whatever worldly differences we have.

 **What happens in worship that helps you encounter God?**

 **How does worshipping with others in your church affect your relationship with them?**

SCRIPTURE NOTES

The following notes from the Uniform Series provide additional information about today's Scripture.

1. When Yahweh called Moses to go to Pharaoh, Yahweh promised that the people would “worship God on this mountain” (Exod. 3:12). Israel was set free to worship God.
2. The covenant (*berit*) is a binding legal agreement (contract). It can refer to transactions in a wide variety of contexts, including personal (Gen. 31:44), familial (1 Sam. 20:16; Mal. 2:14), business (Jer. 34:8–10), and international settings (Josh. 9:6; 1 Kgs. 15:19). The basic form of Yahweh’s covenant with Israel is found in Exodus 19:4–6.
3. In the ancient Near East, a king is a treasured possession of his own god. He is personally chosen, blessed, and protected by that deity. Israel was to be Yahweh’s treasured possession, serving God as a nation of priests (Hebrew *kohanim*).