

October 5th, 2008 was the date when I made a decision that would radically alter the path of my life. It was a decision that would change everything in one moment, yet at the same time, it would seemingly change nothing. The event had been planned for quite some time, and I was orchestrating the exact details of the day.

First, we would drive up to Lake Tahoe. From there, we'd enjoy a nice early midday walk around the lake. Then, right before lunch, we'd hop on a cruise around Zephyr Cove, only to be dropped off just in time for dinner reservations that I had made at a table that would be next to a window that would provide a stunning view of the sun going down right behind the mountains over the lake.

While the anxiousness was more than I anticipated, the details, care, and planning helped me direct my nervous energy to executing the plan. We arrived at the restaurant; I grabbed the gift I was about to extend to Lindsay and jammed a disposable camera in my pocket, hoping to secretly capture the moment.

The waitress came over and took our orders, and then I extended the gift across the table. At that exact time as she opened it, I dropped to a knee and asked for her hand in marriage. Well, the rest is history. I distinctly remember the contrast of that particular night in which everything had changed, and yet after that moment, we drove home; I woke up on a Monday morning and went back to school and work. There was this weird tension of everything had just changed, and yet nothing had changed.

There are these moments, these decisions, and I'm wondering if you've had a similar experience. My guess is that you have had an experience like that in which something changed everything, and yet you were in that waiting before it came to be. There are these thresholds in life in which decisions happen, where things change, and yet you're in that tension of waiting for it to happen.

In that moment, I became Lindsay's fiancé, but that was really just a transition period en route to becoming her husband. The time between the times can be called a liminal space, which is a place of tension and transition. They are the space between being and becoming. I was her fiancé, but it was for the goal of becoming her husband.

Have you ever had that experience of living in between in the liminal spaces? Some of them can be quite mundane. Think of when you're at the airport or a train station and waiting for your departure. You've left home, and yet you're in between home and where you desire to go. It's that orientation at a new job

where it's that period of adjustment, that first week in which you're no longer working for who you were, but you haven't quite settled into where you're going. Liminal spaces can be quite mundane like that.

Other liminal spaces can be quite life-defining, as the one I described. They can be filled with hope or maybe even heartbreak. Think of graduation ceremonies. It's the end of one stage of life, your educational journey, and the beginning of another, a career or a vocation. Think of pregnancy, a period of waiting and preparation that's filled with anxiety, hope, unknown, and coming joy. Think of retirement from the shift of a structured day-to-day routine and identity within a career to a new, growing, different sense of purpose and rhythm. Think of a hospital waiting room filled with tension, fear, hope, as you wait for the test results to come back and the diagnosis, whichever way the doctor delivers it.

Regardless of the context, the liminal spaces in life have a potency within them to transform the trajectory of your life. Because in all of those examples I just gave, whether mundane or life-altering, the liminal space is the place in which you change. Lindsay and I were engaged for ten months, and I can tell you it was probably the worst ten months of our relationship. We hated engagement. That space was difficult, filled with charged energy and tension, all of that in between. We couldn't wait to be married, but it was in the tension that I learned and grew.

The liminal space is the space of transformation. Think of the new employee at the office. Orientation week is, although mundane, a space in which they're learning the new rhythms of office culture. Think of maybe that hospital waiting room, filled with that tension in which you are being transformed and changed as you wait, longing to hear word back. Every time we enter these liminal spaces, something ends, and another thing begins. Every new beginning comes from some other beginnings, and liminal spaces are the spaces of transformation.

We are in the second half of the Book of Exodus. We find ourselves in a pivotal moment in the life of Israel. Exodus 19 to 24 is a high point, not only in the narrative of Exodus but in all of the scriptures. I want to return to the beginning of this season with Exodus 19 because it is a paramount chapter within the whole story of the scriptures.

Exodus, as we've noted, isn't just about one liberation. That's what the first half of Exodus is about. But Exodus is about two liberations. First, God liberates the people out of Egypt, and the

second liberation is getting Egypt out of the people. All of that begins at Exodus 19. Three weeks ago, Dan preached through the Ten Commandments, which was Exodus 20.

In Exodus 20, you see the Ten Commandments, God's vision for a new community. It provides a framework for honoring God, respecting others, and living a life of integrity, responsibility, and love. In Exodus 21, two weeks ago, we got really deep into the weeds when I explored ancient legal codes or case law in which we looked at one particular set of laws around servitude and slavery.

We looked at these laws as revealing not just what seemed on the surface as this regressive vision of God and life; rather, we dug deeper to see that it revealed God's heart for the vulnerable. The laws he was instituting from our perspective seem archaic, but in their time, it was protecting the vulnerable from the systemic powerful. We worked hard to expose the heart of God.

