

God's Relentless Pursuit of Us
1 Peter 1:18-21 and Exodus 39:32-43, 40:34-38
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Here we are—after four months and 17 sermons, we have arrived at the end of Exodus, though not at the end of Moses' story. You'll hear a bit about that later in the month when Karen Chamis is here from NCP to preach. Today we reach the climax of the book, when the cloud that symbolizes God's presence moves from covering Mt. Sinai's peak to covering the newly completed tabernacle. So intense is the divine splendor that Moses is unable even to enter the Tent of Meeting.

Exodus begins by looking back, with a list of the names of Jacob's sons who went to Egypt with their father. Exodus ends by looking forward, anticipating those times when the cloud will lift from the Tent of Meeting, signaling to the Israelites that it is time to close down the camp and continue their journey toward the Promised Land. But, it looks even further ahead to Jesus and the cross. As we bring it all home today, I want us to focus on the ways Moses and the book of Exodus prepare us for the coming of Christ.

Redemption looms large in both Exodus and Gospel. Paul and the early church shared a vision that the goal of redemption was to begin a new creation. We've seen that time and again in the Hebrews' story, that God delivers them, that is, redeems them, from Pharaoh so that they might embody God's vision for all of creation. True worship, right relationships, faithfulness to God and one another, care of the planet, protecting the vulnerable, loving neighbor and enemy alike—these are to be the signs of covenant people living the life God intends for all. And these attitudes and actions ought to sound awfully familiar as the same behaviors Jesus said would be exhibited by those who are part of the Kingdom of God.

There is, unfortunately, a lot of reductionist theology that says that Jesus came to save us from our sins so we could go to heaven and escape the punishment of that "other place." But that's not what Jesus said. Jesus said he came so that we might know what it is to really live, to live abundantly, freely, authentically, full of grace and purpose, peace and hope and power. That's the life Jesus preached and described and lived himself and invited others to live—not someday in the great beyond but starting now, because the kingdom is here. God's redemption of the

Hebrews from Egypt points to the redemptive work of Jesus on the cross. It was for freedom that Christ set us free, says Paul. God defeats the powers of Pharaoh and Egypt that resulted in death for God's people. Jesus defeats death itself, so that the powers of this world—disease, evil, and suffering in all their forms and fury—cannot have the defining word in our lives.

A second major theme connecting Gospel and Exodus is Passover. It is no accident that Jesus chose Passover as the setting to best explain what his death means and what it accomplishes. In Egypt, the Passover lamb is slain, its blood spread across the Hebrews' doorposts to signify that those under the blood belong to God. Jesus *becomes* the Passover Lamb, giving his life and spilling his blood so that all people can be liberated from sin and know the life-giving love of God. Just as God heard the cry of Hebrews longing for freedom from Pharaoh's cruel tyranny, so God compassionately offers us freedom from the painful thoughts, attitudes and actions that hold us in their grip, stripping us of our humanity.

As you recall, the Hebrews are barely out of the city limits when they find themselves hemmed in at the Red Sea. God intervenes to safely deliver them through the waters of the sea, pointing forward to the New Testament sacrament of baptism. Those who come safely through the baptismal waters are reminded that they have left behind the old world of sin and slavery, the "Egypt" of their lives and are on the way home to their inheritance. Like Israel in the desert, we must learn to live in God's new world, not slide back into our old ways.

Revelation is another link. At the burning bush, in the gifts of law and covenant, speaking the divine name, providing for Israel's every need in the wilderness, meeting with them at Mt. Sinai, and finally, coming to abide in their midst in the tabernacle—these are all revelations of God's nature and character, power and glory. In Jesus Christ, God's self-revelation comes closer still. The cross shows us the extent of God's love and mercy, the lengths to which God will go to reach us, the breadth of God's desire to know us and be known by us. The resurrection and the gift of the Holy Spirit show us the power that enables and enlivens the kingdom life, the power that is meant to permeate our lives now. In Exodus and Gospel, God reveals that we are not alone, that God is not a creator who wound up the world and just let us go. God is present, involved, *cares*—and God has an ultimate plan for redemption that will not be thwarted.

The tabernacle is also prominent in both Exodus and Gospel. While the Hebrews are on the move, the tabernacle is God's dwelling place among the

people. Later, settled in the Promised Land, Solomon will build a permanent residence for God, the Temple in Jerusalem. Like the tabernacle before it, the Temple is the place where heaven and earth meet, where God and people intersect—until that is, the Incarnation. In Jesus, God puts on flesh and comes to tabernacle with us. *Jesus* becomes the place where heaven and earth meet, where divine and human intersect. Rather than the Torah remaining in the Temple, Jesus, the Word made flesh, embodies the law of God, revealing the will of God for people and creation alike. He rips open the curtain to the innermost sanctum of God, the Holy of Holies, to give us full and unfettered access. Taking the place of the High Priest, he is a constant intercessor with God on our behalf. He is both priest and sacrifice, accomplishing the ministry of the tabernacle in our very midst.

