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Pentecost X & Proper 13
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Text: Romans 9:1 – 13
Title: People of the Promise

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. You may have seen it before, on a laminated card or on the back page of a Bible. It's a listing of passages to look up in the Bible for different situations such as loneliness, struggles with temptation, or times of worry. While such a list can be helpful, some people never get beyond this kind of reading of the Bible. They open the pages. They find a comforting word. But then they set the Bible aside and never go any further into God's Word, and so their Christianity becomes something it was never intended to be. A private, personal religion. It becomes something you read in your private devotional time and you look forward to when it is "just me and Jesus." God becomes something like our best friend who supports us when times get tough. He helps us accomplish our plans and fulfill our dreams. The problem here is that we reverse roles with God. Rather than us being servants in God's kingdom, God becomes a servant in ours. Rather than us being brought into God's greater story, God is brought into ours.

In our sermon series, we have turned our attention to God's greater story and we have seen the main actor in that story – God. He is the One who was there at the beginning, creating the world and all of the cosmos; and God is the One who will be there at the end, bringing about a new and glorious recreation. In between the beginning and the end, God is here, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, working in love and ruling over ruins. And today, we are going to see how God's greater story involves God's greater people. While God certainly is present there for every individual person, able to be found in a small Bible passage a person reads when lonely in a hotel room, God's vision is much greater than that. God has come in Jesus Christ to save you and

every person and also to join you to a people, a people who live by His promise and for His purpose in His kingdom. This is the work that God calls us to rejoice in today.

As you read today's text, you realize that we have come across St. Paul in a very private moment. He is engaged in prayer that is powerful, personal, and very, very painful. Maybe you have prayed to God on behalf of someone you love, someone you care about, and yet someone who will have nothing to do with the Christian faith. You love that person, and you know God loves that person and wants that person to be saved. But that person wants nothing to do with God. And so you stand there, alone, because you believe in God, and they don't. You're alone because you stand there without whoever you care about. That person who has walked away from faith in Christ. If you've been there, you have a small clue of what Paul is experiencing. This is a very personal and painful prayer for him. Paul cries out, "I am speaking the truth in Christ – I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit – that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh."

Paul is concerned about his brothers, his kinsmen, the Jewish people. Five years before this letter, the Jewish people had been kicked out of Rome. The Emperor Claudius was trying to maintain law and order in the city. There had been civil unrest and so he did what previous emperors had done, and expelled the Jews from Rome. When Claudius died, his decree against them ended. The Jewish people were now returning to Rome and this raised the question, how would the Christian church receive them? What had begun as a movement of faith among the Jews in Rome was now mostly Gentiles. The Jews had left but the church had remained and grown with Gentile believers. St. Paul was worried, not only about the Jews who did not believe, but also about the Gentiles who may not see any reason to care about the Jewish people.

Earlier in the letter, Paul asked a very important question. As he revealed that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, Paul asked, “Then what advantage has the Jew?” We would expect Paul to say, “none.” That is, “all are sinful and all are justified by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.” Therefore, there is no advantage to being a Jew. But, surprisingly, Paul says something different. “What advantage has the Jew?” Paul asked. His answer was “much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God.” That listing that Paul began in Romans 3, he continues now in Romans 9. Here Paul reveals the blessings of God upon Israel: “They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen.”

Paul is engaged in a moment of prayer, very personal, and yet notice how his prayer is wrapped up in the larger story of God. Paul is not praying for himself but for God’s people. Paul is not setting before God his day and his plans and asking for God’s blessing. No, Paul finds God’s greater story set before him and is praying for the fulfillment of what God has planned. He chose Abraham to be the father of His people and from Abraham God chose to bless all nations on the face of the earth. From Abraham and his descendants, according to the flesh, comes Christ and Christ is the One in whom Israel and all nations of the earth are blessed. Paul knows this greater story of God and this story shapes Paul’s life and prayer.

What is amazing is that Paul in prayer is caught up in the heart of God’s story. Notice how Paul is willing to die for the sake of the Jews. Paul knows that not all of his Jewish brothers and sisters have believed in Jesus. Because of the expulsion of the Jews from Rome, it would be very easy for the Christian church to become a church that does not see or care about Israel. And so Paul finds himself overwhelmed with pain and personal love and he wishes that he himself

could be cut off from Christ, if that would save the Jewish people. Here, Paul's heart is filled with the love of Jesus. Jesus is the One who was willing to be cut off from God. Jesus was willing to suffer His Father's wrath, who was willing to be forsaken by God and condemned to hell, so that the kingdom of God might be opened to all people who trust in Him. In Him is forgiveness, life, and everlasting salvation. In Him is the promise that your sins are forgiven and that you are now part of the people of God, people who live by that promise as part of God's greater story. This is what the apostle Paul is doing in his prayer. He is living by that promise, letting God's greater story shape his prayer and his life in self-sacrificial love.

How does this relate to us today? Consider how Paul reminds us that we are part of a greater people brought into the greater story of God. Sometimes we can lose sight of this larger story, the bigger picture. Faith can become a personal matter, something that we reduce to a private experience to help us get through the week. Paul awakens us this morning to the fact that we are part of a people, a much greater people chosen by God, who live by His promises.

Consider today's Old Testament reading. God's call to His people to come and eat. This is more than a foretaste of the feeding of the 5,000. This is part of God's eternal vision of a banquet for all peoples. God speaks of an everlasting covenant made with David. He is a witness and leader and commander for the peoples. Through Him, Israel will call nations they don't know and nations that did not know Israel will run to them. Suddenly, we begin to see a much larger table and a much greater feast for all people and all time. We begin to overhear God's promises throughout the Old Testament to feed and care for His people. From the manna that falls from heaven to the rocks that flow with water in the wilderness, from the table that the Lord our shepherd prepares, to the teaching that "man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord" to the table that wisdom sets for her people. This banquet lies

behind the banquet parables of Jesus and this banquet, this end times feast in the God's Kingdom, lies ahead for all of us, as part of God's people from all nations, who live by the promises of God. Rather than open the Bible and try to use God in our lives, we find that God opens the Scriptures and brings us into His story and the life of His people in this world.

There used to be a painting in Sienna, Italy that captures what this looks like. It was one of five small paintings at the very bottom of the altarpiece. You normally wouldn't see it just from sitting in the church. But if you came forward for communion, you could see this small painting showing the work of God for this world.

The painting was of the Annunciation, when the Virgin Mary was visited by the angel Gabriel to learn that she would have a baby. Mary is seated alone in a room. Before her stands the angel Gabriel, bearing the message from God. When you look closely at the painting, you see something more happening as Mary is receiving the news. When you look outside the place where Mary is sitting, you see the Garden of Eden. Outside the window, are Adam and Eve. It's a sad scene. You see God the Father banishing Adam and Eve from the Garden. They have sinned against God and brought His wrath upon all of creation and now they are subject to death and must live in this fallen world. As God the Father extends His arm to banish them from the garden, however, something beautiful happens. If you follow God's arm, you see that God is pointing from that Garden to the Virgin Mary sitting in the room. God sends Adam and Eve out of the Garden, but He does so with a promise – that there will come a day when the woman will have an offspring who will bruise the head of Satan and rescue His people from sin. That day has come with the work and arrival of Jesus Christ who has done all of the work of salvation for you. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.