

**Freedom To: A Kingdom of Priests**  
LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church  
Nov. 18, 2018 – AM Sermon  
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Exodus 19:1-9

In verse 4 of our passage you have an image that has been beloved by generations of God's people: *God as an eagle*. God says to Israel, "*I carried you on eagle's wings and brought you to myself.*" You also find this image in Deuteronomy 32:11:

*"[The Lord] shielded Israel and cared for him...  
like an eagle that stirs up its nest  
and hovers over its young,  
that spreads its wings to catch them  
and carries them aloft."*

The image is based on their understanding of how a Mother bird took care of her eaglets. When the birds were learning to fly, mama would push the fledgling out of the nest. The young one would flap and flail and try to fly. When the eaglet's strength gave out, when he was falling and about to crash, Mama would swoop down catch the little one, bear him up on eagle's wings and carry him safely back to the nest. "I carried you on eagle's wings."

The image also shows up in some of our Christian songs. All you people who sang youth music in the 80's probably remember "On Eagles Wings?" It's number 438 in Worship and Rejoice. "*And he will raise you up on Eagles wings, bear you on the breath of dawn, Make you to shine like the sun, and hold you in the palm of his hand.*" I was a teenager in the 80's. I sang that song at conventions - everyone holding hands with their neighbors and swaying. We loved that song and we loved that image because we saw it as an image of God's great care for us. We were all learning to fly and this was a promise of safety, and security and refuge.

It's also a fitting image for what God has done for Israel at this point. In Egypt, Israel was like a helpless eaglet tumbling from the sky. The Lord swooped down and rescued her, brought her out of there, gave her freedom. That's the "freedom from" part of the story that we focused on in our early sermons of this series. I carried you up on eagles' wings! It's a beautiful image of rescue and care.

But there is another side to this image. We love the idea of God swooping under us when we're falling. We love the idea of God lifting us up and carrying us to safety. But if we take only the warm fuzzy part from this image we've missed half of it! Remember, Mama Eagle didn't just catch the eaglet; she also pushed him out of the nest! When mama took you on her back and bore you up on her wings, she didn't just do it to keep you warm and safe; she did it to teach you to fly! The love of our God is not just a love that embraces; it's also a love that disciplines. The strongest and best loves always do. God doesn't just want to keep us safe, he wants us to fly.

This is, of course, the 'freedom to' part of God's love. God is shaping Israel and us for a holy purpose. Our passage is right at the place where freedom from turns into freedom to. Our passage is the point where God reveals to his people the shape of their freedom and the purpose of that freedom. Thus far in the 'freedom to' sermons we've focused on very specific ways in which the law of God shapes our freedom: here's how we approach time, here's how we approach art, here's how we approach truth telling. But now we will hear the grand purpose behind all these laws. All the smaller laws of Exodus are in service of a larger strategic purpose.

What is that large strategic purpose? Our passage tells us. *“Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”* *“The whole earth is mine.”* God made this world, and it belongs to him and all the peoples of the world were meant to give glory to their creator. But the peoples of the earth had forgotten God’s name. They’ve forgotten the Lord who loved them and made them. God wants to change that. He wants all the peoples of the world to know his name and to know his Love. Israel will be the nation who will teach the world the Lord’s name. He will show Israel his love, he will teach Israel His ways. And when the world sees this nation with love in its heart and justice in its streets, they will say to each other, *“Who is the Lord of that people?! I want to know his name!”* This is Israel’s grand purpose. They will be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, teaching the world the name of the Lord.

It’s not just Israel whose central purpose is to make God’s name glorious, it’s not just Israel who are called to be royal priesthood and a holy nation, it’s us too. Exodus 19:6 is a pretty good description of the purpose of the church. We have been rescued! We have been saved!! We have been set free. We have been carried on eagle’s wings out of the jaws of sin and death. But why did God rescue us? Did he rescue us so that we could settle down in our nests living happily ever after, comfortable and safe? No, we have the same call as Israel. Listen to 1 Peter 2:

*“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...  
Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing  
wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God.”*

Just like Israel the church is called to be an exemplary community, a community that models grace, obedience and love so that the world looks at us and says, *“Who is the Lord of those people! I want to know his name!”*