Then, last week, we looked at Exodus 21 and 32 and talked about how the fear that was going on at the bottom of Mount Sinai with the people of Israel percolated up and created the environment in which idolatry could take place. Exodus 21 and 32 is one of those moments in which it's devastating to read of the failure of God's people. You see them give up the life with God that was on offer for other ways of living.

Today, we will turn back to Exodus 19 and will be at the base of Mount Sinai for a couple more weeks. In Exodus 19, I want to look at what God was doing with the people at Sinai. Because there are these important things that God was establishing in them, which will actually heightens the severity of Israel's failure from last week.

**On the first day of the third month after the Israelites left Egypt—on that very day—they came to the Desert of Sinai. After they set out from Rephidim, they entered the Desert of Sinai, and Israel camped there in the desert in front of the mountain. vv. 1-2**

There are a few things of importance here. First is this concept of Mount Sinai. This is a very important location in the biblical narrative. It's the same space from Exodus 3, in which Moses and God were communing when the bush caught fire but didn't burn up. It's the same mountain. At that moment, God told Moses, "You will lead the people out of Egypt and worship me on this mountain." The people camping out at the base of Sinai is the moment that he talks about in Exodus 3. A few things to keep in mind.

Our best guess is that the Israelites were a population of over a million people. This isn't a small little KOA campsite. This is a large amount of people. They were at the base of Sinai for almost a year. So this liminal space, where they've left Egypt and are at Mount Sinai, is one which will take some time. This makes sense when you've been enslaved for 400 years. It would take a little

bit of time to get pulled out of that setting, placed at the foot of Mount Sinai, and commune with God. It was a retreat, a moment of new beginnings.

Sinai was that liminal space of encounter where they were no longer slaves, but they didn't quite know who they were. They were moving towards this "promised land," but they weren't there yet. Not only did they spend about a year at Mount Sinai, but it took about 40 years, an entire generation, to get to the Promised Land.

This period, this liminal space is where God performed that second liberation. Because God was not interested in just saving them from slavery, but he wanted to transform them from the inside out to become an entirely new people. So it's at the base of that mountain that they camped out.

Deserts are important places and keynotes within the Bible in which you find spaces of transformation. The one that comes to mind for me, which mirrors this one, is Jesus' temptation in the New Testament. He went out into the desert for 40 days, which mirrors the years in which Israel was in the desert.

That was a place in which even Jesus was prepared and formed into the person he would be for his public ministry. The desert is a place of transformation. It's a place where Israel is here, just like so many before or after who are engaging with God, meeting with God in a transformative space.

**Then Moses went up to God, and the Lord called to him from the mountain and said, "This is what you are to say to the descendants of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: 'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. 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, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites." vv. 3-6**

So Moses, as we've seen numerous times, ascends the mountain, communes with God, and receives these particular words. But what God does here is reorient the life, identity, and calling of the people of Israel. He does this through defining their past, present, and future.

First, their past. He says, "You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt." We have talked about this for multiple weeks in a row that it is the basis of their relationship with God. It is rooted first and foremost and only on the action of God. Exodus begins with the people in slavery with no way out. They were a vulnerable people under this mighty empire, and they had no hope for overcoming the circumstances they were in. The text simply says they cried out to God. So they cried out to God, and he intervened, and God reminded the people that they had seen with their very eyes the work God had done.

This work was a powerful one. Think of the drama of the plagues in which he had gone to bat against all of the Egyptian gods and conquered them, led the people out, and parted the Red Sea, all of that mighty action of the power of God. As we looked at last week, we said that the potential for that is either we run to God or we flee to other things to make sense of it.

So he says, you've seen all of this power that I've poured out, and then I love the way he follows this up. *"You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself" (v. 4)*. Isn't that such a beautiful, almost maternal instinct within God? He's saying, "I did this powerful work. I pushed back all that was oppressing you, and on eagle's wings I brought you in close to me."

God is contrasting the power and the intimacy of his character. He's asserting that he is God, but to not forget how he gathered them. He is a good God, a safe God. He carried them out on eagle's wings. It's a beautiful description of how God loves us. The imagery encapsulates the entire Exodus narrative quite well. God went to the Israelites and carried them to himself, with both power and the intimacy, the warmth of God on display.

Then he goes on and not only establishes their past but also says about their future that there are some stipulations of the covenant—if you obey me and keep my covenant. But then he says, "You will be my treasured possession, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." It wasn't just that God was trying to save them and leave them on their own, but rather, God was working to form a people in which there was a future.

