

Spokane Friends Meeting, June 28, 2026

"God's People"

Scripture: 2 Chronicles 7:13-14, John 17:6-8, 20-23

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Thank you for welcoming me back!

You've probably already noticed that I plan to use some Bible verses in this message. I'm using them to talk about ... well, the Bible.

It's pretty normal to select a Scripture or two to anchor our meetings for worship. Sometimes we pay special attention to those texts, and sometimes they may be our starting point for considering some important topic of the day. Today, instead of using the Bible as a starting point, I'd like to look directly at it for a few minutes, and consider how it forms us as God's people.

It's not that we all have the exact same approach to the Bible. Some of us have been shaped by this book for most of our lives. For me, it's what actually brought me at age 21 to the threshold of faith, to the point where I said "Yes" to Jesus. Others have come to it more recently. Still others have had more difficult encounters with the Bible and the way it's been used in our lives, and are rebuilding our approach. Even so, I suspect that most of us find that the Bible can, in Paul's words, make us wise unto salvation, and not only that, it can help us discern God's true voice.

I've noticed, and maybe you have too, that these days public political oratory often refers to the Bible. Political figures such as our president, vice president, and secretary of defense, on one end of the political spectrum, and people such as Raphael Warnock and Al Sharpton and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez toward the other end, have all at times quoted the Bible to us. No doubt they're sharing something that's very important to them, but I don't think it is cynical to suggest that the weight of biblical words is intended to impress and influence their audiences—that is, us. This is especially true, and maybe especially problematic, when those words are being used to define "God's people."

Theologian Kaitlyn Schiess sets a good standard for the public use of the Bible in her book, *The Ballot and the Bible: How Scripture Has Been Used and Abused in American Politics and Where We Go from Here*. She says,

The Bible is not a free-floating book of ageless wisdom, an interesting historical document, or a weapon that can be put in the service of any political goal. The Bible is a gift from God to the church, given for a particular purpose: to shape that community into the kind of people who can fulfill their commission to make disciples of all nations, and steward God's good creation, anticipating its final redemption.

With all that in mind, let's look at two passages, one from the historical section of the Hebrew scriptures, and the other from the New Testament's account of the formation of our Christian family.

The Old Testament passage is one of the three or four most familiar biblical passages used by politicians, alongside Jeremiah's quotation "for I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you," Jesus' words "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden," and Paul's words "Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority other than what God has established." See if these words from Second Chronicles, chapter seven, don't sound familiar:

2 Chronicles 7:13-14

13 "When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command locusts to devour the land or send a plague among my people,

14 if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land.

This passage was one of the scriptural centerpieces of the recent Rededicate 250 event on the National Mall in Washington, DC, an event linked to our nation's 250th birthday. I was honestly uncomfortable with its use in that setting, but rather than tear down the motives of those who decided to use it, I'd like to propose some

other ways of looking at how Second Chronicles 7 relates to the theme, “God’s people.” To keep from getting too preachy, let me word my proposals as queries to suggest a conversation.

First of all, consider the context. King David wanted to build a Temple to honor God and to provide a focal point for Israel’s worship and sacrifices. For this purpose he’d collected the necessary construction materials. However, God decided that David had killed too many people to be the temple-builder, but his son Solomon was given the green light. Solomon pleaded with God to be attentive to the wishes and confessions of Israel at this temple, and at the inaugural worship services of the temple, God did promise to hear and honor the prayers made by Israel at the new temple. God’s response to Solomon is the central content of Second Chronicles chapter 7.

Before I go further in examining these events and texts, it’s only fair to tell you what you might well already know: Scholars are not united on the historical accuracy of the details of the books of First and Second Kings and First and Second Chronicles, particularly the roles of Solomon and the construction of the Temple. I don’t think we always need to have total assurance on where history ends and theology begins, but I do think that the theology we read in these books, the teachings about the nature of God and God’s relationship to Israel, is coherent and faithfully recorded.

What are some of the central points of that content?

First: the word “**IF.**” God sets up a conditional commitment.

Query: what happens if Solomon and his people don't keep their end of the commitment? Is God implying that the rain or locusts or plague could return? If you’re following in your Bibles, look ahead to verses 19–22 for a variety of other consequences of unfaithfulness.

Next: “**My people, who are called by my name....**” King Solomon is the head of a particular kind of nation, with a specific and unusual form of government: the united theocracy of Israel. The most immediate identification of “my people” would be that nation, whose worship of their God has just been closely linked to their new

Temple and to the successors of David on Israel's throne. Nothing is said about any other nation or any other form of national leadership. True, the words of Jesus and Paul have grafted us Christians into our understanding of "my people," but nowhere in the Bible is any other nation-state, including the USA, given exclusive rights to see itself as more entitled to call itself "God's people" than anyone else.

