

Smoke on the Mountain
Acts 2:1-4 and Exodus 19:1-12, 16-19
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M. Michelle Fincher
Calvary Presbyterian Church

Moses' first dramatic encounter with God occurred on a mountain immediately following a passage of scripture that focused on Moses and Jethro, his Midianite father-in-law. The story of Moses' second dramatic encounter with God, this time with all the Israelites in tow, immediately follows another passage that focuses on Moses and Jethro, which we looked at last week. After the burning bush, it was Moses who said good-bye to Jethro and returned to Egypt. At the end of chapter 18, it is Jethro who says good-bye to Moses and returns to Midian.

With the departure of Jethro, Israel's journey through the wilderness resumes. To this point, the people have been in the desert for about three months. That's how long it has taken them to make the approximately 190-mile trip to Mt. Sinai, where Moses had first met God. In Exodus 3:12 God had told Moses, "I will certainly be with you. And this shall be a sign to you that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain." That word has now come true, and the Israelites will spend the next 11 months learning what it means. In fact, the rest of Exodus, as well as all of Leviticus and the first 10 chapters of Numbers, takes place at Mt. Sinai.

This mountain is one of the most crucial places in Scripture for divine revelation. In the upcoming 11 months, Moses will repeatedly climb the mountain and God will descend upon the mountaintop to meet him, often in dramatic fashion accompanied by smoke, thunder and lightning. But the pyrotechnic display is not primarily for the purpose of generating a breathless "wow" from the Israelites. God is not just showing off or presenting himself as heaven's megastar. There are two key items on Yahweh's agenda. The first has to do with God and Israel entering into a covenant with each other. The covenant does not make Israel into God's people. They are already God's people, but the covenant brings them into a more binding, intimate relationship with God, similar to what happens between two people when they enter into marriage. Love takes on a particular commitment.

As Yahweh's covenant people, this new relationship involves a calling and a certain kind of character. It is their character, that of being a "holy nation," that

points to the second item on God's agenda at Mt. Sinai: the giving of the divine law which includes the Ten Commandments.

These two agenda items will be worked out as God and Moses converse on the mountain, "face-to-face, like two people talking to each other" (Ex. 33:11) and then as Moses represents God's will to the people. To be God's own people means that they have a mission, to become a kingdom of priests who represent God and mediate God's word, God's purposes and God's grace to all the world.

We hear echoes of this special relationship in Peter's first epistle where he describes the special calling of the church (2:9-10):

You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people who are God's own possession. You have become this people so that you may speak of the wonderful acts of the one who called you out of darkness into his amazing light. Once you weren't a people, but now you are God's people. Once you hadn't received mercy, but now you have received mercy."

OT theologian Terence Fretheim makes the astute observation that one of the most distinctive characteristics of Old Testament law is that it is enclosed by story, and this has huge implications for how we understand both the covenant and the law. God's initial encounter with the Hebrews at Sinai has God re-telling what he has done on the peoples' behalf, how God delivered them out of slavery in Egypt so that they might stand as free people at this very mountain. God's dramatic rescue of Israel was a gift, an act grounded in God's gracious divine will. The covenant and the law are both extensions of that gracious divine will. God has intended good for his people from the beginning, and the covenant and law are part of that good. When we try to separate the covenant and law from the story of God's love, they come to be seen as a demanding relationship rooted in a set of stifling rules that are imposed on us which, not surprisingly, breeds resentment rather than gratitude and worship.

But, when we keep the narrative in view like it's supposed to be, we see the call to covenant relationship and the giving of the law as two inter-related gifts that offer us a vision for authentic human living. Together, they paint a picture of how we are to live, love and relate to one another in ways that enhance all people. Far from being intended to take all the fun out of life, they actually do the opposite—they are the key to living with the abundance of peace, joy, and meaning that Jesus promised his followers.

So how does story help us understand law and covenant? First, the story reminds us of the personal character of both covenant and law. Experience has shown us how easy it is for exclusivity and legalism to replace gracious gift, if left to our own devices. But, that is not how it is intended to be. The narrative reveals a lively, pulsating relationship between God and God's people, a relationship that is ongoing, not set in stone, and the covenant and the law are part of this faithful, loving, evolving relationship.

Second, this focus on the story keeps divine action and human response closely related to each other. Obedience to the law is not about checking a box; instead, it is fundamentally a response to the God who loves us, in gratitude for all God has done for us. Obedience then becomes a way of doing justice to this intimate relationship we already have with God.