We'll circle back to these three particular phrases to close our time. The treasured possession, the kingdom of priests, and the holy nation. But all I want you to see here is that God was not satisfied with just that first liberation; rather, he had an entire future set aside and planned for these particular people. God redefines their past, reminding them of what he's done, and in that, gives shape to the future of who they are becoming.

Do you hear the themes of the liminal space? An event took place, and now they're in this in-between, but they're becoming the treasured possession, the kingdom of priests, and the holy nation. Not only does he redefine the past and the future, but God also redefines the present. This is where, in the middle of that section, he says, "Now if you obey me and keep my covenant." We'll talk about this in a little bit, but remember the storyline. This is important. We tend to view the commandments and the law as the way in which Israel earns the love of God, but that's backward.

God had already redefined that. It's at Sinai that the law now comes. So it can't be that the law is some way to earn that position with God. The identity and the salvation have been established. What's happening with the law here, post salvation, is God graciously saying, "Here's the way to get Egypt out of you.

Here's how to be a different people." Here's how to be that different contrast community to all the world around you.

He provides these laws not as a way of earning salvation but as a way of working out their new identity, of working out what was already true of them. God at Sinai, in that liminal space, redefines the past, the present, and the future. This moment begins the journey that Israel will take throughout the scriptures. We know that, at times, they're successful with this, but more often than not, they fail. What is displayed from Genesis to Revelation is the graciousness of God, in which we are not the ones who keep the covenant, but God is the one who keeps it on our behalf and continues to extend his graciousness and love.

**So Moses went back and summoned the elders of the people and set before them all the words the Lord had commanded him to speak. The people all responded together, "We will do everything the Lord has said." So Moses brought their answer back to the Lord. vv. 7-8**

Now, let's be gracious with the Israelites. We know from last week's sermon and from the text that it won't be long until they're worshiping a golden calf. They'll fail at this, but there's nothing to indicate that this wasn't a wholehearted, genuine reflection in which they're looking at God and saying, "Yes, God, we want to be your people."

In many ways, it's simply the conclusion of a covenant that's been drafted. God earlier said, "If you will," to which the people now are responding, "We will." It's just like the vows at a marriage ceremony. That's what's taking place here. Do you promise to have and to hold from this day forward forever?

There's something about this moment, which is the way that they're entering into that engagement. Something is now different. They are trying, committing, and responding with wholehearted genuineness. We will do everything you ask. Exodus 19 is about the establishment of God over his people. But even more so, God is both giving them a new identity as well as the vocation and calling of the people of Israel. This is what's taking place at this moment. This liminal space of receiving the identity in Israel's identity. They are working out how to integrate this into the way they live and walk with God.

Let's explore this more. We've already talked a little bit about the function of the law and that it isn't the way Israel gains or earns salvation, but rather that's already been given, so there's something else happening. The law of God and the stipulations of the covenant exist because God was not satisfied with stopping at the first liberation but wanted to bring a second liberation of transformation.

So, to sum up what's happening at Mount Sinai, God is transforming his people from who they were to who they are becoming. This is what's happening. This is what happens in all of us. Think of that imagery. Think of that liminal space experience

that you've been through. Have you experienced something like this in which there is that moment where you are changing from who you were into who you are becoming? But you're in that middle moment.

There are these key markers in your relationship with God in which you recognize something about your identity has shifted. That moment in which you confess your sins, God pours out his grace and forgiveness, and you realize that you are a new creation, as the scriptures say. There's a new moment. But then I'm guessing you're also like Israel at the base of Mount Sinai. At times in fear, the unknown, and uncertainty, you revert to what you knew, which isn't true yourself any longer, but you fall back into that pattern, that habit of sin that is trying to control the scenario. You betray the progress made. But God meets you with grace and forgiveness, with arms wide open, and says, "Let's continue to walk through the desert in this liminal space. I want to change you into who you are becoming."

This liminal space, this story of Exodus, mirrors our own story. It's not that we're Israel, and we'll talk about that distinction in a second because it's different, but yet the New Testament would teach that those who are found in Christ are grafted into the people of God, so much so that God says we will be his treasured possession, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation because of the work of Jesus those things become true of us as well. So, at Sinai, we, too, receive a new identity, vocation, and calling.

### **Treasured Possession**

God says, "You will be my treasured possession." Now, this is two words in English, but in Hebrew, it's one word. It's the word *segullah*. This word is unique, and it's actually quite a beautiful phrase that's happening here. It has a royal connection. It means the personal treasure of a king. So, think of the way a king would have a large treasury. But then think of that king also designating a certain subset as his personal treasury. That's what's happening here.

