



Exodus 19-20 (19:1-8)
 Journey to Freedom: Exodus
 "The Mountain"

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This morning we continue our journey through the book of Exodus, which will wrap up two Sundays after today – Labor Day Weekend. The last three weeks as I've been gone you've heard from Rob and Paul (Thank you!) as they've shared about the Israelites' journey of leaving Egypt: The Passover, the parted waters of the Red Sea, and God's provision for them of manna from heaven and water from a rock, as they continued their journey.

And the events in today's passage really are the pinnacle of Exodus. As one author writes, "The arrival of the people at this place is the climactic point of the entire book of Exodus. Everything else [before it] is prelude; what follows is postlude."¹ So, what we're looking at today is vitally important, and even sets the stage for Jesus' ministry and gives meaning to his life roughly 1300 years later. So, let's turn to Exodus 19:1-8. This is God's Word to you and me today...

When you first read this, if you're like me, the response is something like, "OK...that's all fine enough...now let's keep reading to get to where this is leading." It doesn't *feel* like the mountaintop of Exodus. But this really *is* where everything has been leading. No, it's not flashy: There's no thunder and lightning, no earthquakes, no fire, no parted seas or plagues of earlier chapters.

But, you may recall that God told Moses that this would happen. Remember back when God called Moses to go to Egypt and Moses kept objecting? After one of the objections, here's what God told him, "**And God said, 'I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain'"** (Exodus 3:12). So, all along, getting back here to Mt. Sinai was a major goal for Moses.

So, Moses goes up Mt. Sinai as the Israelites stayed camped down at the base of the mountain, and then he came back down with a word from God. This is really quite ordinary, even though we might not think so at first. It's not that

different than any one of us going on a hike and having a great sense of God's presence and maybe even God speaking something to us in some way. God didn't appear to him in some kind of bodily form. God's *presence* was there. I don't know if Moses actually heard God's voice, but probably many of us have had a sense of God telling us something without audibly hearing him. Moses has a similar encounter with God...and God speaks to him in some way, to bring this message back to the Israelites.

The message is in verses 5 and 6, and it is the general terms of a covenant that God is making with Israel. More detail of the covenant comes later here in chapter 19, the 10 Commandments are in chapter 20, and more stipulations are in the few chapters after that. But here we get the basic parameters of this covenant: **“Now 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, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation”** (Exodus 19:5-6).

Now, this is clearly a conditional covenant. *If* you obey...*then* you will be my treasured possession, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. So, there are two sides to this covenant. But the key thing to understand in this is that: **This is a covenant that comes about by God's grace.** They have not earned this. God does not say, “Hey, because you all have been so awesome and faithful to me, I want to do something groovy for you.” No. In fact, it's by his grace that they've even gotten to the base of the mountain. Verse 4 makes that clear when God tells Moses to tell the people, “You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.” *Then* comes the words of the covenant.

So, it is God who has brought them thus far. Did Moses do some stuff and provide leadership? Absolutely. Did the people spread the blood of the lamb on their doorposts and gather their stuff and quickly head out of Egypt following Moses? Yes. Did they step out in faith – maybe with fear and trepidation – to cross the parted waters of the Red Sea? Definitely. But underneath all of their action and effort is God lifting them up, leading them, orchestrating things, and essentially carrying them “like on eagles' wings” as this verse says. And that's the grace of God.

And then: **In verse 5 God says that they will be a special treasure to him.** Why? What have they done to deserve this favor? Again: Absolutely nothing. They weren't a particularly large nation or accomplished people; they didn't have a great kingdom with huge borders and an imposing army to protect it. But God chooses them. Again, it's all grace.

No matter how much you've accomplished, no matter how hard you've worked, the invisible hand of God is sustaining you and carrying you forward and drawing you to him. At a very minimum, even if you're here this morning not sure about who God is or if he's even real, we can all agree that we haven't put the sun, moon, and earth in place; we haven't created the cosmos; we haven't invented gravity or water to drink and air to breathe...we haven't put plants and animals on the ground, birds in the air, fish in the sea...let alone humanity. We can't take any credit. It's all grace.

