

Joining People to God's Work of Renewal

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[0 : 00] Well, again, let me say good morning to you.

I'm thrilled to be here. And I'm excited to continue in the series that we started a couple of weeks ago. We're taking time right now, just a few weeks, to talk about the DNA of our church.

We've been here for about 14 years, and some of you have been here for that entire journey. Some of you, this may be your first Sunday with us. And so, in the life of any church, it's very valuable to take time every now and then to remember why we started the church, why we're here, most importantly, where we feel like God is calling us to go.

So this is really about what we feel that God has called us to be and to do in this area. And so, this is week three. We're continuing to look at our statement of mission, which, Julian, if you could put that up, our mission statement is essentially this.

We exist to do three things, to join people to God, which we talked about a couple of weeks ago, to join people to one another, which we talked about last week, and then this week's topic, to join people with Christ's work of renewal in Washington, D.C. and through it, the world.

[1 : 22] This is the topic that we're going to be focusing on. Another way to ask the question that we're going to focus on this morning would be this. What is our salvation for? Why does God establish the church?

Why does God save and restore people and place them in the church? What's God's desire for His church, for His people to do in the world? Why are we here?

Why are we here? And what we see, and this is what the Bible does again and again, is the Bible says, if you know who you are, if you understand your identity, then out of that, you will clearly begin to understand your purpose.

So, if you know who you are, then you can begin to discern why you're here. And that's why we're going to look at 1 Peter 2, verses 9 through 12, because this really speaks to those two things.

It tells us first who we are and then why we're here. So, we're going to look at this in two parts, the identity of the church and then the purpose of the church. So, this is our outline for this morning.

[2 : 22] So, let's take a moment and pray and ask God to guide us as we open His Word. Lord, we thank You for Your Word, and we thank You that it's more than just ink and paper, that it is living, that it is active, that when You send it out, it does not return void.

It accomplishes all that You intend for it to accomplish. Lord, our hope is not in the Word of human beings this morning. It's in the Word of the God who made us. And we pray that even as we open Your Word, that it would become living in us, that it would become flesh in us, and that through Your written Word, we would come to see Your living Word face to face.

And it's in His name that we pray. Amen. Amen. So, first of all, let's talk a little bit about the identity of the church. This isn't just church of the advent. This is the church in the world.

1 Peter, since we're dropping into the middle of this, just to give you a little context, 1 Peter is all about the fact that Jesus, through His resurrection, has raised people to a living hope.

That's what it says in the very beginning of the book. And what that means is this is a hope of life. It's a hope that is living and active in the form of Jesus Christ. And it's a living hope for the world.

[3 : 40] That God's plan isn't just to save people so that they can escape the world. That God's plan is actually to resurrect and renew the world just as the body of Jesus has been resurrected and renewed.

So our hope is a resurrected world. And He raises people to begin to live out that hope here and now. And so, 1 Peter is really all about how we do that when we live in a world where people believe lots of different things, a pluralistic society, and where increasingly people are very hostile to the beliefs of a faith like Christianity.

These people were facing hostility every bit as much as we face skepticism and hostility today. And so, Peter's talking about first in the first part of the book, he's talking about the identity of the church.

Who are we who have been raised to this living hope? And how do we orient ourselves to the world that we live in, the society where God has placed us? And he uses two key terms that give us a big, strong, clear sense of our place in the world.

And the first word that he uses, it's a key term, is the word exile. He says, to understand who you are in the world, you need to understand that now because of me, you are all exiles.

[4 : 59] You're exiles. And he's intentionally referencing a very specific time in Israel's history. In the 6th century BC, the Babylonians conquered God's people and they took them into exile.

And the Babylonian strategy was that after a couple of generations, Israel would simply become assimilated into Babylonian culture.

So the idea is, it's very expensive to kill all of these people. It's very bloody and it's a big waste. We're going to benefit more as a society if they just assimilate and we gain their best and brightest.

And so that's exactly what they did. And so the hope was that Israel would simply cease to exist, right? That their kids' kids wouldn't even remember Israel. And so for these Israelite exiles in Babylon, there was this big question that they were debating among themselves.