It's God saying, "You are my personal treasury." It alludes to that line in the text where he told Moses that although all the earth is mine, that's the big treasury, you will be my personal treasure. There's something unique that Israel has with God, but it doesn't mean that it's at the expense of everyone else.

To say that this is the treasured possession is not saying that everything else is like garbage. It's not that. There's a certain subset, a special purpose for this particular section. But metaphorically, *segullah* means the covenant partner with a special responsibility. It also has this connotation that isn't just warm and fuzzy of God. Like, he's being sentimental. But that's not actually what it means. It has a very specific intention, and the *segullah* is also someone who is to carry out or represent the one who bears that image.

It has the same connotation as the image of God from Genesis, in which all humanity is called to carry the image. When people look at the church or Israel, whoever it is, they were supposed to see a nation who is projecting the image of God to the world so that they get a foretaste of what God is like.

So here, metaphorically, when God says that you are my *segullah*, my treasured possession, He's saying that you'll be the people who will image who I am into the world. Think of it in the way in which a substitute teacher comes into a classroom, and they're supposed to stand in for the teacher who is usually there. God is present in the world, and the substitute comes in. Israel is there, and they are to image that picture, to lead as if they were the teacher.

This would foreshadow the perfect *segullah*, the perfect treasured possession, Jesus Christ. Jesus is the image of the invisible God, as Paul said in Colossians. We are called to be Christ-like, and we're attempting to do that, but we fail. So here we see this foreshadowing. Israel is the treasured possession, but there was coming a day in which the Messiah Jesus would image that perfectly in the world.

God says they will be the treasured possession, which is why he offers this picture of the law. If they follow his commandments within this covenant, they will be that image. We know we fail at this, but Jesus came and did not fail. He perfectly imaged that in the world.

### **Kingdom of Priest and a Holy Nation**

Kingdom of Priests and a Holy Nation should be taken together because the biblical writer intends them to be a parallelism, meaning whatever it means to be the treasured possession is to be the Kingdom of Priests and a Holy Nation, which is why that repetition is slightly nuanced, slightly different. But they're supposed to go together to reinforce what the treasured possession, the *segullah*, is. Let's unpack the metaphors of "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

A priest's primary duty, in its most basic sense, is to serve God. That's what a priest would do. They would orchestrate and oversee the worship gatherings, and they would function in that capacity, in which they served God. Even more so, the priests were meant to be middlemen who would stand between God and the people. So, in that function, they would have two roles.

The first is they were to bring God to the people by bringing the teachings about God. They'd read the scriptures; they'd talk about God, much in the same way I'm doing now. They would bring about the teachings or characteristics of God to the people. But the inverse was also true. The priest was also to bring the people to God through the offerings of the sacrifices of the people. So you see this relationship, this intermediary in which they were bringing God to the people and then bringing the people before God.

Well, this should bring to light the Book of Hebrews, which calls Jesus our high priest. It alludes to the one who came and perfectly mediated the presence between God and the people. No longer would they need a human mediator because Jesus, the very presence of God, was that in Christ. All through the New Testament, you hear this language. Such as Philippians 3, in which he said, "I've done everything the world could offer, but I traded it away because what was of ultimate worth was simply to be found in Christ."

When you get that language in the New Testament, which talks about our identity as being in Christ, it means that Jesus was that perfect *segullah*, that perfect treasured possession. He's the perfect priest, that holy being in which when our life is found in Christ, we are grafted into this whole story. It's a beautiful example of what it means to find that salvation. Not that it replaces that old story, but rather the gift of eternal life is when we are found in Christ that reshapes our identity and gives us a vocation moving forward as we grow in Christ-likeness.

So, in a positive sense, that's what this kingdom of priests and holy nations means. Israel, in the Old Testament, was to project that image out into the world. They were to be a foretaste of God. When people saw Israel, they were supposed to see a foretaste of the presence of God. In a negative sense, it meant that to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, they were set apart. It meant Israel was not to be like Egypt, which is what we see when they fall back into that idol worship in chapter 32. They drifted back into that Egypt mindset, but the invitation was always to be something different, an alternative.

You'll see this struggle over and over in the Old Testament, in which the people of Israel constantly look at the other nations. They said that they just wanted what the other nations had. "God, give us a king. All those nations have a king. It would go well for us if we had a king too." God told them that they didn't want a king. "I am your king." Eventually, after they pepper God over and over for a king like all the other nations, God gives them what they want. He lets him have that king, and it goes horribly awry. The book of 1 and 2 Kings is this mess where king after king comes into that position in which God was meant to lead the people, and there is wreckage and carnage over and over because they had forgotten their identity.

