

Lectionary 22 A 2020 (Modified)

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

August 30, 2020

Colossians 1:9-14

“Your Powerful Inheritance”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

The God of the Bible creates a people. God creates his own nation, his own kingdom, his own people. From the human inhabitants of our planet, from all the tribes and nationalities and races and societies, God creates his own people.

Now, God created the whole of creation, including the whole human species. So in a certain sense, everyone was made by Him, everyone belongs to him. But although the Bible kind of lays that out as a background, the bulk of the Bible is about how he gathers a special people into his story. That a people are called out to be part of his purpose. To do his work. To actually be his instrument for caring for, and blessing, the rest of his creation. God has a plan. And he forms a people as he carries out his plan. And your inheritance— your powerful inheritance— is that you are part of his people.

Most of the time, we think of the American people. Or Latino people. Or LGBTQ people. Or Black people. These things are mostly accidents of birth. Things that just kind of happened to you. Biology. And they are often ways that human beings divide ourselves up. Often asserting that one biological group is superior to another. That's *human* history. That's what *humans* are up to.

The Bible very tenaciously presents a counter- narrative. *THAT* is *human* history, that is what *humans* are up to. But the Bible is *God's* history, what *God* is up to. In Genesis chapter twelve, out of nowhere, apropos of nothing, the Bible says; *Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.* The Bible begins with eleven prehistoric chapters. Adam and Eve. Cain and Abel. Giants and warriors. People with enormous lifespans. Noah and the flood.' The tower of Babel. Pre-history. Prehistoric. But history, God's history, starts in chapter 12, and goes through the whole Bible and right up to this very moment. *Now the Lord said to Abram— apropos of nothing! No context, no justification, no explanation, nothing! — 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing... In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'* And that's the beginning of God's history. The beginning of the story of what *God* is up to, and how *you* might come to be a part of what He is

up to.

The people of God— the *chosen* people— were and are the Jews. Then in Jesus Christ, that chosen people is expanded. Jesus called twelve disciples to symbolize that he was creating a new people, (or reviving the people of old,) because there had been twelve tribes of Israel. Jesus of Nazareth creates a people, calling them out of their fishing boats or their tax collector booths, calling them to come with him and become fishers of people. Fishing for people because he, Jesus, is assembling a new people of God.

The New Testament kind of marvels in this. The remarkable First Letter of Peter says, *Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people.* [1 Peter 2:10] First Peter was written to congregations that were experiencing external pressures or persecution or discrimination. *Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people.* The Bible pretty consistently has this story of being called. You are born and raised in certain circumstances, with certain assumptions. And God calls you, gathers you, into *his* people. To be a citizen of his kingdom, a subject of the new realm that God is making. The Bible is tenacious and persistent about this counter-narrative because we live in the world and we are tempted to see merely the biology of our birth, the circumstances and coincidences that we happen to be born into, rather than the spiritual reality of what God is up to. So the Bible and the Church are constantly trying to re-frame our perspective. For the Church it is most obvious in baptism, where there is a symbolic re-birth in the waters of baptism, and last names are not used, and Christian names are used, and the one being baptized is addressed as a child of God. Not a guest in the household of God. But a member of the household. An heir to the family fortune.

So, during this crisis— The crisis of Covid in particular, the economic meltdown caused by the pandemic, the crisis in America's democratic institutions, the season of dividing people according to the circumstances of their birth, the long hot summer of dangerous climate change— In this crisis my calling is to remind you that you are part of God's people. You've been called into a bigger, better community. You are a royal subject of his royal realm. The kingdom of God.

Part of your inheritance in this spiritual nation is (1) that you are not alone. Even in lockdown and quarantine, even in the ICU, you are not on your own. Ever. Part of your inheritance as an adopted member of God's household is (2) that you are not permanently defined by the accidents and the biology of your birth. You might be an underprivileged Black person. You might be a highly privileged white person. But the legacy of slavery— although it is a reality— does not define you. Anymore than whether you are left-handed or right-handed, tall or short, blonde, brunette, redhead, or bald. You are defined by your membership in God's people. Not limited by your membership in those other peoples. (3) And finally, part of your inheritance in this new Israel, this new city of God, is that your people have always done good things. And your people always come through. Time would fail me. I love this verse that I've printed in the order of service: *Time would fail me... And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets.* [Hebrews 11:32] The

New Testament letter to the Hebrews, like First Peter, is also about peoplehood. And the author goes through this whole laundry list of the faithful heroes of the Old Testament. “Time would fail me.” And then at the end, when he has no more time to talk about the people who have come before us and the obstacles that they have overcome because they have been called out and put to use by God, at the end, the author of Hebrews concludes: *Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.* [12:1]

So that is your inheritance, as a member of God’s people.

- (1) The security that you are never alone, even if you feel lonely.
- (2) The identity that liberates you from the accidents, coincidences, circumstances, and biology of your birth— which affect you but will never define you in God’s eyes and in this kingdom that he is building
- (3) The confidence that your older sisters and older brothers have come through worse things than this. By the grace of God. And so will you.

I have a story to accompany this. It comes from Fred Craddock. Who wrote the book on preaching. He was a pastor in the Disciples of Christ Church. He died in 2015. He taught preaching at the Candler School of Theology at Emory University. And this story means a lot to clergy, and you’ll see why we value it, but this is the first time I’ve ever told it. It’s based in fact, it’s a true story, even if the details have gotten embellished along the way.

Anyway, Fred Craddock was a seminary professor who taught preaching. And he was on vacation with his wife in Gatlinburg, Tennessee, and they were having breakfast in a diner. And they noticed this distinguished looking man with white hair going from table to table, greeting people and shmoozing. And Craddock thought to himself, “I hope he doesn’t come over here.” But sure enough, the man did, and he asked Craddock about his line of work. Now when I’m on vacation, and someone asks me what I do for a living, I lie. Craddock felt the same way, but unlike me, he truthfully told the man what he did, and the man said, “So you teach preaching? I’ve got a great story for you.” And he pulled up a chair and sat down at the breakfast table. And Craddock groaned inwardly.

The man pointed to the Great Smoky Mountains outside the window and described how a boy had been born to an unwed mother who lived at the base of the mountains. And because of that fact, whenever the mother and her son came into town, there were a lot of stares and whispers. This was in the South, in the first half of the twentieth century. The boy was teased and picked on in school. He was alone at recess. He ate lunch alone.

The uninvited guest at the breakfast table continued his story. In his early teens, the boy’s congregation got a new pastor. The boy tried to avoid the pastor, but one day he felt the pastor’s hand on his shoulder. And as pastors will often do, the pastor tried to guess who the boy’s parents were. And the boy braced himself for another awkward and painful situation. The pastor said, “Well, boy, you must be a son of...” and the pastor paused. And then the pastor finally

said, “Boy, you’re a child of God. “I see the family resemblance. “Now, you go claim your inheritance.” And that became a crossroads moment in the life of that boy. Instead of that ugly name that is sometimes given to a child born out of wedlock, that pastor had given him a new name, and a new family, and a new identity. Sometimes a pastor makes a lasting impression. The breakfast companion said to Professor Craddock, “Now isn’t that a great story?” And the great preaching professor was forced to admit that yes, it was. The man stood up from the table. As he turned to leave, he said, “You know, if that new preacher hadn’t told me that I was one of God’s children, I probably never would have amounted to anything!” And he walked away.

So it had been him in the story all along. When the waitress came by the table, Craddock asked her who the man was that had taken the seat. The waitress smiled a big smile and said, *“Everybody here knows him. That’s Ben Hooper. He’s the former governor of Tennessee!”*

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Amen.