

A Sermon for DaySpring  
By Dennis Tucker  
*The God Who Fashions Our Identity*  
Exodus 19:1-8  
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A couple of years ago, as the wildfires in California were breaking out, there was a story of CNN cameraman that made it to the news.

As one of the fires had jumped and broken in one of the valleys, he had been approved to try to get pictures.

He called the local airport to charter a flight. He was told a twin-engine plane would be waiting for him there on the runway.

Arriving at the airfield, he spotted a plane warming up outside a hanger. He ran to the plane jumped in with his bag, slammed the door shut, and shouted, "Let's go!" The pilot taxied out, swung the plane into the wind and took off.

Once in the air, the cameraman instructed the pilot, "Now fly over the valley and make low passes."

"Why?" asked the pilot.

"Because I'm a cameraman for CNN," he responded, "and I need to get some close-up shots of the fires in the valley."

The pilot was strangely silent for a moment, finally he stammered, "So, what you're telling me, is...you're not my flight instructor?"

Identity matters. Knowing the identity of those around you matters.

Throughout Scripture, there are these decisive moments where Israel's identity is shaped. And without question, the single event that shaped their identity was their deliverance out of Egypt.

Last week Chris Gibson took us back to that moment, that moment just after crossing the Red Sea. In the very next chapter, chapter 16, we hear this: "Oh that we had died in the land of Egypt where we sat by our pots of food and ate our fill of bread."

You would think with this liberated people, there should be a spring in their step, a word of hope in their voice—and yet their hopefulness has been replaced with hopelessness.

It is a good thing I am not God—because I might have given them just what they wanted—I might have sent them back to Egypt.

But not this God...he keeps working, pushing, inviting his people to a new identity.

### **I. God is a God Who Carries Us**

And in our text, today we find ourselves on the side of mountain where God shows up to meet his people.

Sometimes we refer to the part of the story as Israel's flight from Egypt. But did you notice the imagery in verse 4?

"How I carried you on eagle's wings and I brought you to myself."

Israel's flight from Egypt was never *Israel's* flight from Egypt. It was a flight borne upon the wings of God.

In the OT, the image of the eagle carries a couple of connotations.  
In some places, God is depicted as an eagle that cares for and nurtures her young—it is the image of a mother bird gathering her chicks under her wings  
But in other places, God is depicted as this majestic and powerful eagle.  
And here, those images seem to merge—God is the powerful one who proved victorious over Egypt, but God is also the nurturing one who has carried his people to deliverance.  
Israel’s deliverance out of Egypt, the crossing of the sea and the journey to Sinai, this encounter on the side of a mountain—it was all of this borne on the wings of God.

That one little point becomes critical for us to understand.  
Before God ever utters a single law, God reminds them that he is the God who has delivered them.  
Before God ever utters a single law, he reminds them that he is their God and they are his people.  
Most of us grow up with the misconception that it was the Law that saved Israel—or that Israelites had to keep the law in order to be saved.  
But that is not accurate.  
Long before the Law was given, God announces that he has created a people.  
All the way back in Genesis 12, God promises Abraham that he is creating a people.  
God did not create a law or sets of law—he did not draw a line in the sand and say only those who can jump this far can be my people.  
No, this is the God who created a people, and then he delivered them over and over again, and he brought them to himself.

When I pastored in Indiana, among the many conversations I had, there were two that remain with me—both were husbands of very active women in the church—and the men never came to church.  
I went to visit one shortly after his fingers had been crushed in an accident at work. The hydraulics machine would come crashing down on metal, pressing them into these thin sheets of metal. Roger would push the bulk metal him, the hydraulic would come crashing down, and then he would pull it and start over.  
Except on that Tuesday, he didn’t get his hand out in time, and it crushed every bone in his hand. We sat in his living room, hand bandaged, a football game on the background as we made small talk. At the end I prayed with him and his wife. And then I said, “Roger, I hope to see in church this week—looks like fishing may be out for a little while.”  
He was staring at the TV, and without missing a beat said, “thanks pastor. I am glad my wife and daughter go but church isn’t for me. I just don’t see the point.”  
About two weeks later, Tish and I were finishing up dinner at Jacks Diner, the local café—the only café—in our little town. It was famous for its bottomless .25 cup of coffee—and for .25 it wasn’t too bad.  
As we were leaving, we bumped into this other woman from our church and her husband. We all stood out in front of the white painted storefront for a few minutes.  
Tish and the other woman visited.  
Wayne and I had some small talk—work, the weather, sports-you know, the typical guy chat stuff.  
I finally said, “hey Wayne, sometime when you get a chance, I’d love for you to come to church.”

And he looked down at the ground, hands tucked into his front pockets, as he kicked a few loose rocks. And there was silence.

Finally said, “Nah, I don’t think I’ll make it.” I was having flashbacks of my previous conversation running through my head and I was beginning to question my effectiveness as a pastor.

But before I could say another word, he said, “You don’t know my past. Trust me, it’s not very pretty---and I have left a wake of destruction over the years. And every time I start to think about going to church, my legs get weak—”

There was a little more silence—and a few more stones kicked.

And I said, “But Wayne, it not about you finding your way to God, it is about a God who has found his way to you.”

A few weeks later, on a Sunday morning without any fanfare, as we were singing the second hymn, I looked up and I saw Wayne slip into the church and slide into the pew beside his wife.

You see, I think we get it all backwards sometimes—we assume Israel had to obey the laws first in order to be God’s people

And perhaps that explains why we assume we too think that we have to get it all right with our lives before we too can be God’s people.

But friends, our God does not work in this way.

All of Scripture testifies that He delivers us first and carries us to himself.

He delivers us first so that we might become the people he desires us to be.

He delivers us first so that we might enjoy a lifetime of becoming the people he desires us to be.

