

OCTOBER 5, 2008

THE CHURCH AS A CHOSEN PEOPLE

— Based on a sermon by Jesse C. Middendorf, general superintendent

1 Peter 2:9-10 NIV

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.

INTRODUCTION

Today we are celebrating the 100th anniversary of our denomination, The Church of the Nazarene. Actually it was on October 13, 1908, under a large tent pitched in Texas, that a magnificent vision began to form. After days of preaching, prayer, negotiation, and debate, the delegates from churches scattered across the United States of America received a final motion that was voted into adoption to begin this new denomination. A spirit of celebration gripped the people. They poured out of the tent, marching around it, singing songs, and praising God. Out of many, they had become one.

It was a *message* that brought them together, a message of holiness of heart and life. They represented approximately 10,000 members in their various organizations and congregations. Though relatively small, many of the groups had churches and mission work across the United States and Canada and missionaries in India, Cape Verde, Mexico, and Japan, soon followed by work in Africa and China. Passionately committed to “spreading holiness across the lands,” they left Pilot Point, Texas, intent on taking the message to all the world.

One hundred years later, the church they launched on that Texas prairie has a membership exceeding 1.6 million people ministering in over 140 languages in 151 world areas. Out of one, we have become many. They were Nazarenes! They were confident in the leadership of the Holy Spirit. They were intent on compassionate ministry and evangelism. And they were passionate about the message of holy living.

The church continued to minister and grow planting churches, schools and hospitals around the world.

As churches were planted, new districts were formed, colleges grew, and Nazarene Bible College in Colorado Springs and Nazarene Theological Seminary in Kansas City were established. The growing church poured people and finances into mission work around the globe.

Throughout the century, the passion that has formed the Church of the Nazarene out of many into one has been to make Christlike disciples in the nations.

We now are a people scattered around the globe. Passionately engaged in evangelism, discipleship, and ministries of compassion, we are still one people defined by a message.

But this message did not originate with us. In his two New Testament letters, Peter, that impulsive and loyal disciple of Jesus, wrote to the Christians scattered across Asia Minor, located in territory that is now in the nation of Turkey. Peter challenged the believers to hold steady in the face of a serious challenge to their stability, their effectiveness, their message.

Peter reminded them of their true identity. They were the New Israel. Through Christ they were related directly to the promises of God in the Old Testament. They were the new people of God.

I. A CHOSEN PEOPLE

Peter made it clear to his readers that they did not come to be the people of God on their own initiative. He said that they were chosen people. That's what's unique about the Christian faith. All other religions are man's search for God. But Christianity teaches it is God search for man. God seeks us. God takes the initiative and by His grace He has chosen us to believe in His Son Jesus Christ.

In his opening words Peter addressed them as people who had been chosen by God (1 Peter 1:1-2, "To God's elect, strangers in the world, ...who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ ..."). God had so provided for them that they had been brought into being "by the sanctifying work of the Spirit."

This choosing is not unique to the believers to whom Peter wrote. This is the common heritage of all God's people throughout the ages. God is the initiator, the originator of our redemption. He has chosen us and has created us as a people of grace. By His grace and mercy He has enabled our obedience to Jesus Christ and has brought us into a relationship with one another as a covenant community.

Peter expressed this reality in 2:10: "Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God"

This reality is not ours alone; it is the marvelous heritage of all those who have responded to His initiatives of grace. He has called all people to himself, and we are joined in a covenant community with all who truly name Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

Do you know this reality? Have you experienced the wonder of God's forgiveness and mercy? You can know Him! That is the heart of our message. You can know Jesus Christ personally, now, today! He invites you to himself through the grace that pours from His heart. Jesus Christ's suffering death is the measure of His love for you. Do you know Him? Would you like to know Him? You may, and you may today. You, too, may

become a part of this new people—the people of God! Acknowledge your need of Him. Confess your sins to Him. Turn from those sins! Now! Completely! And trust Him!

