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You are a Chosen Race¹

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Text: 1 Peter 2:9

This worship service and the Finnish service which preceded it mark the end of three days of festivities. I note a concert, a banquet and dance on Friday, a Juhannus or midsummer festival picnic with bonfire on Saturday, and now the two anniversary worship services with Holy Communion. The worship of our God in Christ Jesus in both Finnish and English is truly the most fitting climax to a centennial of God's grace and mercy in New Finland, Saskatchewan. It is a reminder that we are all but exiles here in this land, that heaven is our true home, and, what is more, every Holy Communion together is an anticipation of our own celestial homecoming.

When I was so graciously invited to be here I asked Pastor Brotherton whether there was any information available on New Finland. He promptly presented me with your 308 page volume, *Life in the New Finland Woods: A History of New Finland, Saskatchewan*. It was most interesting to read through, and awakened in me the spirit of my own Finnish heritage. Both my grandparents came from Finland and my parents grew up in the Copper Country in Upper Peninsula, Michigan. I remember attending the Suomi Synod church in Hancock, Michigan, along with my grandmother, and there hearing the pastor preach, thinking that some day I should like to become a Lutheran pastor and stand in a pulpit and share God's riches with God's people. And so it has come to be!

Old and New Finland

It takes a Finn, I suppose, to know what is special about the Finnish people. Perhaps the one word that captures it so well is *sisu*. As the book on New Finland puts it, "The word has no synonym in any other language; it means something like solidarity, perseverance, patience, energetic endurance, or to put it more bluntly, stubbornness, bullheadedness, downright cussedness." A present day farmer from nearby is reported to have said of you Finns in New Finland, "Those Finns are the most stubborn buggers I've ever known; once they set their minds on something, they dig their heels in and you can't budge them." I especially appreciated the illustrative story about the young girl working as a maid in Wapella [Saskatchewan]. It seems she wrote home to her mother in Finland that she was being ill-treated and was dying of homesickness. Her mother wrote back, "You promised to stay six months. For that length of time, a Finn can sit sideways on a picket fence!"

My contact with Finns convinces me that they are hard-working, industrious, honest, forthright, straightforward, practical, no-nonsense people. It is not surprising that Finland is one country that paid back its world war debt. It is no accident that President Reagan on his way to meet Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev stopped en-route in Helsinki, or that this city was the site of the Helsinki accord on human rights. Finland has made its contribution to the world: architecture, epic literature, music, international sports, and peace. Finland itself has had its bout with the Soviet Union and has set an example of how to promote detente and world peace, particularly within the framework of the United Nations and the European Security Conference.

Old Finland is still very much with us even today, in our culture and in our news. Many of us long to return to the old country, our roots, our ancestral home, at least once before we die. At many a Finnish funeral we do just that too, as we return home in spirit while singing:

Be still, my soul; the Lord is on thy side;
 Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain.
 Leave to thy God to order and provide;
 In ev'ry change He faithful will remain.
 Be still my soul; thy best, thy heav'nly Friend
 Thro' thorny ways leads to a joyful end.

We recognize these moving words as comforting words, set to the melody of *Finlandia*, composed by Jean Sibelius. I think my grandmother Lund had only one record (or did it just seem that way?) and she played it on Sunday afternoons. It was one of the ways in which she returned to Old Finland at least in spirit.

The President of the United States has declared 1988 as the Year of Friendship with Finland in the United States, since the first Finns stepped ashore in the New World in search of work 350 years ago this year. That is quite a long time ago! But today we celebrate the arrival of the first Finns here in Canada, 100 years ago. A moment ago we sang, "Faith of our Fathers"—and we might wish to modernize it to include "the faith of our mothers"—and we remember the pioneering efforts of the first Finnish homesteaders here in what was to become New Finland, in southeastern Saskatchewan. We remember too the building of St. John's Lutheran Church under the direction of Mikki Luoma in 1907, the registering of the Finnish Apostolic Lutheran Church and the starting of Sunday School in 1920, the construction of St. John's parsonage in 1927, and Pastor and Mrs. William Tervo as its first residents, and so many other events. The Finns of New Finland have exhibited, indeed, much continuity with the Old Finland, but by sheer necessity they have had to forge ahead on their own, adapting themselves to a New Land of challenge. What other conclusion can one come to after reading through the record of individual families in the book, *Life in the New Finland Woods*?

Old and New Israel

Now this same contrast between the old and the new is at the heart of today's text.

The fact is, the words of our text have been taken over almost verbatim from the Old Testament. After the Exodus from Egypt, the people of Israel came to Mt. Sinai and there God spoke to them through Moses these words:

You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I bore you on eagles' wings, and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exodus 19:4-6).