How do we relate to this foreign culture of Babylon? And it seemed like there were only two options. Some people said we need to hunker down. It was the sort of fortification option. Let's fortify ourselves against the Babylonian culture.

[6 : 04] Let's keep ourselves entirely separate and let's wait for God to rescue us. And there were some prophets who were saying that's going to happen very soon. Just hold tight. God is coming. The other option that some people sort of accepted with a sense of hopeless resignation was let's just give up.

Let's just allow ourselves to be assimilated. There is no hope for us. We're done as a people. And so that was really the two choices, fortification or assimilation. And God sends the prophet Jeremiah with a third option.

He says, I don't want you to fortify yourselves and I don't want you to allow yourselves to be assimilated. And the option is what we might call faithful presence. On the one hand, he says, don't remain separate.

Go into Babylon. Put down roots. Get jobs. Have kids. Commit to living there for several generations. You're going to be there for a while. And then on the other hand, Jeremiah says, on the one hand, don't fortify.

But on the other hand, don't allow yourselves to be assimilated. Go into the city. Go into the society. You know, get jobs. Put down roots. Get married. Let your kids get married. Get to know your neighbors. Invest in the community.

[7 : 13] But don't be assimilated into their way of life. Stay faithful to me as my chosen people. Stay holy, which means set apart. Stay holy. And more than that, verse 7, seek the welfare of the city where I've sent you into exile.

And pray to the Lord on its behalf. For in its welfare, you will find your welfare. Right? And the word welfare can also be translated shalom or flourishing.

Right? And so this is the third option that exilers are called to in the world. And Peter is saying that Christians need to understand that we need to think of ourselves like exiles in Babylon.

So God wants the church to be present and active and engaged in every sphere of society. God's vision is that Christians would be everywhere there are people.

Right? Go everywhere. In every job. In every profession. In every sphere. But on the other hand, don't be assimilated. Stay holy. Stay separate. Stay set apart.

[8 : 13] Stay faithful to me. Stay salty. Stay. So it's the both and option. Right? Be present but don't allow yourselves to be assimilated. Instead, pray for and seek the flourishing of the society where God has put you.

So that's the first word that he uses. Think of yourselves like exiles called to have a faithful presence wherever God has put you. And then he adds to that a term that would have gone way beyond anything that you would see in the Old Testament.

He says, not only are you exiles, but you were also a royal priesthood. Because of Jesus, you're not just exiles. You are royal priests. Now, for the original audience, for people with a kind of a Jewish background, royalty was a kind of unimaginable privilege.

Right? Most people didn't even know somebody who was royal. And so what they would think of would be sort of King David and the lineage of King David. Unless you were born into a royal family, you probably wouldn't even be in contact with anybody who was royal.

And priests were similar in the sense that that was this kind of unimaginable privilege that you had to be born into. Because in the Old Testament, in the Old Testament priesthood, priests came from certain special families from among the nation of Israel.

[9 : 35] And they were uniquely able to enter into the holy places of God and to mediate the relationship between God and people. So both royalty and priests, they were privileges that you had to be born into.

You had to be born into the right family. So the idea that everybody would be royal priests was just unthinkable. Right? Because these are massive privileges.

And that's exactly what Peter is saying. He's saying that every single Christian who puts their faith in Jesus Christ is born again into a royal priesthood.

You're born into that chosen, set apart, privileged family. And what this means is that every single Christian has all of the privileges of royalty in God's kingdom.

Right? You have the place of honor at the table. And every single Christian has direct access to God. A kind of access that the Old Testament priesthood couldn't have even imagined having.

[10 : 39] So he says you're exiles and you are royal priests. Every single one of you. And this is extremely important for understanding the identity of the church in the world today.

Because, you know, when we use the word priest, we can easily get confused. Because in the church today, we use the word priest in a couple of different ways. In one sense, we use the word priest to describe an office in the church.