There's a story I heard a few months ago – I don't remember where...and I don't think it was told by someone else in a sermon here, but if it was I apologize for the redundancy, and my own memory failure...but there's a story about a group of scientists who got together and decided that humanity had come a long way and no longer needed God. So, they picked one scientist to go and tell Him that they were done with Him. The scientist walked up to God and said, "God, we've decided that we no longer need you. We're to the point where we can clone people, manipulate atoms, build molecules, fly through space, and do many other miraculous things on our own. So why don't you just go away and mind your own business from now on?"

God listened very patiently and kindly to the man. After the scientist was done talking, God said, "Very well. How about this? Before I go, let's say we have a human-making contest." To which the scientist replied, "Okay, we can handle that!"

"But," God added, "we're going to do this just like I did back in the old days with Adam." The scientist nodded, "Sure, no problem" and bent down and picked up a handful of dirt. God wagged a finger at him and said, "Oh no you

don't...Put that down. You go and find your own dirt." Our existence is because of God's grace – we can't even create dirt on our own.

Even the scientist, author, and atheist Carl Sagan once said, **"To really make an apple pie from scratch, you must begin by inventing the universe"** (Carl Sagan). Through the lens of faith, it's an acknowledgment of grace.

Your life is a product of the grace of God – like being lifted up on wings of eagles. None of us have done anything to make life, or our lives, possible. And from that same place of grace, God makes a covenant with Israel. He chooses them for a purpose: to be his agents of grace and truth and to represent him on this earth and point people to him. God wants to work through them for God's purposes.

Now, as many of you probably know, this is not the only time God makes a covenant in the Old Testament. But this covenant, made with the whole nation of Israel through Moses, this one is the one that particularly took hold because it was directed to the whole nation, and not just to a person. In fact, they respond here, and again at other points in the next few chapters as well, by saying, **"We will do everything the Lord has said" (Exodus 19:8).**

They're on board. But remember earlier I said that everything that comes after this in Exodus is like the postlude? Well, in some ways, that postlude extends through all of the Old Testament. And it's a postlude that is filled with a lot of mistakes – like if I tried to play Chopin on the piano after church. It would be ugly and you'd all run for the doors. The Israelites do not do a good job of holding up their end of the covenant: They're disobedient, worship other gods, break the rules, and so forth. So, on one hand, it's the covenant they cling to and they want to do right; but on the other hand, they don't hold up their end of it well at all.

So, this is the covenant that really dominated Judaism for centuries, at least in theory, if not in practice. But God continues to be gracious and uphold his end of the covenant until Jesus comes along. Because then, through Jesus, God not only upholds his end of the covenant but he covers Israel's part as well, and works out his purposes to extend the covenant to all

who put their trust in Jesus. “For the whole earth is mine” as God says here in this passage. Ultimately, his desire is to reach all the world, and that’s exactly what he does in Jesus Christ. Anyone can enter into this covenant through faith in Jesus.

So Jesus comes along and fulfills this Mosaic (through Moses) Covenant. Jesus himself says he’s not come to abolish the law (Israel’s side of the covenant – the stuff they had to do) but to fulfill it. He does their part for them. This is also why at the Last Supper (Passover meal) with his disciples, Jesus speaks of a new covenant. In the Gospel of Luke, for example, after Jesus has broken the bread and declared that it is his body broken for them, we read, **“In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you’” (Luke 22:20)**. Paul reiterates this for us in 1 Corinthians as well. So, Jesus is the centerpiece of this new covenant with this God of grace. This is why Jesus is so important. Jesus isn’t important because we Christians say he is; Jesus is important because *he* says he is.

The Old Covenant is this Mosaic one. The new one is the one through faith in Jesus. And this covenant is extended to you and me – by the grace of God – through faith in Jesus Christ. Like Israel, we covenant with God to live holy and godly lives that points the world to Him. And also like Israel, we fall short. We sin, missing the mark of what God calls us to. But when we trust Jesus, when we partake in this covenant, he covers over our sin.

So: We covenant with God through faith in Jesus, and we covenant with each other as well. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “There’s no such thing as a solitary Christian.” Jesus said where two or more are gathered in his name, he is there with them. For us here at Rose Hill, and other churches in our denomination, it’s in our denominational name: A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians. We are covenanted with God and with each other, through faith in Jesus. And so much like the Israelites before us in verse 8 of today’s passage we say with one voice, “We will do everything the Lord has said.” We affirm this covenant.

