

SERMONS

Wait Training: I Am a Priest?

Exodus 19:4-6a

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Rev. Ellis White

New Hobbies

Have you taken up a new hobby during this coronavirus season? I feel like every person I speak to has done something. From baking sourdough, to home-renovation, to playing video games, to getting a puppy, everyone seems to have adapted to this season in a new way. I took up cycling with my kids.

Earlier this summer, we went to a trail that had a jump park in it. It was fun riding over the little rollers. The kids loved it. But then... Kid pressure. They started saying, "Why don't you go off the big jumps?" How could I refuse?

So, I climbed up the big roller, my heart in my mouth. I took a deep breath and pushed out over the edge. Built up my speed. Hit the lip, caught the air. And I absolutely nailed it. Soaring through the air. Stuck the landing. Rode off into the sunset. I was pumped. Sadly, my perception was a long way from reality. This is what I thought I looked like. [\[SLIDE\]](#) And this is what I actually looked like. [\[SLIDE\]](#) I mean, there is at least four inches of air there, right?

Nevertheless, I was pumped. So pumped, in fact, I forgot to slow down for the turnaround at the end of the jump line. As I tried to turn on the dusty ground, my wheels began to slide out from under me, I lost my balance, and I hit the ground. Hard. I'd love to tell you the only thing I hurt was my pride. Sadly not. I cracked both my ribs and the face of my watch.

I wonder if you've taken up a Covid-hobby? And if you have, I wonder why you did it? I think that for many of us, this season has been incredibly unsettling because the things we used to spend our time doing have gone away. And I think this has left us lacking a sense of purpose. And we've tried to fill it with hobbies, but I wonder if, for many of us, we are just trying to find some meaning and purpose to our lives? Perhaps you've even asked yourself this question at some point: what on earth am I here for?

Looking Back

My name is Ellis, and I am one of the pastors here. We're been working our way through a series called Wait Training [SLIDE - sermon title/series graphic], asking what lessons we can learn in this season of waiting. We've been doing this by looking at the journey of the people of God, after they had been set free from slavery in Egypt over 3000 years ago. They entered a period of waiting in the desert, that in total stretched to 40 years. So far, we've made it through 60 days of their journey.

The people have got over their exuberance of being set free and after 60 days of wandering I wonder if they are now beginning to ask the question: Why have you set us free? What was the purpose? It's the same question I wonder if many of us are asking in this season. What's my purpose? What's my role? The world has totally changed, and I don't know where I fit in anymore. And in our passage for today, God is going to answer that question. Let's hear what God has to say to his people.

Exodus 19:4-6a

[SLIDE] "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."
(Exodus 19:4-6a)

Our Purpose

What do you think of when you hear the word priest? I think of someone like this.

[SLIDE] I grew up going to a Catholic primary school and this was my priest—Canon Griffiths. I recall wondering why he was called Canon, rather than Father, and someone told me it was because he was a big gun. Nevertheless, my lasting image of a priest is a Catholic priest. But a priest is so much more than just a Catholic priest. A priest is someone who fulfills a role of great purpose in this world.

What if I were to tell you that God has called you to be a priest? What if I told you that your purpose in life was to fulfill your priestly duties? What if I told you that fulfilling your priestly duties would bring you great meaning and purpose? I believe that is what the Bible teaches. God has given you the role of priest, and through fulfilling that role you will find meaning and purpose.

In God's speech to the people of Israel, he reminds them of what he has done for them: setting them free from slavery in Egypt. And now he turns and outlines what their role is to be. He tells them that if they stay faithful to him, he has chosen them to be a special group of people, from all the peoples of the world: a kingdom of priests. The people of God were called, all of them, to be priests.

And that calling isn't just on the people of Israel before Jesus. No, that calling carries through to this very day. Peter, one of Jesus' closest friends, wrote this in one of his letters to the early church: [SLIDE] "But you are a chosen people, **a royal priesthood**, a holy nation, God's special possession." (1 Peter 2:9) Peter takes the very words of Exodus 19, the words that originally applied to the people of Israel, and applies them to the Church. We, brothers and sisters, are called to be priests.

And this is further confirmed by the passage from Revelation 5 that Gunnar read earlier: [SLIDE] "You [Jesus] have made them [the Church] to be a kingdom and

priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.” (Revelation 5:10) We, the Church, are called to be priests.

What is a Priest?

But what is a priest? If it isn't just a Catholic priest, but something more, what do priests do? One commentator wrote, based upon Exodus 19, that priests are called to serve as [SLIDE] “intermediaries between a holy God and a lost world.”¹ In other words, priests are to act as a go-between for two parties: one party is God, the other is the world. They are the connecting point.