Third, covenant and law remind us of the fact that God has chosen not to do everything in this world alone. However much the story keeps God as the primary agent of redemption, covenant and law insist that there are important human initiatives and responsibilities to be undertaken. We are given important tasks in furthering the causes of justice and peace throughout creation. We are given a role in promoting and enhancing God's purposes and building upon the foundation that God has laid out for the world. To put it in New Testament terms, we are to work for God's kingdom as followers of Jesus Christ.

Finally, the motivation for covenant and obedience to the law is also contained in the story. You were slaves in Egypt, therefore, you are to shape your lives toward the disadvantaged in ways that are compassionate and just. The Hebrews' basic motivation for obeying Torah and staying faithful to Yahweh is drawn from their historical experience, not from some abstract ethical argument. They don't obey "because God said so." They obey because obedience serves life and well-being, the shalom that God wants for all people. Obedience contributes to wisdom and understanding, to loving and faithful relationships within the community, and it becomes another form of witness to God and to what God has done. Before there is any talk of obeying the law, what God has done fills their lives. Obedience is, thus, always a response to God's infinite and merciful love.

We are all, sadly, familiar with the abuses that occur when one group of people sees themselves as special in some way and lauds it over everybody else. I wish I could say that the Christian church is not affected by this kind of "log in our eye", but of course, I can't. It is true that God's rescue of Israel came with a

promise that they would be his special people, God's "treasured possession." And, with that promise came privilege. But, the privilege also came with responsibility. God did not save Israel so that they could live any way they wanted, with their own needs and wants primarily in view. God saved them so that they could permeate the world with God's very presence and nature.

They were to be a kingdom of priests, that is, a servant nation rather than a ruling nation. They were to be devoted to mediating God's desires for all creation, committed to extending the knowledge of the Lord throughout the earth. And, they were to be a holy nation, embodying God's own purposes to all peoples.

As they camp at Sinai, the question before Israel is, "what does it mean to be God's redeemed people in the world?" The way to be this kind of people is to keep the covenant and the law. A disobedient Israel would not be able to be who God has called them to be, nor be used in the ways God would like to use them. By their obedience, they are to show the difference that living in relationship with God makes. The point is not to exclude other people, but to show by their lives what a just, peaceful society is like, thereby attracting other nations who would want to join them. At Sinai, Israel responds by giving themselves over to this divine purpose. They commit to become this holy nation, to take on a new identity as a kingdom of priests, and given this context, obeying the law becomes a means by which the will of God can move toward realization in the entire earth.

After their pledge to the covenant, the Hebrews spend three days preparing to meet God. Sometimes God shows up unannounced and so preparation is impossible. But on those occasions that are pre-established, preparing oneself for the sacred, transcendent moment is essential. This is not just another day at the office. Care must be taken when an encounter with God is imminent.

There is something about the electrifying presence of God that is both frightening and fascinating, both dangerous and delightful. To use the language of the early 20th century German theologian Rudolf Otto, near God we are "lashed with terror," but "leashed with longing." As we saw at the burning bush, whenever and wherever we are in God's presence, we are on holy ground.

This is the only time in the OT where the faith community as a whole is confronted with such a direct experience of God, hearing God speak without an intermediary. It is a unique divine appearance. Such a direct encounter centers the reverence and attention of the people on the God who has redeemed them so that they can rightly hear and understand God's words. And it convinces the people,

now and forever, that Moses is a mediator of the word of God and not just his own opinion.

Just as at the burning bush, God's revelation to the people comes amid fire. In fact, the pyrotechnic, acoustical manifestations of God's descent onto Sinai are matched in Scripture only by similar remarkable phenomena on the Day of Pentecost—the blowing of a violent wind and the appearance of tongues of fire.

The similarity in the two events shouldn't surprise us. There are so many points at which Moses' story parallels the story of Jesus, points where the Gospel writers want us to notice allusions to Exodus. In Moses' story, it is the third day when God's glory is revealed on Mt. Sinai; the Gospels, of course, tell us it is on the third day that Christ rose from the dead, revealing God's glory and God's power over evil, sin and death.

In the Torah, Moses goes up on the mountain to receive the law; in Matthew, Jesus goes up a mountain to deliver a new, expanded law, the Sermon on the Mount. As we'll see in a few weeks, Moses' physical appearance is altered by his encounter with God, his face radiant from God's glory; when Jesus ascends the mountain where he is transfigured, he meets Moses and Elijah, and his appearance is also radiant, reflecting the glory of God.

Like the Israelites, we, too, have a story, a history with God that we need to regularly recall—how God has walked with us and led us, been faithful to us, rescued us and loved us. As God's people, we, too, are called to be obedient to the law and faithful to the covenant, to God's call to be a holy people, a people who mediate the Lord's presence and love and reflect the glory of God to all the earth. Israel's response to God's invitation was to answer in unison, "Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do." Calvary, what will be our response?