



**Mennonite
Church
Canada**

Resource Centre

Sermon

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God's People Now!

We are God's People Now! This is the theme that has been chosen for Mennonite Church annual assembly here in Edmonton in just a few short months and it's our theme for this year's annual Alberta Song Fest.

It's a great theme! God's people now! – That's right now – right here! God's people now – not in a past which can't be changed or a future that only God knows. We are God's people now, and we are writing the story of His people even now as the clock of time ticks away. It's an exciting thought because we, through our thoughts, our words, and our actions get to determine the script! But it's also a sobering thought, because at some point in the future we will get to look back and see how the story unfolded and sometimes it will look mediocre, sometimes it will be negative and sometimes it will be very positive. It's all part of both the pain and the joy, the agony and the ecstasy of being the church – of being God's people now. Sometimes being the church brings great satisfaction and other times it's a source of frustration. Sometimes being God's people brings tremendous joy and other times it's a source of grief.

But that's the nature of being the church, because the Holy Spirit of God has been poured into imperfect human vessels made of clay. As one version puts it – we are a treasure in

cracked pots! So I have news for us: We are in this for the long haul – in spite of our human tendency to give up or to bolt – we are in this thing TOGETHER! Opting out is not an option – like marriage; we are in covenant relationship “until death do us part”, for better or for worse. And I'm kind of glad that it's not always smooth sailing, for it's all part of the mix that helps us to grow up in Christ. This is us, God's people now, the beauty and the warts, the mediocre and the sublime, the joy and the pain.

We are not only God's people in a specific time. We are God's people in a specific geographic location, 3650 91st in the city of Edmonton, province of Alberta, Canada, Planet Earth. God's people are always in a context. We didn't become God's people now to escape the world, but to engage it. As I read Scripture, it seems clear that the sphere of God's activity in both the present and the future is planet Earth, and not some far out place in space. This should be self evident, but the attitude of some Christians seems to be retreat from the world – you become a Christian, are baptized into the church to retreat behind its four walls every Sunday – perhaps make a foray on occasion to make more recruits and then retreat again to the safety of the four walls of the church to await the day when we will be taken away to escape it all.

Maybe that is the reason so many Christians take a care less attitude toward earth and its creatures – It's all going to burn anyway so caring for the environment, working for peace, or promoting life strategies are not high priorities. The priority is recruitment rather than engagement. Recruitment is important and as Mennonite Christians I think we need to do a much better job because after all we want to see many more join God's people, but recruitment is only the beginning. We are being recruited to become part of God's redeeming, reconciling, healing purposes for His world. And it takes place here! God wants to renew all things. God loves the world! The Vision of Revelation is the Holy City coming down out of heaven to earth. Earth is going to be renewed – it will be changed for the better and meantime we engage God's world as signs of that future home and healing.

I have recently been reading Tom and Christine Sine's book, *LIVING ON PURPOSE*. In it Tom argues for a more "whole life faith that has greater influence on your entire life". He says, "God offers us a future and a hope but it isn't just about us and our spiritual lives (it's not just about "me and Jesus"). It's about the transformation of every part of our lives and every facet of God's world. We aren't headed for the clouds. The scriptures repeatedly affirm that God plans to make all things new, (which means us) and the entire creation. - - - The creator intends to rescue the world; not abolish it".

If this is true, what kind of exciting possibilities does this raise for your own personal and family mission statement? What kind of imaginative possibilities does this raise for us as churches to realize that we can be part of God's redeeming, healing plan for His world? What kinds of new Visions for Mennonite Church Alberta might this grand purpose of God inspire in us!?

We are God's people now, warts and all, and we are God's people in context.

But what is the key to being effective people right now in our contexts? Is it to redouble our efforts, develop better strategies, or get a good Vision statement? I think we need some of those things to have a clearer picture of what it is we want to do. But being comes before doing. The kind of people we are determines the things we will do and the kind of energy we will put into our programs. That's what our theme text is strongly suggesting.

This is WHO you are – The test says, we are CHOSEN, we are ROYALTY, and we are HEAVENLY CITIZENS!

As chosen people, we belong to God! And while it should be very evident that that is the case, I don't think it can be over emphasized! If we belong to God, then God owns us! We don't belong to anyone else, including ourselves, nor do we belong to anything else. We are the exclusive property of the one true God – we don't belong to any one of the myriads of gods who compete for our allegiance. And we belong to God by virtue of redemption. We've just celebrated Easter, remembering the suffering, the death and the resurrection of Jesus from the grave. Through that work of God, we were bought, purchased at a great price so that we who once were no people are now the people of God.

We who once were in darkness, slaves to sin and self are now freed people walking in the light. Yes, we still can choose darkness and bondage but now we are also free as God's people to choose light, to choose freedom, to choose God's way because we belong to Him. We are the chosen people of God in Christ along with all who name His name.

We are also royalty! We are called a royal priesthood. Royal is an interesting adjective for describing priesthood. The priestly role is a servant role reminding us that we are both servants to our own community and the world as well as servants to God in our worship. But it's also a kingly role "a priesthood belonging to the King and in the service of the King. As we serve God, we are serving in the palace of the king's court" – we share with Christ in His kingship as well as His priesthood. This adds dignity, worth, and motivation to our service, so that however humble our acts of service might be, they are being done as representatives of God in the presence of royalty!

Chosen people, royal servant, but also heavenly citizens. You are a holy nation. The Greek word for nation is *ethnos* meaning plural for the gentile nations. Israel as one of those nations was to be a distinct nation, a set apart nation for God to worship God. Today, we the Church are that set apart, holy nation of God among the nations of the world. We live in the world and among the world but we are not world citizens and we do not owe our primary allegiance to this world. We pay its taxes and obey its laws as good citizens but our primary allegiance is to God's Kingdom because that's where our citizenship resides. This is another

great privilege, and it defines us as God's people. However, it also can be a source of confusion, because both kingdoms share the same geographic space called earth. As Peter Stuckey put it quaintly at Assembly last summer, "we get these two nationalities confused and that gets us into a whole lot of bad trouble". Perhaps the counter-cultural pledge of allegiance that Nelson Kraybill repeated at that same assembly would be helpful: "I pledge allegiance to Jesus Christ and to God's Kingdom for which he died, one Spirit led people the world over indivisible with love and justice for all". He then footnoted that pledge with this sober reminder of the context in which God's kingdom exists – "When we consider what's happening today by the waters of Babylon, we should sit down and weep".

I find this to be a precise illustration of both the high privilege of being citizens of God's kingdom and of the complexities of being the kingdom in which the gods of the nations compete for our loyalties. Heavenly citizens, yes, but with the ever constant need to keep Kingdom focused and make it our highest priority.

We are God's people right here, right now – chosen by God, royal servants, citizens of God's Kingdom – so that, so that – we might declare the praises of Him who called us out of darkness into His wonderful light.

Being God's people now is nothing to keep quiet about. It's something to crow about, something to declare! And we can do that in a multiplicity of ways. Of course, we ought to be doing it verbally. But a life lived in keeping with our identity also speaks volumes. Exercising patience with our co-worker and in traffic, speaking well of others, and commending every good thing in others all give credibility from which to declare our allegiance to Christ and His redeeming activity in our lives. The corporate witness of service and united worship events such as this are ways to mutually declare the praises of the God who has called us.

Being God's people now is something to crow about, to sing about, to tell others about. Who else can say that God chose them, that they serve in a royal palace, or that they carry citizenship in God's Kingdom??

It's the opportunity of a lifetime and the celebration of an eternity forever with God!