Somebody who wears a collar. Somebody like me. And we say, well, some churches have priests in them. And that word comes from the Greek word presbyteros, which essentially means elder.

And what we see is that since the very beginning of the church, the apostles set aside certain people to serve the church as presbyteros, as priests, as elders.

People to sort of oversee and manage the affairs of the church and God's people. And so that's what I do. That's what a very small number of people do. We have that job in the church.

[11 : 40] It's an office. But here's the thing I want you to understand. Our job and the reason that this office even exists is to serve you, the royal priesthood.

So we are sort of priests who serve all of the other priests in God's family, in God's temple. And so as Paul says in Ephesians chapter 4, the job of people like me is to equip the saints for the work of ministry.

Our job is to equip the royal priesthood to be a royal priesthood in the world. And so our contract is essentially this. I keep you well fed so that you can go out and do all of the things, do all of the ministry that God has given you to do.

And that's how the relationship works. And one of the biggest threats to the mission of the church is what we might call clericalism, which is the mistaken belief that the clergy are the ones doing the real work of ministry on the front lines and that it's the job of the church to support the kind of ordained people.

You know, the pastors and the missionaries and the monks and the nuns, they're the real Christians. They're doing the real work of ministry. And everybody else's job in the congregation is to support what they do.

[12 : 58] And what we need to emphasize here is we can't really emphasize this enough. That's the exact opposite of the way God, I believe, intended his church to function. I mean, I stand up here for an hour and a half roughly every week.

And you all are the ones sitting in the pews because this is the time for you to be fed. This is the time for you to come together and to be fed and to be nourished. And we all sort of come together in prayer and around the word of God and around the table.

And so you need to be fed by word and by sacrament, right, for all that God has called you to do. So this is the time for you to sit in the pews. But that's about an hour and a half a week, give or take. For the remaining roughly 166 and a half hours of the week, you are the ones on the front lines and I'm the one behind the scenes.

And you are the ones on the front lines doing the work of royal priests in the world. And I mean that in its fullest sense. Everywhere you go, you bring the presence of God with you.

You have an ability to do what no Old Testament priest ever could have done because you don't need to go to the temple. You don't need to go into the holy of holies in the temple.

[14 : 11] Wherever you go. And it might sound ridiculous to say, you know, when you go to Costco and you're standing in line, you have with you, in you, the presence of the God who made the universe.

You're a royal priest. So when you walk into a room, people may not know it, but you are the single most important person they could possibly talk to.

Right? If they really knew what they were doing in terms of networking, everybody would line up to talk to you. Because you are the one with a royal priestly authority to bring them into the presence of the God of the universe.

One conversation with you, and they have a chance to actually know and be reconciled to the God who made them. Because you're a royal priest.

And if we understand the identity of the church as exiles and royal priests, I think that begins to shape our sense of why we're here.

[15 : 13] Our purpose. We're exiles called to seek the welfare of the society where we've been sent. To be present everywhere, but not to be assimilated. And we are royal priests who bring with us the authority of the kingdom of God and the presence of that God wherever we go.

Now just let that sink in. And so the job of the people up here, the job of the people who work for a church, is to make sure you have everything you need to do that. It's to make sure you're well fed.

It's to pray for you. It's to do all we can to equip you. And then when you go out and you fight on the front lines, and you get beat up and you get wounded and you get tired and you get hungry, you come back and we patch you up here on Sunday.

And then we send you back out to the front lines. And that's how it works. So we're exiles. We're royal priests. That leads us into the second part, which is understanding the purpose of the church.

The purpose of the church. He says, But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

[16 : 30] To proclaim God's excellence. That's essentially our purpose. To proclaim God's excellence. And that means to make it known far and wide.

So the word proclaim here is not just speaking. It's also living. I make God's excellence known in what I say. I make God's excellence known in what I do and how I live. That's what a royal priest does.

That's the job of a royal priest. So what does it look like to do this? I wanted to give you a few examples. You see them up on the screen right now. A few specific examples of ways we as a church proclaim God's excellence.

