

THE THIRD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | JUNE 18, 2023

EXODUS 19:2-8A | PSALM 100 | ROMANS 5:1-8 | MATTHEW 9:35—10:8

There's a question many high school and college graduates are asked endlessly this time of the year. *What are you going to do now?* For years, there's been an obvious next step to take. The next grade. The next credit. The next semester. But suddenly, there is no obvious next step. *So what are you going to do now?*

It's a question we don't just ask our teenagers and twenty-somethings, but people approaching retirement, too. For years, you've had this responsibility shaping your life. But starting pretty soon, that won't exist. *So what are you going to do now?*

And for those of us who are somewhere between graduation and retirement, we may have our own smaller versions of the question. After the kids move out or the big move or the caregiving role ends. *What are you going to do now?*

But for all of us, the question is less about the next item on our to-do-list than with what will give shape and meaning to our lives. It's not just about what we do but about who we are.

That question is also at the heart of today's Hebrew Bible reading. This reading begins after God has rescued the people from slavery in Egypt. When the people were enslaved in Egypt, Pharaoh shaped their entire life. What are you going to do today? Whatever Pharaoh says you're doing to do. Where are you going to go? Wherever Pharaoh says you're going to go. Who are you as a people? Whoever Pharaoh says you are. But now that you're out of Egypt, these questions don't have obvious answers. So what are they going to do? Where are they going to go? And most important, who are they going to be?

In today's reading, God provides an answer. God invites Moses up Mt. Sinai to relay a message to the people. God begins by looking back, reminding the people of how they were rescued from Egypt. And at the very end of the message, God looks to the future and declares what will shape this community's life. God declares, "You shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation." *So what are you going to do now?* Be a nation of priests.

It's important to pause here and get our terms right. Because many of us hear the word "priest" and start thinking about clergy. Maybe you think of people like me or Fr. Stephen or one of the more exciting priests on the BBC who solve crimes in their spare time. But that's not what "priest" means in this context.

It helps to think of "priest" not as a type of person but as a kind of action. In the Hebrew Bible, the primary thing priests do is support and repair the relationship between the God and God's people.¹ Sometimes this means they bring the people's concerns before God. They explain what it's like to be human, what people are going through, presenting human life to God. Other times, they perform liturgical rites and offer sacrifices as a way of repairing and resetting the relationship between God and the people. So to be a priestly people simply means a people who support and repair relationships between God and the world.

So the people are undergoing a radical transformation. Under the thumb of Pharaoh, the people existed to labor and extract and stockpile. But with the accompaniment of God, now they will be tending and restoring relationships. A sign of God's mercy to the whole world.

That focus on their priestly vocation brings out another element of today's gospel reading. Jesus has been going out to the towns and cities, Matthew says, "teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness." We often talk about Jesus as a teacher and healer, but here we see him taking on a kind of priestly role. He doesn't hang out in the Temple and wear unusual liturgical outfits. But remember, that's not what being a priest is all about. It's about supporting and repairing relationships between God and God's people. And that's exactly what Jesus does.

¹ Rowan Williams, *Being Christian: Baptism, Bible, Eucharist, Prayer* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2014), 15.

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He brings people's concerns before God. He helps people to trust in God's promises. He accompanies people in their stations in life and enacts God's presence in the world.²

And here's where this gets interesting. You could imagine a world in which Jesus says, "Only I can repair relationships between God and people. So you can stand over there and watch and be impressed, but you're going to be spectators." But that's not what Jesus does at all.

Just like Moses called the people at Sinai together and gave them their new vocation, Jesus calls the disciples together and gives them theirs. "Then Jesus," Matthew writes, "summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness." Jesus gives us the authority to continue his mission of healing relationships and deepening faith. Of bringing people's experiences to God and of conveying God's steadfast love to humanity.

What's so remarkable about this calling is that it's given to all of us. This is what the priesthood of believers is all about.³ That's not saying we don't need ordained ministers. It's saying that every one of us, regardless of our station in life, does work that is spiritually significant. The work of conveying God's love to the world isn't something reserved for some small subset of people over there, but it's entrusted to all of us.

A few years ago, I was at a funeral talking to a family member of the deceased. And after I explained how I knew the person through the church, this person said that the person who died always regretted that they hadn't gone into the priesthood. Because they thought that if they'd gone into the priesthood, they could have really helped people and deepened people's relationship with God.

The good news, of course, is that they were a part of the priesthood. Because the priesthood is not about a having a title or getting your name on the clergy roster. It's a calling that Jesus gives to each of us in our baptisms. And thanks to the gift of Christ's Spirit, we are empowered and sent to repair all that is broken and hurting in the world.

So when I declare that your sins are forgiven, that is a priestly action. But so is it when you work on rebuilding trust with a partner or friend. It's a priestly action when we take the concerns of the sick, poor, and vulnerable before God in the prayers of intercession. But so is it when you support someone in your twelve-step group. It's a priestly action when we celebrate communion together every week. But so is it when we work to repair social inequalities in our society. By giving us his Holy Spirit and entrusting his mission to us, Jesus makes us a communion of priests.

Some days, maybe even most, we don't feel quite like that. We may feel that our lives are unimportant, we may envy the callings of others, or we may feel like we're just trying to make it through another day. And yet, thanks to God's calling, our lives become something much more important and valuable than they appear or feel. We are a community of ordinary people that God has transformed into a communion of priests. Now what do we want to do?

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

² This is to say nothing of how Jesus's death and resurrection repairs and restores our relationship with God. This is a focus of much of the book of Hebrews.

³ There's a good discussion of this in Timothy Wengert, "The Priesthood of All Believers and Other Pious Myths," *Institute of Liturgical Studies Occasional Papers*, January 1, 2005, https://scholar.valpo.edu/ils_papers/2. Luther never used the phrase "priesthood of all believers," but it comes from an idea built out in *The Babylonian Captivity* (1520). Essentially, Luther wants to get rid of a secular/religious distinction so that everyone works and lives before God, not just clergy.

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