Query: Do you identify with the people "called by my name"? Is it by virtue of your citizenship or your freely-given commitment to follow God?

Next we come to the terms of the commitment that God declares to Solomon: "... **will humble themselves and pray and seek my face....**" There are many scriptural models for what this looks like. Some examples: "My heart is not proud, Lord, my eyes are not haughty; I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me. But I have calmed and quieted myself..." from Psalm 131.

Another teaching: "And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites", Matthew 6:5-6.

And, there's Luke's parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector in chapter 9 of his Gospel, a parable Jesus directed at those "who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else."

Query: when we pray as a community, can we stay focused on God, with healthy humility, rather than seeking to impress the audience? How do we keep this focus? Could this be how we respond to suffering, ours and others?

Continuing in Second Chronicles, "If my people, ... **turn from their wicked ways....**"

Query: who is to do this turning? In this Scripture, God is specifically asking for Solomon and the people of his nation to decide to turn from evil, not necessarily today's Democrats or Republicans or Iranians, or other convenient targets of the day.

Then, Second Chronicles continues with God's side of the covenant: "**Then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin.**" Here God is specifically referring to God's attentiveness to the Temple.

Query: How and where does God hear from you and me and our repentant community?

God continues: **“I will ... heal their land.”** Awkwardly, God isn’t necessarily promising to heal the land from the people’s misuse of it, but in the theology of the Chronicler, to heal it from the plagues and droughts and locusts that God apparently used to get their attention and, we hope, lead them to seek God’s face.

Query: For what, in our own time and place, do you and I seek healing? For what do we as a community, seek healing? What is our own commitment to heal the land of our misuse?

Here’s my point: we shouldn’t stretch the interpretation of a Scripture well beyond the actual context. To put it more positively, proposing a contemporary application or interesting contemporary parallel is always welcome, but to impose a politically-loaded interpretation of “my people” delivered in an imperious voice without context or conversation is biblical malpractice.

In the New Testament’s Gospel of John, I find another piece of the Bible’s understanding of what “my people” means, one that explicitly includes you and me. As I’ve said before, I’ve found that the Bible is constantly conversing with itself, and the antidote to biblical malpractice can be found right in the Bible itself, in those conversations. Here’s the passage I want to end with today:

John 17:6-8, 20-21: Jesus is praying to God in the presence of his disciples, just hours before his arrest and interrogation:

6-8 “I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word. Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me.”

20-23 “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father,

just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”

Chapter 17 is part of Jesus’s final full-length conversation with his community. Look at the church he has built! It’s not a physical temple. Remember what he said to the Samaritan woman at the well, back in John chapter 4: the time has come when God is to be worshipped not in a specific place but in Spirit and in truth. Now he speaks to the core of that spiritual, relational temple, built of faith and love and the sacrifice of praise.

Jesus says that these people he’s speaking with have become his people because, first, God gave them to him, and second, they have accepted him and identified with him. But, through them, he is speaking to all who have responded to their testimony, and to those who in turn have responded to *their* testimony, down through the ages. We who have believed these successive generations of witnesses are absolutely “God’s people.” Not just the people we know personally, but all those who are folded into this intimate friendship, we are all being built, in Peter’s words, into a spiritual house. As Peter summarizes in his first epistle, chapter 2 verse 10, “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.”

We do not claim to know the full extent of this relationship, as John reminded us back in his chapter 10, verse 16: “And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.” There’s no room here for the arrogance of exclusion and condemnation based on political criteria masquerading as Christianity. As I said the last time I was with you, for us Quakers and many others, the church is simply *all those who are gathered around the living God, learning what it means to live with God at the center, and helping each other to learn that way of life, including its ethical consequences*. That is our peoplehood, and that is our temple.

I’ve already loaded a bunch of queries on you this morning, but I’ll send this text to the Spokane Friends office, so you can consider them, or not, at your leisure. For

this morning, I just have a few more queries in case they might be helpful in our open worship. If they're not helpful to you, please just let them slide by. Thanks for your kind attention!

Queries:

1. What might it mean for each of us, and for us as a church, to see ourselves as “God’s people”?
2. Can we ever know for sure that this or that person is not one of “God’s people,” either now or potentially? If so, what are we to do with this knowledge?
3. What did Peter mean when he said that we have received God’s mercy? Do you know that you are among those who have received God’s mercy? Does someone you know need to hear this, maybe from you?