The first example is simply this. Through evangelism. That's the most obvious example of proclaiming God's excellence. And evangelism is something that every Christian is called to do.

It's a part of how we respond to Jesus. You see at the end of Matthew, that passage that I just read, that Jesus gives that commandment, go and make disciples of all the nations, to his apostles.

[17 : 36] And then he tells them, go and tell everyone you know, everyone you meet, everyone who becomes a disciple, to observe all that I've commanded you, including the commandment to go and make disciples.

Right? And so this is something that applies to every Christian. And it's a quintessential job of a royal priest, is to make the presence and the glory of God known to people who need to know him.

And honestly, at its core, evangelism is simply proclaiming God's excellence. Ideally, evangelism starts simply by telling people stories of how God has worked in your life.

That's where evangelism really, I think, should begin. You know, this past week I was in Oregon, and I found myself one night sitting at a table with just the most random mishmash of people.

And we're sitting there, and earlier in the trip, somebody had asked what we all did, and it got to me. And I said, you know, well, I'm a pastor back in D.C. I'm a priest of an Anglican church.

[18 : 41] And I could tell that that was sort of an unexpected answer. You know, it's like doctor, lawyer, lawyer, doctor, priest. And they're like, okay. And so another day goes by, and then the third night we're all together at dinner, and somebody brings it back up and says, well, how does somebody, none of these people were Christians.

And they say, well, how does somebody get into that kind of work, you know? And I said, well, honestly, I don't think it's going to make much sense to you unless I tell you the story of how I came to faith.

Would you be interested in hearing that story? And everybody at the table said, absolutely, we'd love to hear that story. And I'm inside thinking, really? You really want to hear? Not many people, okay.

And so I just begin to tell the story of how I came to faith. And I get done with the story. And then somebody asks a question about Jesus, and somebody asks a question about the gospel.

And next thing I know, the entire dinner conversation, until the end of the night, we're talking about the gospel. And we're talking about Jesus. And we're talking about grace. And we're talking about idolatry. And we're talking about how nothing that we put our hope in is ever going to last and deliver.

[19 : 48] And we're talking about how Jesus is the only thing, the only one that we're ever meant to know and follow. But it all launched out of just an opportunity to tell my story. And it was fascinating to me to realize that I'm not gifted in evangelism.

If you know Lisa, our deacon, she's very gifted in evangelism. I don't have the spiritual gift. But as a Christian, I know that I'm called to do it. And what you realize is that very often, you know, I didn't go in there with any kind of strategy, any kind of game plan, any kind of approach that I was going to take.

I was just showing up and eating dinner. And God created the opportunity. And that when God creates that opportunity, all we have to do is respond with the truth.

Well, here's how I've experienced God in my life. Here's what God's done for me. We are proclaiming God's excellence when we do that. And then when people want to know more and they want to know more and they want to know more, all of a sudden you find yourself laying out all of the core aspects of our faith and why we put our hope in Jesus above anyone else.

And I think that's where good evangelism starts. And, you know, we live in a culture that I think increasingly rejects the idea of organized religion, but story has a real power.

[21 : 01] People really put value on stories. And it's interesting how when you begin to tell your story, how people begin to rethink and question their own story in ways that I think God can use.

So this is something that every single one of us can do. So this is one of the ways that we proclaim God's excellence through evangelism. Another way that we as a community proclaim God's excellence in the world is through ministries of justice and mercy.

You know, unfortunately, you don't often see churches that emphasize both evangelism and justice and mercy. Typically, you have churches that emphasize evangelism, but they don't talk a lot about justice and vice versa.

But I think if you read Scripture thoroughly, it shows you pretty clearly how much God cares about justice and mercy right alongside evangelism. You know, you read places like Isaiah 58 where God says to His people, is not this the fast that I choose?

In other words, do you really want to prove that you're my people? Do you really want to glorify my name? Do you really want to show your devotion to me? Well, loose the bonds of wickedness.

[22 : 07] Undo the straps of the yoke. Let the oppressed go free. Break every yoke. Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house when you see the naked to cover him, right?