You know the only thing better than owning a boat? Having a friend who owns a boat. One of the things my kids love to do when we visit friends who have a boat is to go tubing. Now, I love tubing... when I'm not in charge of keeping my kids safe. [VIDEO] I can tell you that there is nothing like the fear of seeing your 4-year-old fly into the air at 20 mph and land in the icy cold waters of the Puget sound.

Tubing works because there is a connecting point between the two parties; a connecting point between the boat and the tube. Without that rope, it wouldn't work. Priests are just like that rope. They connect together a holy God and a lost world. And without a priest, a holy God and a lost world could never be connected. Priests have a hugely important role in the work that God is doing in this world. But why does the world need priests to connect to God?

Holy God // Lost World

Later on in the story of God telling his people that they are to be priests, God declares that he is going to come and visit the people himself. Up until this point, only Moses had met with God, but now, God was going to meet with all the people. But according to the story... if the people were going to meet with God, they needed to prepare themselves by purifying themselves.

¹ NLT Filament Study Bible

Why? Because God is holy. God's holiness is probably something you've sung about, but what does it mean? Well, a good analogy for it is the sun. [SLIDE] The sun is the source of all our light, which ultimately sustains life. And yet, if you get too close to the sun, you will burn up and die. It's the source of life, and yet, as you get closer to it, it becomes deadly.

God is, similarly, the source of life, and yet, if an impure person, that is, someone who has ever committed a sin—that's all of us, by the way—if an impure person gets too close to God, they will be consumed by his holiness. Just like getting too close to the sun. It's a strange paradox, right. The source of life is also the source of death if you get too close.

Listen to how God's holy presence is described in this passage: [SLIDE] "On the third day at daybreak, there were loud claps of thunder, flashes of lightning, a thick cloud covering the mountain, and an ear-piercing trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp shuddered in fear... Mount Sinai was all smoke because GOD had come down on it as fire. Smoke poured from it like smoke from a furnace. The whole mountain shuddered in huge spasms. The trumpet blasts grew louder and louder. Moses spoke and God answered in thunder." (Exodus 19:16, 18-19a MESSAGE)

The Ultimate Priest

Crazy, right? So, the world can't approach a holy God without being pure, and that's where a priest comes in. A priest purifies themselves so they can approach God and connect the lost world to Holy God.

So how did a priest purify themselves? Well, in the Old Testament, it was through religious rituals such as sacrifices. If the people performed these rituals, they could be purified and hence approach God's holy presence. Unfortunately, the people didn't always do this, sometimes because they forgot, sometimes because they didn't want

to, and sometimes they just lost the instructions—no joke. But thankfully for us, God had an ultimate solution to our impurity and his holiness: Jesus.

Jesus is the one who ultimately made a way for people to be purified, through his sacrificial death on the cross. Through him, we have been made clean and pure. We have been given access to the holy presence of God himself. We can boldly approach God in our time of need. In fact, Jesus is the ultimate priest, or as the Bible calls him the Great High Priest. Jesus is the ultimate intermediary between a holy God and a lost world.

And if you know Jesus... If you accept what he has done for you, then you are purified. You, personally, have access to this holy God. You don't need to shudder in fear at the thunder and the lightning and the trumpet blasts. You can boldly approach. And because we have that access to a holy God, we, the Church, can serve as priests. We can serve as intermediaries between this holy God and a lost world. We can be connected to both a Holy God, and a lost world, just like that tow rope is connected to both the boat and the tube. We can do what the people of Israel never could—bring together this lost world and our holy God.

Little Priests

Now, obviously, we don't replace Jesus in this. He is the only one who can reunite a lost world with a holy God. But God invites us to participate in this work of reuniting a lost world with a holy God. Jesus is the great priest and we are his little priests. And this, I believe is where that great sense of purpose and fulfillment comes in. God invites us to join in with his work, like a loving Father.

One of my friends, Vince, told me he often has this picture of "God as a father raking up leaves in the backyard... [SLIDE] Gathering up all of the leaves after they've fallen from their natural place in the trees."



But God doesn't do this task alone. God invites us, his children to participate with him. Yet, we're still kids. We're out there "with our little toy rakes and our lack of coordination. We fumble around, only getting in the way and making it more difficult for our Father, but NONETHELESS, he wants us out there helping him, and he delights in the fact that we want to be alongside Him doing what He does.

"Our God could SO EASILY gather the nations by Himself. He could do it so much better and so much more efficiently Himself. BUT he wants to use YOU, in all of your inadequacy, he wants YOU as a partner for the most important mission of all."² He wants you to help bring the world back into relationship with God.

This is the purpose that you have. This is the role that you have been given. To spend time with your Father in his work of reconciling the world to himself. This is what can give your life meaning.

