

The Mountain of God

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

2nd in a four-part series

July 13, 2014

©2014 Scott L. Engle

Exodus 3:1-6 (NIV)

[God's people, the descendants of Abraham, have been in Egypt for several hundred years and enslaved by the Egyptians. But God is riding to the rescue and begins this mission by coming to an Israelite named Moses, who has fled Egypt after murdering an Egyptian foreman.]

Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro, his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God.

²There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. ³So Moses thought, "I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up."

⁴When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, "Moses! Moses!"

And Moses said, "Here I am."

⁵"Do not come any closer," God said. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." ⁶Then he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God.

Exodus 19:1-6 (NIV)

[God comes to Moses and sends him to confront Pharaoh and demand that the Hebrews be set free. After much trouble and tragedy, that comes to pass and the people cross the Red Sea. They make their way to the mountain where Moses had first met God.]

On the first day of the third month after the Israelites left Egypt—on that very day—they came to the Desert of Sinai. ²After they set out from Rephidim, they entered the Desert of Sinai, and Israel camped there in the desert in front of the mountain.

³Then Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain and said, "This is what you are to say to the descendants of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: ⁴'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. ⁵Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, ⁶you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites."

Abraham's family has suffered in slavery for hundreds of years. It is time to free them from bondage and to teach them what it really means to be God's people.

This week, we turn from Abraham to Moses, continuing in Act 3 of the Bible's six-act play:

Act One Act Two Act Three Act Four Act Five Act Six
Creation → Fall → Israel → Jesus → The church → Renewal of creation

God made expansive promises to Abraham but after four generations, this family of God is enslaved in Egypt, where they had gone long before to escape a famine. Now, they are in desperate need of rescue. And, as Exodus puts it, God "heard their groaning and remembered¹ his covenant with Abraham" (Exodus 2:24). So God set out to choose and prepare the one who would be God's agent in this rescue. His name: Moses.

The Exodus

When the book of Exodus opens, Abraham's descendants (through Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob's twelve sons) have been enslaved in Egypt for several hundred years. Sometime

¹ It isn't as if God could really forgotten the promises he made to Abraham. This is a Hebrew way to speak of the time having come for God to act.

²Jews commemorate this "passing over" every spring. In the last week before his crucifixion, Jesus arrived

around 1500–1300 BC, Moses is born, grows up in the Pharaoh's house, murders an Egyptian who was beating a fellow Hebrew, and disappears into the desert. There, he marries and tends to his flocks.

One day, he sees a bush that is burning but is not consumed by the fire. When he investigates, Moses is confronted by God, who tells Moses that God is going to save the Hebrews. It is in this meeting that God reveals his name to Moses: YHWH, which means "I am" or "I am who I am" (Exodus 3:1-6).

Moses resists and offers up some reasons why he isn't the right guy, but God persists. Eventually, Moses, with the help of his brother, Aaron, returns to Egypt to confront the Pharaoh and demand freedom for the Hebrews. As you'd expect, the Pharaoh resists,

Covenants

The notion of covenant is one of the central themes of the Bible. It isn't a word we use much anymore, but it expresses the making and keeping of commitments and promises. An excellent example today is a marriage covenant.

Though there are several types of covenants in the Bible, they fall into two broad categories, (1) the covenant between God and his people and (2) the covenants among humans.

Covenants are used in the Bible to bind two persons legally and personally, as when Jonathan makes a covenant with David (1 Samuel 18:3-4), wherein their loving bond diminishes the legal aspects of the covenant. In other cases, such as the covenant between Laban and Jacob (Genesis 31:43-54), the legal power of the covenant is much more important because Laban and Jacob don't trust each other. In most biblical covenants between humans, God is called on as the witness and guarantor.

When God is a participant in the covenant, such as God's covenants with Noah (Genesis 9:8-17) or Abraham (12:1-3) or Moses (in Exodus and Deuteronomy) or David (see 2 Samuel 7), the covenant takes on all the theological significance of a commitment between God the creator and his creation, between God the king and his people.

so God sends plague after plague upon Egypt. In the end, Pharaoh relents only when God sends death to strike all the first-born of Egypt. However, the death passes over the homes of the Hebrews who have marked their doorways with the blood of a lamb.²

After this final plague, Pharaoh lets the Hebrews go, but then changes his mind and chases after them. God parts the Red Sea (or "sea of reeds") to let the Hebrews pass, but the Egyptian army is drowned when they follow the Hebrews into the parted waters.