This is God saying, if you want to glorify my name and proclaim my excellence, then you need to care about what I care about, to care the people that I want to care for, right?

And then in Luke 11, Jesus actually accuses the Pharisees of hypocrisy. And what he's talking about there is, he says, you're overemphasizing certain forms of holiness and piety.

You're tithing so meticulously that you're even tithing your herbs in your garden. You're tithing your mint and your cumin. And he says, and yet you're neglecting the people who are right in front of you, who are victims of poverty and injustice.

He says, you're neglecting justice. And he says, this is a form of hypocrisy. He says, woe to you. Woe to you, Pharisees. Right? And so the Bible again and again says that some of the clearest evidence of genuine Christian faith is whether or not we care about justice and mercy for those who are vulnerable.

[23 : 17] And the Bible again and again and again has what many people have called the quartet of the vulnerable. Again and again and again, you see the widow, the orphan, the immigrant, and the poor. The widow, the orphan, the immigrant, and the poor.

These are the most vulnerable people in society. And God says, if you care about me, then you've got to care about them. And the best evidence that you care about me is that you care about them.

Right? So when we do the work of justice and mercy, we proclaim God's excellence because we're showing the world what God cares about, who God cares about, and we're giving people a preview of the kind of world, the kind of society that God is establishing through his kingdom.

Right? We're saying, see this here. It's the same thing that Jesus did with his miracles. Right? Why does Jesus heal the blind and heal the lame and raise people from death?

Why does Jesus do that? There are previews. There are ways for Jesus to say, one day when the kingdom is fully established, this is what everything is going to be like. And that's what we do when we do justice and mercy work.

[24 : 20] We're saying, you know, this is the kind of world that God is building, a kind of world where this is true for everybody. So this is why our church places a high value on supporting ministries like Little Lights and the mentoring work that they do.

Or ministries like DZ 127 and the foster care and adoption work that they do. Right? This is why we prioritize ministries that help us show the world the heart of God.

It's why we have new ministries like the Antioch ministry that's devoted to building cross-cultural relationships with other churches in the city. It's the same reason. This shows the heart of God to the world.

This proclaims His excellence. So we have evangelism, we have ministries of justice and mercy, and then finally, we have vocational ministry. And there's a reason that I wanted to end on this.

Here's the reason. Evangelism, centrally important. Justice and mercy, centrally important. But when people ask, what ministries do you have at Church of the Advent? Get asked that a lot.

[25 : 23] What ministries, what are you guys doing? I say, you know, my first answer is pretty simple. I say, you want to know our primary ministry? It's our people. It's our people.

You are our primary ministry through your vocation, through what God has called you to do and equipped you to do in the world. And the word vocation simply means calling.

All Christians have two vocations. This is the way the Puritans used to break it down. They would say, all Christians have two vocations. You have a general calling and you have a particular calling.

Your general calling is everything that we've been talking about up to this point. You are called to follow Jesus. You're called to evangelism, to share the gospel. You're called to do the work of justice and mercy. Everything that we've been talking about, that's all your general calling.

All Christians are called to do those things. But you also have a particular calling. This is a specific occupation that God has called you to that uses your gifts and that it uses your talents and uses your aptitudes and uses your passions to do things that other Christians may not necessarily be called to do.

[26 : 37] right? So whether you build or you cook or you raise children or you paint or you organize or you clean or you lead or administrate or sell or manage or counsel or support or advise or oversee or inspire or teach, there are certain roles that God has designed and equipped you to fill roles that you play in his kingdom.

And I'm not talking only about you doing those things in the church. I'm talking about you doing those things as the church in all of the world, wherever God puts you.

And the thing is, if you imagine two overlapping circles like a Venn diagram, your vocation may not necessarily line up with your current job or career.

Right? Ideally, your vocation and your job or your career that there's some overlap. Some of us, it may be like this. You gotta make money, but this is really your calling.

Ideally, there's some overlap and ideally, over time, part of your Christian maturity, part of your discipleship, is getting more and more clear on what your vocation is so that you can spend more and more and more of your time pulling those things together.