The Balancing Act

You have a purpose. You have a role to play. You are a priest. But if so... if you are called to serve as an intermediary between a lost world and a holy God, if you are called to be that tow rope connecting God and the world, what does that look like? I believe it means we have to cultivate two relationships: our relationship with God, and our relationship with the world. And if we are to serve effectively, we must effectively cultivate our relationships with both God and the world. And because a holy God and a lost world are naturally at odds with each other, our role might better be described as a balancing act—balancing these two relationships.

Let me demonstrate. You may know Derek from his role as our Music Director. He helps coordinate the music our modern band pulls together. But Derek also has a passion for fitness. I asked Derek this week, whether there was a particular exercise that required balancing two different things in order to perform it effectively. He said,

² Vince Vitale, "A Christian Approach to the Problems of Evil."

“Yes! The dumbbell bench press.” I told him, “Great. Can you bring your bench and dumbbells and show everyone on Sunday? I’ve hurt my ribs, otherwise, I’d do it.”

So, I’m going to label [physically label dumbbell with paper] this dumbbell worship—that’s our relationship to God. And this dumbbell mission—that’s our relationship to the world. And to do the dumbbell bench press effectively, you need to balance these two dumbbells as you push them upwards. Derek, why don’t you show us what happens if you exert too much force on one side? You lost your balance and fail at the exercise.

In the same way, in our role as priests, if we are to serve as intermediaries between God and the world, we must balance out these two relationships. We must balance out both worship of God, and mission to this world. Without both, we will lose our balance and fail in our role as priests. Thanks Derek!

Worship without Mission

I think we tend to emphasize one of these over the other. We either tend to emphasize our relationship to God, or our relationship to this world. We tend to become imbalanced. And the consequence is that we fail in our role as priests. Tim Hughes, the songwriter and worship-leader, once put it this way: [SLIDE] “Worship without mission is self-indulgent, mission without worship is self-defeating.” (Tim Hughes)³

I wonder where you are in terms of balancing these two in your life. If you’ve been following Jesus for many years, I think the tendency can be to neglect your relationship to this lost world. I remember about 3 years into my time at Chapel Hill, I was challenged, in quick succession by both my Father-in-law and by a close friend as to where I was building relationships with people outside the church. In effect, they were asking me whether I was emphasizing worship over mission. And I had a

³ <https://twitter.com/timhughes77/status/311769891629842432>



moment where I realized that this was entirely true. I had neglected my call to this world by not building any relationships with people outside the church. I was imbalanced. I knew this had to change.

For me, at that time, that looked like joining the Y, participating in exercise classes and building friendships with those outside the church. More recently, especially in this Covid-season, it has looked like developing friendships with my neighbors. And through both the Y, and my neighborhood, I have had the opportunity to see God use me to help draw people who weren't in relationship with Him, into relationship with him.

If you are imbalanced in this direction, neglecting mission, maybe you need to ask yourself the question my close friend and my Father-in-law asked me: [SLIDE] "Where are you building relationships with people outside the church?" Maybe you need to commit in this next season to build at least one friendship with someone who isn't a part of the church. Maybe you already have someone you've developed that friendship with and you need to consider inviting them to do Alpha with you. It starts in 10 days. You can find out more online.

Mission without Worship

Or maybe you feel imbalanced in the other direction. Maybe you feel like your relationship with the world has been emphasized far above your relationship to God. Maybe that's because you've never had a relationship with God, or because you've neglected your relationship with God.

I remember sometime after our second child was born that I realized, despite working for a church, I could go through a whole day without talking to God. I wouldn't spend time in the morning reading the Bible or praying. I didn't acknowledge God's presence in any way throughout the day. And I didn't even pray with my kids in the evening. It was a stark realization that all my time and energy was going into building



relationship with people through my work at the church, but none of my time and energy was going into my relationship with God. I was imbalanced.

And so I committed to a simple practice. Starting every day with reading the Bible. And my favorite way to do that is the Bible in One Year app from Alpha [[SLIDE](#)]. I'm in my third year of reading the Bible this way, and although I took a break from it to use another resource earlier this year, I found my way back to it two months ago. I firmly believe this is one of the best resources out there. You can download it on your app store. You can listen to it, if you prefer. It comes with highly applicable commentary every day. And, if you keep it up, in one year, you'll have read the whole Bible.

If you feel like your worship is out of balance, maybe you need to commit to a daily habit of spending time with God? Labor Day marks the changing of the seasons. It is a perfect time to take up something new. Why not start reading the Bible in One Year tomorrow?

Conclusion

You have a purpose. You have a role. Your life can have meaning. You are called to be a priest. You are called to serve as an intermediary between a Holy God and a lost world. But to do so, we must balance both worship and mission. We must balance both our relationship to God and our relationship to the world. Without both of these things, we cannot effectively fulfill this role. So, where are you out of balance? What next steps do you need to take? Let's take some time to pray and seek God and ask him to reveal to us what that might be.