

# On Being God's People

by John Vissers

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*This sermon is about the identity and vocation of Christians in a changing world, and how we are called to be God's people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation.*

**Duration:** 21:30

**Scripture:** Exodus 19:1

**Topics:** "Church"

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## Description

In this sermon, the preacher focuses on the importance of understanding our identity as believers in Christ. He emphasizes that we are chosen by God, part of a royal priesthood, and a holy nation. The preacher highlights the significance of belonging to God and reminds the congregation of their calling to declare God's praises and share the gospel with the world. The sermon also emphasizes the role of pastors and teachers in nurturing and equipping God's people for mission and ministry.

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## Transcript

Standing for prayer. Let your gospel come now, O Lord, not only with word, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit, deep conviction, and with full assurance, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Please be seated. We have two scripture lessons this evening. The first is taken from the Old Testament, from the book of Exodus, chapter 19, reading verses 1 to 6, and if you'd like to follow along, you'll find this in your pew Bible at page 73.

In the third month, after the Israelites left Egypt, on the very day, they came to the desert of Sinai. And after they set out from Rephidim, they entered the desert of Sinai, and Israel camped there in the desert in front of the mountain. 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 house 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 the 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. And then in the New Testament, reading from the epistle of 1 Peter, the letter of 1 Peter chapter 2 and verses 4 to 10, which is on page 1201 in the pew

Bible. As you come to him, the living stone rejected by men, but chosen by God and precious to him, 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.

For in scripture it says, See I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame. Now to you who believe this stone is precious, but to those who do not believe, the stone the builders rejected has become the capstone, and a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall. They stumble because they disobey the message, which is also what they were destined for.

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. 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.

Amen. May God bless to us these readings from his word this evening. Let me begin, if I may, with a personal word tonight.

I wish to thank the Presbytery of East Toronto and the ministers in session of Knox Church for the privilege of preaching at this service, and of course I also want to extend my prayers and best wishes to you, Linda, on this the occasion of your ordination to the ministry of word and sacraments. It's been a long journey, a long road, but here we are, and God bless you tonight. One of the joys of my ministry during the past 24 years has been that I've served in three congregations which all produced ministers for the Presbyterian Church in Canada, and more than that, women from all three of those congregations in North Vancouver, in St. Paul's Vaughan, and here now in Knox, Toronto have been ordained as ministers, and so in God's grace, God continues to raise up men and women for ministry to lead the people of God, and we as God's people should be grateful to the Lord that he continues to raise up leadership for the church in these days.

In one of his books, Leith Anderson, the American pastor, the American church leader tells the story of a man named Sergei Krikalev, a true story. Sergei Krikalev was a man who knew who he was. He was a highly privileged Soviet cosmonaut.

He had convictions, stability, success, fame, and fortune. He was a member of the Communist Party, a citizen of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, and a follower of Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev. But in 1991, everything changed for Krikalev, because in April of that year, he was launched into space to orbit the Earth for what was supposed to be four months.

While he was in orbit, however, huge changes occurred. The nation that he had left behind collapsed, and as a result, the Soviet space agency was in disarray, and more frightening was the failure of the technical system that was to bring the Soviet cosmonaut back to Earth. And so with no means of returning to Earth, Krikalev had to stay in orbit, not for four months, not for five months, not for six months, not for seven months, not for eight months, not for nine months, but for ten months, a total of ten months before he was finally brought back down to the Earth.

Now imagine how he must have felt when he finally came home and stepped on solid ground for the first time in nearly a year. He was, without a doubt, relieved to be home safely. But home was not the same.

His country no longer existed. Mikhail Gorbachev had been replaced by a previously marginal politician named Boris Yeltsin, who had become the new president of the new nation of Russia. The Communist Party was out of power and in disrepute.

Krikalev's hometown of Leningrad had been renamed St. Petersburg. His 500 ruble salary, significantly reduced by inflation, had once afforded him a luxurious lifestyle. Now it barely enabled him to buy a Big Mac at the local McDonald's.

Krikalev must have felt an incredible sense of disorientation. He must have wondered where he was. He must have wondered who he was.

He must have wondered whose he was. He must have wondered what he ought to do. He must have wondered how he was going to live his life in light of all these changes.

I want to suggest to you this evening that being a Christian today, especially in the Western world, feels a lot like that. The Church is experiencing an incredible sense of disorientation in a rapidly changing world. Presbyterians in Canada today feel this acutely.

Right across the country, as I have traveled across the country in my capacity as principal of one of our colleges, it's true in our cities, in our churches in the suburbs, in our churches in small towns and in rural and remote areas. Things are not the way that they used to be. And it causes many of us to wonder where we are, who we are, whose we are, and how we are possibly going to make our way in this strange new world.

Now as it happens, we are not, in fact, the first people of faith to feel this way. And we certainly will not be the last. In 1 Peter, we read about a church that was struggling to come to terms with its faith and its life in a world that seemed disorienting.

Peter was writing this letter to a group of Christians, mostly Gentiles, who lived in Asia Minor, which is part of modern-day Turkey. And they lived and they moved and they had their being every day as residents of places called Pontus and Galatia and Cappadocia and Asia and Bithynia. And some of them were well off while others were struggling to eke out a living.

Some were active in business and in politics and the arts, while others were simply content to live a quiet life. Some were young and others were older. Some were single while others were married with children.

But they all had this one thing in common. They had become followers of Jesus the Messiah. And this meant that they found themselves now in a strange tension with the world in which they lived.

They were sometimes discouraged. They were sometimes disoriented. Some of them were persecuted for their faith and some suffered for their faith.

