

Sermon: We are people of God

Good morning, and Happy Anniversary! What an incredible day, to be joining in the celebration of 172 years together in the worship of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ within the walls of this sanctuary at St. Andrew's.

The mission statement of this congregation states, "We seek to be and to build a Christ-centered community of people, glorifying God in worship, and striving to show the Gospel of Jesus Christ in our daily lives." That couldn't be a more truthful statement of the body of this church.

Through conversations with some members of this church, I have come to genuinely believe that this will always be an extraordinarily strong and faithful body of Christ. God's blessings are certainly upon you all.

Our psalm today was one of Martin Luther's favourites, calling it his "beloved psalm" and a source of profound comfort, especially during personal trials. The psalm starts and ends with "Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever," which Luther believed should always be in the heart of every person. He recognized it as a hymn of praise for God's unfailing goodness and steadfast love, a core message of the Gospel, and a reading I chose and felt was appropriate in the recognition of God's unfailing love and support for this congregation.

Now you may be wondering why Jacob's dream is a suitable reading for a church anniversary. The simple answer comes in his naming of the place as Bethel in verse 19. Bethel means 'house of God.'

Yet in his case, it was not a house of God in the sense of a permanent building structure where God's people gather to worship. Rather, it was a site where God is at work in the formation of a people for his praise through the patriarchs.

And what we learn here about God's formation of Israel applies in New Testament terms to his formation of the church.

First, we learn that the people of God are formed by God's initiative. "I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying." It is God's idea to form a people for himself. The people of Israel were not just another nation that emerged from ancient history, and the Christian church is not merely a human institution. God took the initiative. The question before us is why?

Well, my belief is that it was for the salvation of the world. God's choice of Israel and his election of the church is not just a case of choosing people for their own salvation, but then he does not choose others. No, that is not the way it works! He chooses and makes his people for a purpose: we are chosen so that we are a light to the nations. God chooses us so that we reflect his light in the world and that others might be attracted to the Light of the World, Jesus himself.

We are conditioned to understand that in an individual way. Each one of us is a witness to Christ. But we also need to understand it together as the fellowship of the Church. As the community of Christ, we are called to be a light to the nations, beginning in our local area and spreading as far as God may send us.

The Christian Church is not an accident. An individual congregation like this one here at St. Andrew's is not an accident either. God made the first move to create this community and call it according to his purposes, of shining his light in the darkness.

So, if you are here by God's initiative, it is an important question to ask how you are shining the light of Christ here and beyond your walls.

If you can identify how, you are shining the light of Christ to the wider world, and then you are fulfilling your purpose as a church and a congregation. But if you realise you are not doing so, then you have some hard considerations. I do not think that you here at St. Andrew's need to worry about whether you are fulfilling your purpose as a church or a congregation. We would not be participating in this glorious event if you weren't.

The second thing we learn from our reading today is that the people of God are formed by God's promise.

"Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring."

There are things we need to do for the growth of God's people to come. We cannot be passive. We must have intent if we are to grow. But before all that, the growth of the church is about God's promise. He will make Israel 'like the dust of the earth,' and Jesus famously promised that he would build his church. It all starts with God's promise.

So, are we seeing the growth of the church? Are people around the world hearing the Gospel through the Christian church? The answer to such questions is a very certain 'yes,' but what about us?

I think the fairest summary of the overall situation would be to say that in some places we are losing many of the battles against the spirit of darkness, but overall, we are winning the war. I think here at St. Andrew's, the life and working together as a family, is putting strength and glory into the battles.

We are a united group, demonstrating the love of God to the world as a family.

Now the third and last lesson we learn is that the people of God are formed by God's grace.

I could have begun with this point, but it is also the theme behind the two other points about God's initiative and God's promise. The formation and development of God's people is a matter of God's grace.

This is a story about Jacob. Do we remember why he is travelling? It is because he is on the run after deceiving his twin brother Esau out of their father Isaac's blessing. Esau wants blood. Jacob is hardly saintly.

Yet for all that, as the patriarch of the next generation, God is using him in his long-term plans to form the people of God. Yes, this scheming, self-centred man! He is not exactly the ideal material, is he?

However, when God intervenes in his life here through the dream at Bethel, Jacob responds with a vow that if God will provide for him and protect him, then the stone he lays as a pillar will be the house of God and he will give a tenth of all he has back to God.

In other words, grace transforms sinners.

I was told I should never forget that every church has a few sinners. Like Jacob, sometimes we have made bad life choices.

But isn't it also true that over the years we have seen, with God's grace, how our lives have changed while we have responded to all he has done for us in the life of his son Jesus Christ?

Has not that life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus initiated a response from us to God's grace? I sure know that it has with me. And I also know that I have been a sinner.

We are not the finished product. We are not people who have it all together, all the time.

For the world is not always attracted to the smooth operators who seem to have gotten it all together, whereas the broken, fallible people like us who are utterly dependent on the grace of God are a more welcome proposition. We are more relatable.

So, for all the challenges that this story is to us it is good news. As God's initiative in forming the people of God calls us to be a light to the nations and as God's promise of growth challenges us to face tough questions, if we're not growing, in the final analysis it all comes down to grace.

And God's grace is the most remarkable and wonderful thing, making beautiful creations out of broken people.

While we believe that, and live out that truth, there is always hope. There is always that hope that will surely guide this congregation into the next 172 years. God bless you all. Amen