God then leads the Hebrews into the desert. After a few months (not forty years!), they arrive at Mt. Sinai where God gives Moses the Ten Commandments and the instructions for building God's tabernacle, the place where God will dwell with his people. God also instructs the people on a system of priests and sacrifices that will mark them out as God's people.

God comes to his people

Though the plagues in the Exodus story capture people's imagination, the heart of the story is the encounter between God and his people at Mount Sinai. There, Moses climbs the mountain to appear before God, who reminds the people of what God has done for them and then proposes a covenant with the Israelites: "If you will obey me and keep my covenant, you will be my special treasure" (see Exodus 19:1-6). When Moses returns from the mountain, the leaders of the people meet and agree to accept the covenant, "to do everything Yahweh asks of us." After everything God had done for them, the Israelites' willingness to accept God's covenant shouldn't surprise us. Sadly, neither will their failure to keep it.

²Jews commemorate this "passing over" every spring. In the last week before his crucifixion, Jesus arrived in Jerusalem for the Passover celebration. The last supper of Jesus and his disciples was a Passover dinner. Thus, the followers of Jesus came to see him as the Passover lamb, who was essentially inaugurating a new Exodus. This, Jesus was seen the one whose sacrificial death makes our own salvation possible.

After the people accept the covenant with God, the most amazing thing happens. God tells Moses that he will come to the people in a cloud of smoke so they can hear the audible voice of God! God is going to spell out clearly the terms of the covenant Israel has accepted so that all can hear. Thus, Moses assembles the people at the base of the mountain where God, in smoke and fire and announced by the blowing of a ram's horn, addresses his people.

Instruction in the covenant

In God's address, YHWH lays out a series of ten terse commandments. In these commandments, God begins to shape a people who will be holy, who will reflect God's own character. The Ten Commandments begin God's instruction on how to live in right relationship with God and with one another. This entire passage (Exodus 20-31) is foundational to the biblical narrative, and there are at least three keys to understanding why this is so.

First, God's choosing and saving of Israel was never simply for their own sake but for the sake of the whole world. Looking back from Mount Sinai, the Israelites can remember God's promise to Abraham that all nations would be blessed through him (Genesis 12:3). More than a thousand years later, Jesus would remind his disciples that they were to be the light to the world and not hide their light under a bushel basket (Matthew 5:14-16). But to be the light to the world, to be the ones through whom God would restore all creation, God's people had to grow in holiness. Their character had to reflect God's own character. The Ten Commandments begin to show the Israelites what it means to love God and to love neighbor. The abstract commandment to love is made concrete by the commandments.

Second, God is going to dwell with his people. But just how does a holy God live with an unholy people who remain very much the children of the rebellious and disobedient Adam?³ So, beginning in Exodus 25, God gives them instructions for building a tabernacle⁴, a moveable shrine in which God will dwell. The Israelites didn't imagine that God could be contained in a tent, but they knew that God's presence would be with them in a way that he was not with other peoples. God would dwell with *them*! Imagine that God came to you and told you that he would live upstairs in your home. What a privilege; what a responsibility.

Third, God sets up a system of rituals, priests, sacrifices, and festivals so that the people can begin to learn that some things are holy and some are not. They must learn that the two do not mix. The priestly system teaches the people that God cannot be approached by a sinful and unholy people. Thus, the priests and sacrifices accomplish, only after a fashion, the reconciliation of God and his people. But still, all the rituals, priests, and sacrifices are only signposts to the real thing; they could never be the "real thing" itself. That will await the arrival of God's own son (Act 4).

Israel breaks the covenant

In the midst of the Exodus story, we learn that the people will be unable to live up to their end of the bargain. Their words say "yes;" their actions say "no." While Moses is on the mountain with God, the people start whining, even wishing they were back in Egypt. And when they decide that Moses isn't coming back, they fashion a calf made of gold, an idol, and thank this figurine for saving them from Pharaoh. It boggles the mind, but this story would be repeated countless times in the pages of the Old

³We are all children of Adam in the sense that we are all sinful, failing to love fully God and our neighbor. It is the separation and estrangement created by "sin" that must be fixed.