With the grace of God as our foundation that lifts us up, we covenant together to shine the light of Jesus to build up believers and so that others would be drawn to him. We covenant together to make disciples – male/female, young/old, rich/poor, black/white and everyone in between. We covenant together to be the best church we can be; to be the best representation of Jesus here in Kirkland and the surrounding communities – in our homes, neighborhoods, places of work, etc. Sometimes, like Israel, we don't hold up our end of the covenant as well as we could. But as we keep coming to the base of the mountain as God draws us in - like in this passage, as we keep looking to Jesus, as we keep seeking the Lord's leading, as we keep joining together in mission and ministry: God will continue to be faithful, and lift us up like on eagles' wings. He will put us back on the straight and narrow path when we've gotten off-track, so we can shine the light of Christ even brighter.

So, with God's grace as your foundation, are we ready to respond as the Israelites did: "We will do everything the Lord has said"? Are we willing to do all that God calls us to as a church, as individual Christians? Sacrificing, giving, loving, serving, teaching, discipling, and doing it all with love, joy, and a spirit of generosity because we're sold out for Jesus?

Yesterday morning I came to the church to clean up what I could of the mess that was left when a drunk driver didn't stop his car until he had plowed onto our church property earlier this week. I knew I'd be limited with my leg locked at 180 degrees in this brace, but I wanted to at least clean up what I could – especially the banner and frame that was par-way torn down and was a real eye-catcher for people driving by. I also knew others would clean up the heavy stuff at some point, and Dan Wolfe was working on organizing that. When I got here, however, Dan and a few guys were already here cleaning up the heavy stuff, and more came not long after I arrived. They were here working on a Saturday morning to take care of our church grounds, and they did it all with laughter and joy and a great sense of "we're in this together." No one said anything about a covenant ("Look at us covenanting together!"); And I didn't tell them I was going to make this part of the sermon – it didn't occur to me until I finished the message late yesterday

afternoon. But it's a fantastic example of covenanting – with God and with each other, and doing what we can to uphold our end of this covenant.

Let me close with a brief illustration. There was a university professor in Los Angeles named Leo Buscaglia. I think I'm pronouncing his name right.² He passed away in 1998, and he taught at a University I usually pretend doesn't exist – USC. One particular course he taught was on love. Whenever he taught this class, at the start he asked his students to write their answer to a question and turn it in. The question was: "If you only had five days left to live, what would you do?" The answers invariably came back in along the lines of: I'd say I'm sorry; I'd say thank you, I'd tell my parents how much I appreciate them, and so forth. And professor Buscaglia read each, and handed them back to each student with this written on it: **Why don't you do it now? What are you waiting for?**³

By his grace, God took the initiative; he didn't wait any longer, and he covered both sides of this covenant through his own effort. He covers his side of it and all the promises he makes, *and* he covers our side. He's done that through Jesus Christ. If you *aren't* a part of that new covenant through faith in Jesus...if you haven't acknowledged God's grace and don't have that assurance of a right relationship with God and forgiveness for your sins so you can be with God in eternity...why don't you do that now? What are you waiting for?

If you *have* entered into that covenant God, and if Rose Hill is your home church whether you've formally covenanted with us or not, then I invite you to live into that covenant with God and each other in a deeper, more tangible way than you currently are. (And I know many of you are engaged in ministry...but maybe there's room for more; others of you are newer and maybe you're just waiting to get involved in service and leadership.) Like the guys here yesterday who gave their time and energy with joy and generosity, why don't you get involved in the mission and vision of Rose Hill? What are you waiting for?

We've covenanted with the Lord and with each other. He's initiated it; it's by his grace. This same covenant, in its old form, is the centerpiece of Exodus.

And now, through Jesus Christ, the new version of that covenant is ours to partake in. With one voice, let's say "Yes! We will do everything the Lord says!" Let's not wait any longer, and experience God together at the top of the mountain in our covenant relationship with him and each other.

¹ Maxie Dunam, *The Preacher's Commentary – Exodus*, p. 217.

² I found out the next day that the "g" in his last name is silent. So I pretty well butchered the pronunciation.

³ *Ibid.* p. 223. You can read about him online in a number of places.