“Call” is yet another thread woven between Exodus and Gospel. God chooses not to act alone to accomplish his divine purposes. In Exodus, Moses is called to provide servant leadership to confront evil, rescue the people, and shepherd them through the wilderness. In the Gospels, Jesus calls the Twelve to follow him, to become his understudies, learning to live like he lives for the sake of his kingdom. Both the Hebrews and the Church are called as a people to be the carriers of God’s will and ways for all creation by embodying the love, joy and hope of God to the world. Every single one of us is called. Every single one of us has a place in God’s family and a job to do in God’s mission of renewing heaven and earth. If we have somehow listened for 17 weeks to Moses’ story without hearing God’s call, God’s invitation to us personally to be part of God’s ongoing work of redemption, we have missed the point.

Covenant and law are also critical connections between Moses and Jesus, and in speaking of them, we cannot fail to mention Israel’s idolatry. The Hebrews’ failure to worship God and God alone was an egregious breach of both covenant and law. In forsaking God, they proved faithless to the divine vocation to which they had been called to bring blessing to the nations. But, Israel’s faithlessness is redeemed by Christ’s faithfulness. The Messiah, in his faithful death, specifically accomplishes God’s covenant purposes, shedding his own blood as the blood of the new covenant.

Likewise, in Christ we have the summation and fulfillment of the law. Jesus said that he came, not to do away with the law, but to fulfill it to the last letter, and in his perfect love of sinful humanity, he did exactly that.

And that brings me to the last thing I want to say about Exodus. I don't know that it's possible to summarize a story as dense, powerful, provocative and relevant as Moses' story—at least, it's not possible for me. But, perhaps at the end of the day, what Exodus and Gospel both demonstrate to us is precisely what's been on our bulletin cover since Week 1 of this series: that God's pursuit of us always has been and always will be relentless. God will go to extraordinary, preposterous lengths to tell us how much we are loved, how much God cares about our lives, how involved God is in our world, how deeply concerned about justice God is. God passionately wants us to experience joy and purpose, to have healthy relationships that nurture us and help us grow, to live with freedom, to embrace our calling as covenant, kingdom people who work with God to bring redemption and new life to everything and everybody we touch.

God does not forget us and God does not give up on us. If you're stuck down in Egypt, slaving away under the taskmaster of addiction or anger, pride or worry, resentments or perfectionism—God knows where you are, God hears your longing for freedom, and God is relentlessly pursuing your redemption. But the question is, are you ready for freedom? Or, are you resigned to staying stuck in self-defeating attitudes and behaviors? Or, have you gotten so comfortable, you'd rather stay in bondage than change? It requires a leap of faith to leave Egypt, which is why God sends people to help us, but we've still got to lace up our sandals and take a step.

If you're in the wilderness, weary from the daily, never-ending grind, not sure where you're going or how you're supposed to get there, God knows where you are, too. People can end up in the wilderness for a lot of reasons, sometimes due to choices you've made and sometimes through no fault of your own. Illness, grief, loss, failure, betrayal—the wilderness is the journey of suffering. In the wilderness, you are invited to walk by faith, not by sight, to trust that God is present and at work, even if you can't see it which usually you can't in wilderness times. But, God is there, relentlessly pursuing you, too, providing glimmers of hope—water from the most ordinary of rocks or manna out of seemingly nowhere—just when you need it most. Hold on to the hope.

Perhaps you are standing at the mountain. You've had some experiences of God's faithfulness in the past, but that seems like a long time ago, or at least, you are not sure what that has to do with your life now. A lot of the time, it feels like you're just going through the motions. All this talk of covenant and law, justice and peace, loving your enemies, being kingdom people—it sounds a little too "pie

in the sky.” It seems so much more reasonable to sample all the world’s offerings, to seek the truth a little here, a little there, in your own time, in your way. But, it’s a dead end. It turns out to be nothing more than a shiny, gold-plated ego-trip that eventually turns to dust and leaves a bad taste in your mouth. God is pursuing you, too, inviting you back home, wooing you into an intimate relationship with the only person who can put your restless heart at peace, Jesus Christ.

Perhaps, you’ve come through these 17 weeks, and like Moses, you’ve had your ups and downs. Some days you want to throw up your hands in exasperation, frustrated by the difficult people in your life, the whining and complaining, the challenges of leadership that are largely invisible and the challenges of community that are all too apparent. Other days you are humbled and awed by the privilege of being part of God’s redeeming activity in the world, thrilled to be sitting with God in sweet communion, ever-aware of how dependent you are on God to work in you and through you if anything good or beautiful or eternal is to come of your life. Moses did not always get it right, any more than we do. But, he did desire an honest, authentic, intimate relationship with God. He yearned to know God and be known by God, to experience God’s presence continually. He longed to see God, to know God’s glory, and when that is the longing of our hearts, God will never disappoint us but will relentlessly pursue us as the Lover of our souls until we behold God face to face. O what a day that will be, o what a face, o what glory! All thanks and praise to the God who continues to speak through his servant Moses across the millennia to us and to our lives. Amen!