It was as if they both belonged and yet somehow did not belong at one and the same time. Now, I suppose that if faced with writing a letter to such a church today, we might be tempted to offer all kinds of practical advice. Contemporary writers probably would offer twelve steps to successful Christian living, or ten ways to cope with life in the real world, or the seven habits of a healthy and happy Christian.

But Peter, notice, does something more basic. He goes to the very heart of the matter, he goes to the very core of the matter, and he reminds his readers who they are and whose they are. And with words that

reflect the richness of Old Testament imagery, Peter says that they are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God.

They have been called to declare the praises of the one who called them out of darkness into light. Once, Peter says, you were not a people, but now you are the people of God. Peter does not dish up some feel-good platitudes about what it means to be respectable and religious today, what it means to be respectable and religious at the same time.

He challenges them, rather, by going to the very core of their identity. He wants to remind them who they are, who they are to understand themselves to be. He reminds them that their new life in Christ is a gift, that they didn't do anything to earn this, that God called them and chose them to participate in Christ, that they are a community created by God's grace, that their identity, therefore, as the people of God had nothing to do with what they had done or with what they had not done, and everything to do with what God had done and with what God was doing in their midst.

It was not about them. It was about God. And what God had done for them in Jesus Christ, what God was doing in and through them by the power of his Holy Spirit, about God's redemptive purposes in the church and in the world.

And in the eyes of the world, they were a diverse, often despised, and frequently misunderstood, ragtag group of people scattered throughout Asia Minor. They didn't appear to have much influence, but in God's eyes, nevertheless, they were God's people. And they were called to worship and to serve God in all of life.

This was their identity. This was their vocation, to bear witness to the living God in word and deed. I think it was the 20th century psychologist and philosopher, Eric Erickson, who coined the phrase, the modern phrase, identity crisis.

People, he argued in his books, go through a variety of passages or a variety of crises as they try to find out who they are and what they ought to do with their lives. And in a very real sense, Christians today in the western world, it seems to me, and again, we Presbyterians feel this acutely, we seem to be going through an identity crisis. William Willeman and Stanley Hauerwas describe Christians today as resident aliens.

Christians are those who live between two worlds, and it is often disorienting. And for many, the disorientation leads to disillusionment, because the church always seems to be so often on the losing side. And so we try to figure out who we are and whose we are and how we ought to go about the business of the church.

One of my favorite stories to illustrate this, and some of you have heard me tell this story before, is about the worst defeat that was suffered by any team in the history of sport. It happened during a college football game in the 1930s, and Cumberland College, one of the teams that was playing in this game, lost this football game 222 to nothing. I'm not making this up, it's true.

After about three quarters of the game, when the score had begun to mount and the team was dramatically demoralized, there came a moment in one of the few plays when Cumberland College actually had the ball, that the ball was snapped back to the quarterback, who, as he had done on almost every other play, immediately fumbled the ball. And the opposing linemen were charging in and the ball

was trickling around in the backfield, and the quarterback screamed out to the halfback, pick up the ball and run with it, pick it up and run with it. And the halfback was this scrawny freshman, and he looked down at the ball, and then he took a look up and he saw these hulking, huge linemen charging in at him, and he looked over at the quarterback and he said, you pick it up stupid, you dropped it.

Well, as someone who has been the pastor of three congregations and as someone now charged with the responsibility of educating and equipping a new generation of ministers, I can tell you that this is how many people feel about the church today. Let someone else pick it up. Let someone else run with it.

After all, they dropped it. And if the church is only a quaint gathering of religiously minded folk trying to figure out how to be respectable in the midst of a changing culture, then quite frankly, people have every right to feel that way about the church. But if the church is the church, if the church is God's people, then it's a different story.

Tonight we celebrate the fact that God continues to call men and women to pick up the ball and to run with it. That men and women continue to respond to that call, to that command, to that invitation. We celebrate that all God's people are called to ministries and that all ministries proceed from and are sustained by the Lord Jesus Christ.

That the Holy Spirit gathers and equips and sends out people for mission and ministry in the world. That all of us are called to share the gospel with the world. That all of us are called, in the words of Peter, to be a holy people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation.

To offer the Father the worship and the service that are due to God the creator from the creation through Christ, the only mediator until he comes again. And we continue to give thanks to God that God furnishes the church with pastors and teachers so that God's people may be renewed and nurtured for mission and ministry. You see, God, I believe, is calling us as a church today to understand ourselves anew and in a fresh way as a people belonging to God.

That we indeed might declare the praises of him who called us out of darkness into God's marvelous light. And if we understand that once we were not a people, that once we had no real identity, that once we had no real vocation, but now in Jesus Christ we have an identity and we have a vocation, that we are God's people, then maybe, just maybe, the church will once again be the church. The hymn writer puts it well, we are God's people, the chosen of the Lord, born of the spirit established by the word.

Our cornerstone is Christ alone and strong in him we stand. Oh, let us live transparently and walk heart to heart and hand in hand. One of my earliest memories of Christian faith, as some of you know, was being taught the Heidelberg Catechism as a child.

And the first question of the Heidelberg Catechism asks this, what is your only comfort in life and in death? And the answer is that I am not my own, but I belong in life and in death, body and soul, to my faithful savior, Jesus Christ. You see, that's what it means to be the people of God. We are not our own.

We belong to Christ. That is our hope in life and in death. May God grant us the grace, as Christians, as a church, to become what we have already been declared to be in Jesus Christ.

And now, to the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus through all ages. Amen.

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