The words are addressed to a people already redeemed. Salvation is not something earned by their obedience; their obedience is their response and demonstration of loyalty to God's initiating love. "You shall be my *segullah*." This word is best translated "my own prized possession". It refers to a king's private treasure (1 Chronicles 29:3; Ecclesiastes 2:8). Israel is called "God's special treasure", selected and singled out from all peoples of the whole earth, to be a reigning priesthood, to serve as the mediator between God and the other non-Israelite peoples, a holy people, set apart from other nations for the worship and service of the Lord. The Lord is not Israel's possession, to be used for Israel's own personal benefit; Israel is to be the Lord's possession, to be used for the world's benefit.

Israel worked hard at maintaining her high calling. To be sure, Israel had much in common with her ancient Near Eastern neighbors. Thus she thought of God as present at certain times, at certain places, and even on certain mountains. There were many institutions in common, too: holy war, kingship, judges, elders, prophets, priests, the school of Wisdom, temple and temple personnel, a similar sacrificial system, as well as liturgical and festival calendars. Moreover, festivals like the barley harvest, the feast of Unleavened Bread, the wheat harvest, i.e., Pentecost, and the everything-else-harvest at the end of summer, Tabernacles, were taken over from the Canaanite farmer's almanac, from the land which Israel inherited.

But Israel expressed her God-given differences and discontinuities, too. Unlike her neighbors' temples, there was to be no image or statue of God in Israel's tabernacle or temple. Furthermore, Israel's God was confessed not just as another god in the heavenly pantheon, but as the only God, the unique God, who had no heavenly wife or family of gods. The Lord had a wife and a son, alright, but the relationship ran vertically and historically from heaven to earth, and not horizontally and mythically across the heavens: God's wife and God's son were the people of Israel. (Compare the book of Hosea as a good example of the imagery in action.) Israel also exhibited a most respectful approach to God. This is demonstrated so clearly in the approach to God in the tabernacle and in the Solomonic temple. Only the High Priest, a person of impeccable character, pedigree, and physical bearing, could enter the Holy of Holies. Next came the regular priests, but only as far as the

Holy Place, then the Israelite men, then the women, and finally the converts to the Israelite faith. The Gentiles stood outside the system.

In our New Testament text, 1 Peter 2:9, the words once addressed to the Old Israel are now addressed to us, the new Israel. In Peter's first epistle the proclamation is not so much a challenge to accept some aspect of the Christian faith as it is a recognition that those being addressed are already redeemed Christians. The text, like Exodus 19, is a call to demonstrate loyalty. It is part of an exhortation to "holiness". In contrast to the Old Israel which rejected Christ, the living Stone, Peter now reminds us, the New Israel, "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." What a wonderful statement of our character as God's people and of our mission in this contemporary world!

As God's people today we enjoy much in common with Israel of old: our call to obedience, the promises of God, monotheism, the fact that we are sons and daughters of Abraham, festivals and calendar. Like Israel we too have been called not for our own sake, but for the sake of the others outside. Like Israel of old we have been called to be a counter-culture in a modern Canaanite environment. We have been called to be the Servant of the Lord and the Prophet to the nations, to be leaven, healing, light, and an example of patience and understanding, to those around us.

But as God's New People we must also confess and witness under God in Christ to some underlying differences and discontinuities. No longer is one special place so important. Our Jerusalem is the incarnate Christ. As Jesus told the Samaritan woman, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father....The hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth...God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:21-24). God is present where Christ is present and Christ is present where two or three of us gather in his name around Word and Sacrament.

Think about it: if each of us could trace his or her family trees back far enough we would all find that somewhere back

there we were all at one time pagans in Old Finland, worshipping trees and the gods of nature; our present gift of faith came to us when dedicated Christian missionaries brought the Christian gospel to our forebears. Thus what Paul writes to the Ephesians is literally true of all of us:

Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles... were... separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility... that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross....

Christ has taken the Jewish people and the Gentile people and has made one new people out of the two.

And he came and preached peace to you who were far off [Gentiles] and peace to those who were near [Jews]; for through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built into it for the dwelling place of God in the spirit (Ephesians 2:11-22).

In short, God's temple is no longer a building, but people! Christ has brought down the old world lines of demarcation and has created in himself one NEW PERSON out of the Jews and out of the Gentiles. "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:26-28). We have no right to rebuild any of these old world barriers today; they are incompatible with Christ's new world! Thus Peter encourages us to become what we are: "Come to him, to that living stone, rejected by men but in God's sight chosen and precious; and like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:1-5).

We rejoice today not simply in the fact that we are Finns, Canadians, or even Lutherans. We rejoice most of all because

we are persons for whom Christ died, who by his grace are privileged to bear his name and his burden.

The temptation on a day like this is simply to revere the past. The challenge is to reaffirm our own commitment to Christ and the gospel as persons of Finnish background, to work to accomplish something for which people 100 years distant will give thanks and praise to God in Christ. May what we do in the next 100 years, in the tradition of our mothers and fathers, be celebrated with as much love, joy, and thanksgiving by our children's children! AMEN.

Notes

- ¹ Preached at the Centennial Homecoming Celebration, St. John's Lutheran Church, New Finland, Saskatchewan, July 1988.