The OT story is not one of a people who always got it all right, it is the story of a God who makes all things new.

And for each of us and all of us together as a community of faith, this is our hope—that is our identity—

--that we belong to a God who delivers, that we belong to a God who bears us up on eagle’s wings, and that we belong to a God who brings us to himself.

--that we belong to a God who as at work among us, making all things new.

## **Not only is this God the God Who Carries Us, This God Calls Us to be a Kingdom of Priests and a Holy People**

### **II. God Calls Us to be a Kingdom of Priests and a Holy People (v. 5-6)**

I know what some of you are already saying, “Look at verse 5—it says “if you will obey me.”

And you are thinking—see, Israel has to obey God first in order to be God’s people. But look again—that’s not what the text says.

The word “obey” really means “to hear” in Hebrew, and the Hebrew is written in such a way that a better translation might be “if you will *really* listen to me.”

As they stood on the side of the mountain, God does not say **if** you will listen to me then I will be your God

—God says “*if you will really listen to me*, then you will become a kingdom of priests and a holy people.”

--*If you will really listen to me*, then you find your identity.

Those born between 1893-1900 were called the Lost Generation. It was a generation of men and women who came of age during and right after WWI.

As a result of their war experiences and the social upheaval of the time, they grew cynical and disillusioned—the life that they had anticipated had disappeared in an instant.

Although sometimes referred to as the roaring 20's, historians suggest that perhaps that generation sought to mask the pain and lack of purpose through wild and raucous living, the kind of living that seemed to throw caution to the wind and live in the moment.

Books like the *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald were written during this period and reflects well this attempt by an entire generation to mask a loss of purpose and identity amid a season of great uncertainty

Some observers of culture today have asked whether our society has become another Lost Generation.

Don't get me wrong, at any moment, I can pull out my cell phone, go to social media, and tell everyone where I am and even send a picture of what I am about to eat.

At any moment, I can say something about my life, but I am rarely saying something about my identity.

Even though we have everything at our fingertips, the one thing we long for most is seemingly beyond our reach—it is to have an identity, to live a life of meaning in the eyes of God.

So how did Israel do it? How did they live a life of meaning?

How are we to do it? How are we, in this second iteration of a Lost Generation, how are we to live a life of meaning?

God told Israel and he tells us today, *if you will really listen to me*, O my people, then you will become a kingdom of priests and a holy people.

Those are impressive titles, aren't they?--To be a kingdom of priests and a holy people

One could interpret that as saying we might just stand a little above everyone else.

But that would be a grave and great misunderstanding.

-to be holy means you are set apart for a task.

-priests were those who stood in gap between God and the rest of world

God tells all those gathered around that mountain on that day that they have been set apart for the work of God in the world—that is the work to which they have been called and that is their identity.

And it is the work to which we have been called as well.

We are to be the ones who mind that gap between the world and God

—and our job is to bring the world closer to God and to make God known better to this world.

That is a lofty goal for those of us living in another Lost Generation because we too at times lose sight of our work, of our identity.

And so perhaps we would do well to pray that short prayer that Soren Kierkegaard scribbled in his journal,

--“Now Lord, with your help, I shall become myself.”

If we believe this is the God who carries us,  
If we believe this God has called us to become a kingdom of priests and a holy people—  
Then we must become a people of live into our Identity

### **III. God Invites us to Live into Our Identity**

Look just a page over in your Bibles—or scroll down on your phone until you get to chapter 20.  
There we find the giving of the Ten Commandments, followed by another three chapters of the laws.

We might be tempted just to skip over this—and sometimes my students wonder why we don't.

But these laws were meant to reinforce the identity of Israel,

Or we might say it this way:

The law “was not designed to show [Israel] *how to achieve redemption*; rather its purpose was to show them *how to live as redeemed people*.”

You may remember, Jesus boils down the 10 commandments and the whole Law to 2 things:

Love God, love others.

Most of us who have two operative eyes benefit from what is known as binocular vision—that is why for most of us, our eyes move in unison.

Each eye sees an image and two separate images are translated by our brain into one image—a 3-D image that provides depth and awareness.

It is binocular vision that helps us perceive distance. You need binocular vision when you reach out to touch something or when you are doing simply tasks like walking and climbing the stairs.

You need binocular vision in order to scan the world around you and make sense of you place in the world.

When we love God, when we love others, suddenly the world comes into focus.

When we love God, when we love others, we suddenly understand our identity as a kingdom of priests, as a holy people.

But this only happens if we are really listening to God.

This only happens if we seek nothing more than to mind the gap between God and the world.

But most of us, I suspect, suffer a bit from blurred vision—we are tempted to believe this life is about me and that my identity is secured by my own achievements—by what I can list on my CV or resume, by the position I hold or once held, or the title I am given or once had, by the esteem I receive.

And even if we don't believe that, sometimes we find ourselves living and thinking that way.

But when you have your eyes set on God, when you are reaching out to those around you—when you love God, when you love your neighbor—

Then you discover you have an identity far greater than any you could create for yourself--

You discover, you are a child of God, you are part of the kingdom of priests, that you have been set aside to do the very work of God.

We are reminded in our text today that it was on the side of a mountain that God came down, met his people and he gave his people an identity.

And well more than a millennia later, it was on the side of another mountain that God came down once more, and this time stretched out his arms on a cross so that all things might be made new, so that we all might become the people of God set apart for a task.

He loved God, he loved others, he loved us. In that moment, on a dark Friday long ago, Jesus minded the gap between the world and God—and we were given a glimpse of our new identity.

You see, the God who made all things new for Israel is at work among each of us and all of us, even now—and that which we long for most, our true identity—it is there for the taking—

It is there for taking, if we but choose to listen.

Thanks be to God.

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