

A SERMON FROM ST STEPHEN'S

PECULIAR TREASURE

A sermon preached the 14th of May 2017, the Fifth Sunday of Easter (and also Mother's Day), at St Stephen's Episcopal Church, Belvedere, CA, by the Rev'd Phillip Channing Ellsworth, Jr., Rector. Based on 1 Peter 2. 2 – 10 and Acts 7. 55 – 60.

“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, newborn babies craving milk, a holy nation, a *peculiar treasure*, that you may declare the praises of him who calls you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”

Ask you to meditate with me on that expression “a people of God's own.” It's an echo of a line from Exodus [19] where we're told what happens just before God gives the ten commandments to the Hebrew people at Mt Sinai. They had been rescued out of slavery in Egypt, brought across the Red Sea, and through the wilderness. “God's own” is a translation of *segullah* which means ‘peculiar treasure’. We have a good idea what *segullah* was; lots of evidence from outside the Bible as well as within it.

It was used in the context of royalty. When kings are ruling they control tremendous wealth, all the wealth of the revenues, the accumulated taxes of the people, the palace, annual tribute from vassal nations. It's all theirs; it all belongs to the king. But in addition to that public wealth, they had private wealth, that which they owned by inheritance or by virtue of risking their lives in battle. A king in the ancient world always led his armies into war, and when he was victorious, a portion of the booty became his, part of his ‘peculiar treasure’, his *segullah*.

We have a great example of this in 1 Chronicles 29 when David was about to die and was preparing to pass the throne to his son Solomon. Solomon was charged with building the Temple. David wanted to do all he could to fund it so we read David say that “with all my resources” (referring to the public funds over which he had control), “I have provided for the house of my God, so far as I was able, the gold for the things of gold, the silver for the things of silver, and the bronze for the things of bronze, the iron for the things of iron, and wood for the things of wood, besides great quantities of onyx and stones for setting, antimony, varicolored stones, all sorts of precious stones. Because my heart is in this, in addition to and beyond what I have gathered, I'm turning over my *segullah*, my

personal fortune, of gold and silver for making this place of worship for my God.”

Imagine a president, whilst announcing plans for a significant spending project, saying, “I believe in this so much I'm contributing to it everything I own, my cash and savings.” Imagine then president-elect Trump last December, when he announced the deal in which Carrier Corporation would receive \$7 million in economic incentives, or President Obama, seven years ago in Nevada, when he shared with the nation a plan to fund, up to the tune of 1.5 billion dollars, various ways of helping those who were in danger of foreclosure in the five states that had most suffered in the then recent economic crisis. Imagine if, whilst announcing these things, Mr. Trump or President Obama had said, “I am so committed to this that I'm going to help fund it by giving every dollar of my private wealth.”

That would be amazing! (You have to imagine it because no president has done it.) But that's what David did; and when he did it, all the leaders started to put money into the treasury as well, into funding the temple. There are reasons David was beloved by the people.

Segullah was used also to describe the private wealth of poor people. In ancient patriarchal societies, all the wealth of a household was under the control of the father of the family. But in ancient Israel, a wife could have some of her own wealth, a son or daughter could have, even slaves could have, some of their own wealth, and that wealth was called the *segullah*, their peculiar treasure.

A passage in the *Talmud* speaks of it. “This is like one who has a *segullah*,” we read, “which she counts repeatedly to know its sum, rejoicing at each count.”

Poor people worked hard to take care of the needs of the household, but they also did things like stitch together extra clothes in order to put together a little sum that would now be theirs.

Jesus likely had a *segullah* in mind when he told this parable. “Suppose a woman had ten silver coins and loses one, does she not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it. And when she finds it she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me, I’ve found my lost coin!’ In the same way, I tell you there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” The coin in that parable sounds like the woman’s *segullah*, her peculiar treasure.

The Bible speaks this way to convey how God feels about you. In that Exodus text referred to earlier, we’re told that Moses went up to God. “The Lord called to him from the mountain and said, ‘This is what you’re to say to the house of Jacob, and what you’re to tell the people of Israel. You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt and how I carried you on eagle’s wings and brought you to myself. . . You will be my peculiar treasure, my *segullah*.’”

The Feast of Stephen falls on the 26th of December. Our patron saint is happily overshadowed there by something to do with Jesus and his mother. But today the lectionary — the schedule of scripture readings followed by the Episcopal Church and many others — appoints for reading the story of Stephen’s martyrdom. You heard it from Ian Foley.

Stephen died a martyr, stoned to death for his witness, and this church is designed to help us see ourselves, our own lives, in the light of that witness. Every window on the walls of this church, from the clerestory on down, is made of thick glass ‘stones’. So I think of the stones David speaks of in that text from 1 Chronicles — “varicolored stones, all sorts of precious stones” — and I give thanks for the ‘stones’ assembled here. They create the kind of thing David gave his peculiar treasure, his *segullah*, to create: a temple, a dwelling place, fit for the Most High.

That’s what Jesus, the ‘Second David’, does. The God who owns everything gave his peculiar treasure, his very Son, to create yet another peculiar treasure, the Church. And here you are, singing the praises of Him who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light.

It’s Mother’s Day. The Bible likens the love of God to the love of a mother. “As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you, and you will be comforted over Jerusalem,” Isaiah writes. God’s love is compassionate. It is also, like a *mother’s* love, fiercely protective. Speaking of any who’d keep God’s *segullah* from realizing her identity as a peculiar treasure, God, through the prophet Hosea, says, “I’ll jump them like a mother bear, robbed of her cubs. I’ll rip out their guts.”

That’s how profoundly God loves you. Why? Just because. That’s the way it is with real love: a mother’s needs no explanation. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

St Stephen’s Church welcomes you to worship with us at 3 Bayview Avenue, Belvedere, CA, Sunday mornings at 8 or 10 o’clock. For more information about our life and mission please email us at office@ststephenschurch.org, call us at 415-435-4501, or visit us at www.ststephenschurch.org www.facebook.com/St.Stephens.Belvedere