

There was a day when people did not spend a lot of time asking, “Who am I? And what is my mission in life?” Pursuing these questions is now something of a heroic quest, and our need for clarity about life’s calling just keeps reappearing as we move through the different seasons of life. But through most of history these fundamental identity and mission issues were seen not as an individual pursuit but an inheritance.

My grandfather was the sixth of the generations before him to inherit a tobacco farm in North Carolina. He farmed because it was the life he was given, and the life he knew. As a young man he left home for a short time to join one of the Big Bands in Miami. But he found that life was filled with loneliness, addictions, and as he said, women who scared him. So he pretty quickly returned to the life given him by his parents and grandparents who lived in the same house, aunts and uncles who lived down the road, his schoolteacher, who was also his Sunday School teacher, the preacher at the Tarboro Baptist Church, his friends and his lifelong girlfriend, my grandmother who said she wouldn’t marry him until he got that fool idea about the Big Bands out of his system. A similar story could be told about historic urban families, immigrant families, and families of color. But times have changed.

When I was in college, and on my own quest to find a fulfilling way of life, I visited my grandmother. While I was there I asked her if Granddad was fulfilled as a farmer. She found the question confusing. So I tried to explain the concept of fulfillment, which she also found confusing. Finally, she said, “I don’t know, Honey. He was a farmer.”

We know what fulfillment means, and we pursue it like the holy grail because we believe it has something to do with finding great answers to the pressing questions, “Who am I and what is my mission in life?” But we certainly don’t look to our families or our communities to answer those questions. For the last several generations home is something you leave in order to discover yourself by yourself.

When we dismantled the claims of history and traditions upon the individual pursuit of identity, we assumed people just innately knew how to self-construct their lives. All the next generation needs, we thought, were choices, the freedom to make them, and the willingness to work hard. Anyone who has been a parent in the last three generations knows that much of the advice we received was to teach our kids to make good choices. And the hope was that with hard work they could choose their way into a life they would enjoy.

But how have we fared, on our own, untethered to any story greater than we can write on our own? Half of our marriages haven’t worked out even though we chose them. According to a recent Harris Poll 69% of the workforce in our country are thinking about another job because their current one isn’t all that fulfilling, again even though they were chosen. The Harris Polls also claims that 70% of millennials think they were deceived, and 77% of us are worried about finances. And last spring the Wall Street Journal published a poll that claimed only 12 % of us would say we are “very happy.”

I don’t think these statistics mean we were better off when the generations before us told us who we are and what our mission in life will be. I’m not sure they were any happier than we are, and apparently they didn’t even know what fulfillment means. Also, I’m very happy I am not a tobacco farmer today. So I am not advocating a return to the “good old days,” which were actually pretty hard on people.

However, as these statistics about our current society reveal, life is a hard thing to construct on our own no matter how many choices we have. Maybe that is because we are not creators—even of our own lives. Maybe we need to be a part of a bigger story than we can write on our own. That is why we come to worship, read, sing, and consider holy texts and pray for the Spirit to help us find our own lives in them.

Over the last four weeks I have been preaching about the Hebrews journey from slavery in Egypt through the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land. More than one person has said to me, “I don’t feel like a runaway slave, and we are far from the desert here.” Got it. It reminds me of a physician who greeted me at the door following worship one Sunday. He said, “Craig, only preachers and Jesus like metaphors. No one else.” Well, I’m not sure that is true. But I am working with a huge metaphor here. No, we are not the Hebrews, and we’re not struggling our way through the Sinai Desert. But we are on a journey. As is often the case in life, our church is in an in-between place, or a time of transition. These transition times always call for us to make big decisions and commitments that will make a huge difference in how we handle the unfolding of the future.

There are some powerful insights in this biblical story that can help us understand the stories of our own drama with God. Today we get to the part of their journey, our journey, where we find some eternal truth about the timeless questions “Who are we, and what is our mission in life?”

After three months on the journey, the Hebrews have come to the base of Mt. Sinai. Moses climbs the mountain, and there God gives him a sermon to proclaim to the people. Thus, saith the Lord: “You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings...” The subtext here is, you have seen my faithfulness at the Red Sea I divided for you to cross to begin the journey to true freedom, how I provided water in the desert and daily manna along the way, and you have seen how I defended you against the enemies of the dream of going to the Promised Land. It is as if to say, God is not just in heaven, and is not limited to the top of Mt. Sinai, but is with you, along the way, even the road is hard. The reason we are on the hard road is to see this faithfulness even when it is more tempting to focus on what is unfulfilling in life.