⁴The tabernacle was a moveable tent, suitable for a nomadic people. Inside was a place set apart from the rest that was called the Holy of Holies. In it was kept the Ark of the Covenant containing the stone tablets brought down the mountain by Moses. Centuries later, when the people were settled in the Promised Land, they would build a permanent temple in Jerusalem. It was patterned on the tabernacle described in the book of Exodus.

Testament. At first, God refuses to go on with the Israelites, but, in quite a turn, Moses persuades God to go with the Israelites to the Promised Land.

After leaving Mount Horeb/Sinai, God leads his people to the land God had promised to Abraham. They send spies into Canaan to check things out and, being terrified by what they see, the people turn back. Rather than trusting in God, they trust in their own judgment. As you might expect, God is angry with them and tells them that they will not enter the Promised Land until that entire generation dies.⁵ Even Moses will never enter Canaan. Thus, the Israelites wander aimlessly in the wilderness for forty years.⁶ The book of Deuteronomy then is largely Moses's final speech to the new generation of the Hebrews, who will soon begin their conquest of Canaan. Moses's death is recorded at the end of Deuteronomy. Next week, we turn to Joshua, God's commander for the conquest of Canaan.

Jesus, the Law, & the Two Tablets

When Moses came down from Mt. Sinai, he brought two tablets containing what we call the Ten Commandments. These commandments can be found in Exodus 20. The first four commandments speak to our relationship with God: do not worship any other God, don't make idols, don't abuse God's name, keep the Sabbath holy. The last six speak to our relationship with others: honor your parents, don't murder, don't commit adultery, don't steal, don't testify falsely against your neighbor, and don't covet other people's possessions. The Ten Commandments lie at the heart of the Old Testament law.

Many people mistakenly believe that Jesus came to abolish the Old Testament Law. On the contrary, Jesus came to fulfill the law. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught his disciples what God's Law is really all about. When tested by the young lawyer, Jesus said that all the Law can be summed in the commandments to love God (the first tablet!) and to love neighbor (the second tablet!). All of the "do's" and "don'ts" one finds in the Bible are simply concrete expressions of those two commandments.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

The Ten Commandments is one portion of the story of the Exodus that everyone is familiar with. They embody the essence of God's teachings to his people. Read Exodus 20:1-18 and then consider the following:

1. Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon remind us "that the [ten] commandments are so straightforward and terse suggests not that they are easy to know, but that they are not self-sufficient." After all, not all Christians agree on what "you shall not murder" means. Is this only referring to our modern legal definition of murder or does it speak more broadly about the sanctity of life? The meaning and application of these commandments are worked out in the life of God's people. How does this happen? How do we build a community that attempts to be faithful to God's will and way, yet stays humble? Surely, sometimes we get this wrong. Hauerwas and Willimon suggest that "we don't know what adultery is apart from a church that shows us what marriage is." Do you agree? How do we as individuals or as the church work through the meaning of these commandments? How does the church influence your own moral decisions?
2. Imagine that God came to you and proposed that he live in your house. How would this make you feel? Would it make a difference if God had done some good things for you? Suppose that God posted the Ten Commandments as new rules of the house. Do they make sense to you? Is there anything missing? Why these ten and not others? What would you like to see on the list that isn't there? As you look over the list, which ones make you the most anxious? The Jews found joy in the rules of their house (see Psalm 119). Why do you think this is so? Many of us find little joy in any rules. Even the word "obedience" can make us nervous. How can we find joy in being obedient to God's will for our lives?

⁵Two of the spies, Joshua and Caleb, urge the people to trust in God's promises and enter the land, but they are ignored. Because of their faithfulness to God, Joshua and Caleb are allowed to lead the next generation into Canaan.

⁶This time in the wilderness becomes an important theme in the Bible. For example, where does Satan tempt Jesus after his baptism? In the wilderness.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Exodus 3:1 – 4:17 Moses meets God at the burning bush and is given his assignment.</p>	<p>Tuesday, Exodus 11-12 The warning of the final plague and the institution of the Passover meal</p>
<p>Wednesday, Exodus 20:1-18 The Ten commandments</p>	<p>Thursday, Numbers 14 The people refuse to enter the promised Land</p>
<p>Friday, Joshua 3 With God as their warrior king, the people cross the Jordan river and enter the Promised Land.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Prayer List</p>