You are my *segullah*, kingdom of priests, the holy nation. You are to be different. The people of God have a long history of mistaking their identity, in which when we want to be like all the other nations and it goes awry quickly. Whenever we pursue that, we mistake our own identity and calling. That liminal space of transition was one in which God was trying to get them to see that they are different and are called to be a distinct people.

That same invitation is true of us today. It isn't that we replace Israel, but rather, we've been grafted into that story. So we, too, are called to be that treasured possession, that kingdom of

priests and holy nation. Take a look at 1 Peter 2. Peter is speaking to a mixed audience of Jews and Gentiles alike. We'll draw upon this same metaphor, and you'll catch the same language that Exodus uses that Peter is now saying of the church in the New Testament. "*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*" (1 Peter 2:9).

Peter is quoting God in Exodus. He is saying that the same thing is now true of us as the church. Do you remember Exodus 3? That text I mentioned before. "You will worship me on this mountain," Peter says the exact same thing. It's the same vocation that was true of the people of God back in Exodus and is true of the church in the New Testament.

**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. Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. 1 Peter 2:10-12**

Peter is depicting the imagery that we see in Exodus. He's saying that this is true of you and me. As the church, we are called to be grafted into this long lineage. I believe Peter had all of this in mind. It's as if he's looking at us and saying: You have seen what God has done in Egypt. You have seen what God has done when you were in darkness. You yourselves have seen what God has done when you were caught in sin, when you were broken, when you abandoned your commitment. You have seen what God did when your life fell apart, and he was there hearing the cry. You yourselves have seen this, and do not forget that you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession.

What a beautiful line to see that you were called out of darkness and into a wonderful light. Church, I wonder if you have experienced this. I wonder if you've experienced that liminal space where you've been called out of an identity, and in this tension and uncertainty of the present, you are becoming someone, something that's true of you—God's chosen people. He saved you, and he brought you out, and you're in that moment. Have you had that experience in which you're wondering, "God, are you who you say you are? Can I live up to this high call? Can I find that identity?"

Return to that table overlooking Lake Tahoe. What happened on that night gave shape to the rest of my life even to this moment, 15 years later. My identity has changed; it has shifted. I went from Lindsay's boyfriend to Lindsay's husband for the rest of my life, till death do us part. I'm learning to live out of that reality. It's not that I'm never not her husband, it's rather I'm trying to learn

what it means to be her husband. It's that reality, that moment at Sinai, just like that moment at that table in Lake Tahoe.

What's happening is two things. In the liminal space, you must receive that identity and then integrate it into your life. It's one thing for me to say that I'm Lindsay's husband. It's a whole other thing to learn how to integrate that into the corners of my being. I was different in that moment, and I'm different now because of it. And I'll be different 15 years from now, Lord willing. All of that is receiving an identity and integrating it into your life. This is the work of the liminal space.

Church, have you received the identity in which God has said over you that you are a chosen people? The Father sent Jesus, the perfect embodiment, the perfect image of God. Have you received that? Then the invitation is what it's always been: to integrate that into your life so that it gives shape to everything about you. That will take a lifetime of a journey. It'll be up and down. It will be successful and mundane. At times you'll do it well, and at other times, you'll fail. But what the scriptures attest to is from Genesis to Revelation, God continues to be faithful to that covenant. It's through the blood of Jesus that we have been invited into that covenant relationship. It's a beautiful gift.

I find it interesting that Peter drew upon this language. It reminds me of that scene at the end of the Gospel of John, in which Peter starts out as this bombastic disciple. He's excited to have been called by Jesus. He received that identity, but he struggled to integrate. And as he was following Jesus for those three years, you see these high moments where he's out there jumping and walking on water towards Jesus. But then, he would often shift his eyes off Jesus and begin to sink.

At the height of Jesus' ministry, in which he's going to the cross, Peter had this epic failure in which he denied even knowing Jesus. Peter, who is the one who would later say, after that event, all of that failure, and coming back to Jesus, "You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood; you are a holy nation."

**When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" "Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my lambs." Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep." The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my sheep. Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went**

**where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go." Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, "Follow me!" John 21:15-19**

Church, the invitation has always been the same. All of our journeys have echoes of Peter. We have successes and failures in which we struggle to live up to the invitation that God has given us. But maybe you've had an experience like Peter. Sitting by a fire, Jesus is looking at you and asking if you love him. Not with condemnation, I believe Jesus had love in his eyes. I believe he was looking and inviting his disciple back in saying, "Do you love me? Follow me."

It's the invitation before us. In the liminal space you find yourself in, may it be the space in which you receive what is most true about you: that you are a beloved child of God. May you then go from that space with the same response as Peter and follow Jesus. That's Jesus' invitation.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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