Then God makes a covenant, which is so foundational that it establishes the Hebrew’s identity as a people. “Now therefore if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.”

This covenant is written in the language of ancient Near Eastern suzerain treaties, in which a suzerain or powerful king would make a conditional commitment to a vassal king. This treaty promised protection and other benefits in return for loyalty and various forms of tributes, along with curses and dire penalties for failures in allegiance. We have copies of Assyrian and Hittite treaties that follow a similar structure and language to this covenant in Exodus. Like these other ancient treaties, God’s covenant with the Hebrews is also conditional. If they want to be the treasured possession and the holy nation of Almighty God, they have to obey and keep the covenant.

It is striking that the text tells us the Hebrews quickly agreed to these terms, but they haven’t yet received the 10 Commandments. So they are agreeing to keep a covenant that hasn’t been fully revealed. Why would they do that? Maybe it is because they have seen the faithfulness of God on the hard road, and they know they have to follow this God whatever that entails for them.

When I am in pre-marital counseling sessions with a couple, eventually I ask them to tell me why they love each other. Up to this point they’ve answered all my questions easily. But with this one, they get quiet before responding. It is fascinating that they can tell me why they do the work they do, use money the way they do, live where they live, and even why they prefer Cheerios to Wheaties. But they stumble over why they’re about to make a covenant of marriage without possibly knowing where that commitment will take them. Eventually they usually just say, “I’m in love.” Well, yes, there it is. The Hebrews commitment, our covenant, with God is not dependent on knowing all the terms. We have seen God’s loving faithfulness in our past, and our faith is a devotion to following this God whatever it takes us.

But while God’s covenant with the Hebrews is built around the familiar conditions of choice found in other ancient treaties, there are some notable innovations here that had never been seen before in history.

One of these is that there are no curses or penalties for not obeying and keeping the covenant. This is all invitational language. If they keep the covenant, they will be treasured, priestly, and holy. This is also true of the 10 Commandments that soon follow. The commandments begin “Thou shall” and “Thou shall not,” but even these imperatives are an invitation to a moral life. Thus, these commandments are actually signposts to freedom.

Another distinction of this covenant is that it is woven into the larger narrative of God’s past and future drama with the people. Having carried them on eagles’ wings thus far, this is how God will continue to carry them into the dreams of tomorrow. But like all dramas, this one needs a decisive turning point. The giving of this covenant, again like the exchange of marriage vows, establishes what Emil Fackenheim calls, “a root experience,” out of which the Hebrews will grow into their identity and mission in life.

That leads to the most distinctive element of this holy covenant. The reason the Hebrews were called to be a treasured possession was to serve the world as a kingdom of priests. “Indeed, the whole earth is mine,” the Lord says, “but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom.” And that is what can make them a holy nation. So God’s covenant, with them, and with us, was never about privilege, but about service. And the holiness was never about being better than the rest but about witnessing to God’s love for all the earth.

Today is World Communion Sunday, which is a day when churches around the world pause to remember that Christians come from North and South, East and West to commune with the same Savior. It also serves as a holy reminder that when we come to this table we carry the dreams and yearnings as well as the pathos and deep hunger of the entire world with us. God’s covenant is never just for those we know, those who are near, those like us, but also for those far off who are brought near by the Spirit at this table. And when we hear about disease and starvation, persecution and violence in the world, for the kingdom of priests—a broken world is always a call to service.

In our New Testament lesson today, Peter is writing to those of us who have encountered the grace of God in Jesus Christ, and who desperately needed that grace because we looked for our identity and mission in lesser things than God’s calling and did not keep our side of the conditional covenant. Notice how similar the covenant is with the church: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” The call persists for us to serve as a royal priesthood to the world, proclaiming light in the darkness.

The only thing that is different between the new and old covenant, is that after Jesus Christ the conditional has been made unconditional. The church has not received an if—then commitment. It doesn’t say that if you obey, then you will be treasured, priestly, and holy. This covenant is rooted in the unconditional grace of God proclaimed in Jesus Christ. And it simply proclaims who you really are and what your mission in life really is all about—serving as a priest. This calling was one of the hallmarks of the Protestant Reformation. All believers in the grace of God in Christ have as their identity and mission in life the calling of the priesthood.

No matter what your job is, no matter where you live, no matter who you live with or without, you are a priest who proclaims the grace of God who brings light into every dark corner of the world. Even, and especially, the dark corners of your world. Amen.