Writing to scattered and often isolated people dispersed over a wide territory, Peter encouraged their faith in the midst of trying circumstances. *You are not alone*, he said. *You belong to God, and you form a new people—the people of God.*

You are a chosen people and you are ...

II. A HOLY PEOPLE

Peter went on to assert a very significant aspect of this choosing when he said, “You are . . . a holy nation” (2:9).

As the nation of Israel camped at Mount Sinai following their deliverance from Egypt, the Lord spoke through Moses: “Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:6).

Peter echoed that bold claim for all believers: “You are . . . a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God” (2:9). Peter takes this heritage of Israel and applied it to the people to whom he wrote. *You have been chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified (set a part) by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ*, he said. *This is your heritage. This is your future. You are the holy people of God.*

Earlier in the letter (1 Peter 1:14-16) appealed to this heritage of the people saying, “As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: ‘Be holy, because I am holy’”

The holiness to which Peter called his readers is the heritage to which the Lord has called the Church of the Nazarene. We people called Nazarenes, as a body and as persons who make up that body, are called to be a holy people. We are called to live out the holiness imparted to us by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, and we are called to obedience to Jesus Christ.

This is an obedience of love and compassion, of mercy and acceptance. This is an obedience of rugged resistance to sin in all its forms and resistance to conformity to the world around us.

This is an obedience of radical surrender to the lordship of Jesus Christ, to Spirit-empowered living, to love in depth toward people of every kind. And this is an obedience of active engagement with the needs of people around us.

This wonderful grace of holiness, being set a part completely for God, is more than just a theory. Have *you* experienced this marvelous grace? Have you allowed God’s Spirit to work in you, to draw you closer to Him, to shape and mold you toward the image of

Christ? Have you come to a moment of utter surrender of your will to the sanctifying fullness of the Holy Spirit? He longs to fill you with Himself. He longs to purify your heart. He *invites* you to this moment of surrender. This is His will for you!

Will you seek His fullness? Will you offer your redeemed life to Him in utter release of every other thing in your life? Will you allow Him to be the Lord of your life at the deepest recesses of your soul? Trust Him! Yield to Him! Receive Him! He is longing to fill you with His Spirit!

The Church of the Nazarene's mission is to evangelize the world in order to lead believers into a transforming encounter with the Holy God who desires to sanctify His people "through and through." For we are also ...

III. A SENT PEOPLE

Peter also said that we are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people "that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (2:9). We are a sent people.

We are chosen and made holy by God not for our own good only. We are commissioned to proclaim His mighty acts. Having been chosen, redeemed, transformed, and sanctified, we are also sent. This choosing is not for us alone; it is for the world ...and that world includes the person nearest to you as well as the one miles away on another continent.

In his second letter Peter made the point abundantly clear: "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9).

God who loved the world enough to send His one and only Son does not desire that any should perish!

We are the sent people of God, called to proclaim the riches of His grace to all people everywhere. With the radical optimism of grace motivating us, we go in the power of the Spirit to take the world for Christ.

We are sent. This is our heritage; this is our mission.

CONCLUSION/INVITATION

The next century is ours to claim. We dare not merely celebrate the past successes nor mourn over the missed opportunities. We have this moment to change the world! With the grace and help of God we will continue to be "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that [we] may declare the praises of him who called [us] out of darkness into his wonderful light" (2:9).

Earlier in this message I asked you two very important questions. One of them related to your relationship with Jesus Christ as your personal Savior. Let me ask you again: Do you know Him? Have you experienced the wonder of becoming His child, forgiven, adopted into His family, and given life that only Jesus can give? If you have not, what better time than today!

To the believers, I want to ask my second question: Have you allowed the Spirit of God to “sanctify you through and through”? Have you experienced the inexpressible joy of knowing that Jesus Christ is the unrivaled Master of your soul? He longs to make you like himself. He longs to fill you with His holy love. He longs to purify your heart of any competing sovereignty. He can do it! And He can do it now! Will you allow Him to do so? Again, I say, what better time than today!