[28 : 01] And, you know, Amy Sherman writes about this and she says that our vocation is typically found at the intersection of three things. God's priorities, your gifts, talents, passions, interests, aptitudes, and then the world's needs.

You pull all of those things together and you will find where those things intersect for you a sense of vocation. And it's the work of the church to help you figure that out.

That's part of how we equip you for the work of ministry in the world. That's our responsibility as a community. And so what I want you to take from this is that the work that you do day in and day out, that work matters to God more than you can possibly imagine.

It is one of the ways, and I would say as a church, a central way that God uses you to accomplish his purposes in the world. And Julian, if we could put this quote up on the screen, I want you to see this, I want you to hear it, I want you to remember it.

N.T. Wright says this in his book *Surprised by Hope*. What you do in the present by painting, preaching, singing, sewing, praying, teaching, building hospitals, digging wells, campaigning for justice, writing poems, caring for the needy, loving your neighbor as yourself.

[29 : 18] And you can add into that list however, whatever you feel called to do in the world. Whatever you do will last into God's future. These activities are not simply ways of making the present life a little less beastly, a little more bearable, until the day when we leave it behind altogether.

Last sentence. Listen to this. They are part of what we may call God built, what we may call building for God's kingdom. That when you do the work that God has called you to do, that is a part of building for God's kingdom.

It's building for God's kingdom. So our primary ministry at Church of the Advent is you. Doing the work, doing your job, doing your vocation with excellence, with excellence for God's glory.

Right? So when I see you doing something that you're phenomenally good at and something that you love to do, when I see your heart singing because you are doing the thing that God has put you here to do, that is proclaiming God's excellence.

The world looks at that and says, and this is what Paul says in Colossians, do everything, work hard, work earnestly, work with all your heart as though you were working for Christ because that's exactly what you're doing. So you're our primary ministry.

[30 : 39] You royal priests, you exiles, you who are called not only to generally follow Jesus but to the specific things that God has put you here to do. So bringing all of this back to the mission of our church, we exist to join people to Christ's work of renewal in all of the ways that I've just described.

Jesus has risen from the grave. One day Jesus will resurrect and restore this world. And because of the cross, we who were once caught off from God because of sin are not only reconciled to Him but we gain the unimaginable privilege of joining in the work of renewal.

And so part of what we do as a church is to join people into the work that Christ is already doing in the world. And this means supporting and equipping you in your general vocation to follow Jesus faithfully and be holy and set apart, to share the gospel, to do the work of justice and mercy, and also supporting and equipping you for your particular vocation, helping you discern what has God called you to do, how do you integrate your faith into your work, and making sure you understand the importance of your work for God's kingdom.

Because God has made you for His purposes and until you understand that, your life is never going to make sense. Let's pray.

Lord, we thank you for your ministry in the world. All we do is a response to your ministry in the world.

[32 : 11] The fact is, as your word says, once we were not a people, once we were cut off and alienated, but now because of you we are a people. We thank you for your ministry and we thank you for the honor and the privilege of not just sitting on the sidelines and watching you do your thing, but the fact that you call us into your ministry.

You call us to partner with you, to join with you in your work of renewal in this world, Lord. I thank you for calling us, Lord, in the ways that we're all called to tell people about you and to show your heart to the world and those we care for.

And Lord, I also thank you for the particular colleagues that you've given each one of us and I pray that you would give us through the power of your Holy Spirit greater and greater clarity over what that is and that, Lord, you would inspire us, that you would give us the boldness and the freedom as a community to speak truth to one another in our discernment, that when we see things happening, Lord, that remind us of you, that put your glory on display, that we would speak up, that we would affirm that in one another.

Lord, I pray that in all that we're called to do, all of the work that we're called to do, no matter how menial, no matter how unimportant it might feel, that we would do all of it with our eyes fixed on you, Lord, in the light of your pleasure, seeking only to bring you more glory and proclaim your excellence to the world.

We pray this in your Son's holy name. Amen.