So that’s Israel’s call, that’s our call... How are we doing with that call? Are we a holy people making God’s name great among the people out there? Are we living such good lives among the ‘pagans’ that they see our good deeds and give glory to God? Statistics suggest otherwise. I heard Philip Yancey preach about this a couple of years ago. He said when you think of the task of the church in America today you need to think of a number: 16. 16 as in 16%. Why 16%? As late as 1996 85% of all Americans who had no religious commitment still had a favorable opinion of the Christianity. 85% of outsiders had positive impressions of Christianity. In 2009 only 16% of young outsiders had the same favorable impression. When you asked the same young outsiders about their opinion of evangelicals that number dipped to 3%. 16% to 3%. Not good. Our brand is tanking. How did we get there? That’s an important conversation and the answer is complicated. I don’t want to get into that this morning. I’d rather talk about what we do about this.

How do we raise the brand of Christianity? How do we lift up the name of our Lord in our society? 1 Peter seems to say, *“Well, that’s simple: if you want to lift God’s name higher, you have to live up to your call to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. You have to live such good lives among the people out there that they will see your good deeds and give glory to your father in heaven.”*

That sounds clear enough, but let me ask you this: How many of you want to be God’s poster boy or God’s poster girl? How many of you are ready to be the person who stands up and says: *“Yeah! All the unbelievers out there should feel free to take a close look at my life. I’m pretty sure that when they look at me they will see my good deeds and give glory to God. I’m willing to represent the holy nation and the royal priesthood.”* My guess is not many of us are

eager for that assignment. We know our sins and our sins are always before us. We don't feel like great moral exemplars; we feel like regular folk. And yet, as we've seen this call is central to who God wants us to be. From the Old Testament to the New Testament, we are supposed to represent his name. How are regular folk like us supposed to change the tide of opinion out there?

Two things here. First, you don't have to have it all together in order for Christ to shine in you. In fact your life can be pretty messy and you can still show God's glory. You see, glory of God is not revealed in perfection, it is revealed in humble change. Imagine a righteousness spectrum. Over here on the left is zero righteousness, pure evil. I don't think any human being ever reaches those depths. Over here on the right is perfection. No earthly person reaches that end either (except Jesus). Now, on the spectrum of righteousness, we have a person over here who is 85%. He keeps 85% of the law. Then over here we have a person who has kept only 10% of God's laws. Mr. 85% gets up every morning feeling good about being a decent citizen. He looks at other people, feels satisfied and makes no attempt to change anything in his life. Why should he! He's Mr. 85%. Mr. 10% isn't happy about who he is. He knows he's fallen short and he's sorry. Every day he strains to do a little better. Every day he tries to be, he prays to be Mr. 11%. Who shows the glory of God? Who shows the power of God's resurrection? Mr. 85% holding steady; or Mr. 10% becoming Mr. 11? It's not about where you are on the righteousness spectrum; it's about getting on your knees and asking God to change you. Are you on your knees asking God to change you? The glory of God is not revealed in perfection, it is revealed in humble change. This is the lesson of Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. There's not a person here so broken that they can't become part of this royal priesthood, this Holy nation.

Which brings us to the second thing to say to those of us who feel inadequate when it comes to representing Jesus in the world. If you really want people to see God's glory and God's goodness through you, if you really want people to see the beauty of Christianity and the church, don't point to your life. You point to Jesus. He's the royal priest. He's the head of the Holy nation. In Exodus 19, God gives Israel the role of representing his name among the nations. God wants people to look at Israel and see his glory. Jesus fulfills that holy purpose. In the New Testament it's when we look at Jesus that we see God's glory. Hebrews says, "*The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His being.*" Jesus himself says, "*If you have seen the Father you have seen me.*" If you want people to see God's glory in the church, you point to Jesus.

I promise you that if we stand up and say, "Hey everyone, if you want to see the royal priesthood, take a look at us!" our popularity rating will sink. There's a better way. We could stand up and say: "Hey everyone, we are just like you. We are a family of broken people, we are messy, we fight with each other, we make a hash of our relationships, we lose our temper, and we lose our way. But we belong to Jesus! We are loved by Jesus! We aren't much to look at, but Jesus is amazing. He gave up power and might to become a poor child. He healed the sick. He embraced the unclean. He lifted up the fallen and brought down the proud. He loved the world so much he died for it. Every day he comes down into the mess of my life and helps me take another step towards the light." Not only would all that be true; it would be glorious. In him the call of Exodus 19 and 1 Peter is possible. In him we are a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God.

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