

God's Treasured Possession

Exodus 19:1-9 September 3, 2017 Pastor Roger Barkley

Today's reading in Exodus 19 finds the Israelites arriving at the Mountain.

Anyone remember what this mountain is called? (Mount Sinai – sometimes called Mount Horeb, and sometimes called the Mountain of God.)

Good.

And anyone remember what previous event happened at this same mountain? (Moses and the burning bush)

Very good.

That's where God directed Moses to go to Pharaoh to free the Israeli slaves, but Moses questioned whether he was the guy for the job.

God responded:

Exodus 3:12 *"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."*

And here we are, just as promised.

And to be sure we don't miss the point, a passage preceding today's reading mentions that Jethro (Moses' father-in-law) has dropped by the Israelites' caravan.

That's significant because it was his herd that Moses had been tending that day on this mountain.

Next week we are going to look at the Ten Commandments, which God spoke to the people through the fog of fire and lightening from this mountain, and then there will be a long list of applications of those basic commandments that address the people's specific concerns and culture.

This block of material is so important, that the bulk of the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible) actually takes place right here with the Israelites camped at the foot of Mount Sinai.

Of course, the Israelites were not the first civilization to produce a set of laws.

The Sumerians, Egyptians and Greeks each had formal legal systems – but here at Mount Sinai we are witnessing something previously unknown to humankind:

What is new is that the Law is given within the context of a narrative.

What is that narrative?

It is the story that we've been reflecting on over the past couple of months, beginning with Genesis 1.

In other words, the Law is spoken by God who brought order out of chaos, who personally cared for and blessed this tribe through Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and Moses, and who called them to become bigger than themselves – more than a nation blessed, but a nation that would bless the world.

The story of the Israelites begins with the call to Abraham, who had been settled in the northern Babylonian Empire, and is called by an unknown God to become a migrant in an unknown land where he will wait for decades to father a family.

Exodus 12:1-3 *The LORD had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.*

*"I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.
I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you."*

It was an outrageous promise to a man and woman who had been unable to conceive – and we've witnessed how tenuous even the continued existence of this small tribe was.

But God stepped in at critical points both to remind them of His promise, and to get them through whatever crisis they faced.

So, the Law to be given here at Mount Sinai is not just a civil code arbitrarily imposed on the people.

It is the natural progression of the larger story of God's goodness.

The Law is a gracious gift from the Creator of Heaven and Earth given so that life will go well for His people.

Deuteronomy 6:24 explains, ... *(the Law was given) so that we might always prosper and be kept alive*

And, it is because of its narrative context we learn about the nature, concerns and priorities of the One who gives the Law.

Rather than being distant and aloof as the gods and goddesses were thought to be in the Ancient Near East, God reveals that He is personal, concerned and involved.

God intervenes in the lives of slaves who were victims of a different kind of legal system, an oppressive system designed to entrench and enrich the powerful.

God's Law will be the opposite of that exploitative legal system.

Rather than forcing regulations on the people, God woos the tired desert wanderers into embracing this gift.

Exodus 19:4 *"You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself."*

Do you hear how God describes Himself in the tender, maternal imagery of a powerful eagle wrapping her young in her protective wings and flying them to safety?

The Law is given in this same spirit ... protecting people from the dark impulses lurking in the human heart and from the oppressive forces of unchecked political power that would again enslave them.

People and governments live in a constant tension between unrestrained freedom, and laws for order and protection of the larger community.

We may be seeing some of this being played out in Houston, where in the midst of the unspeakable tragedy we are reminded that while Texans prize themselves for having minimal regulations, there had been many voices cautioning against unrestrained building, zoning practices and weak building codes that apparently contributed to the tragedy.

That real-world balance is hard to find, but before giving the Ten Commandments and all the axillary laws, God reminds the people of who He is, what He's done, and what His motives are – so that they can trust that these laws are good.

Then, notice that God does not say that He brought the Israelites to Mount Sinai.

What does He say?

I brought you to myself.

So, the Law is a means of drawing and keeping the people close to the heart of God.

The first thing to be done is to give structure to this community that until three months before had only known life as slaves.

Every minute of their lives had been structured, every misdeed greeted with a beating.

Now they are unrestrained.

Maybe you remember your first year of college ... away from home and curfews and inquisitive parents.

I'm sure *you* never did this, but many first and second year students go wild.

Drinking and drugs go unrestrained.

It's easy to skip class.

Student loans pay for parties.

Eventually we learn that we need structure, which is an immediate purpose for the Israelites' law, and the reason for some of the restrictive statutes.

As we've read through Genesis and Exodus, we've also learned how God engages people in the stuff of life.

God doesn't just swoop in and fix everything; God doesn't grant our every desire with the snap of a divine finger or a magical prayer.

Thinking back to first year college, God doesn't re-write our transcripts after we neglected a semester's worth of homework.

Or maybe this is just about me.

What we've been seeing is how God's people built faith and resilience in the midst of hardship, long periods of waiting, and confronting the risks and fears of the wilderness.

The Law underscores the fact that God chooses not to do everything in the world by Himself.

The Law is divine action inviting human response.

Exodus 19:5 Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession

The Law is another response people can make to what God is doing for them, and their response is necessary if they are to align with God's ways and purposes.

And, placing the Law within the narrative context of God's on-going grace, means that they are not to be cemented to a particular culture or time.

They were given 3,000 years ago to a small tribe surviving among many enemies in an Ancient Near Eastern culture.

This is particularly important as our world addresses the alarming rise of various fundamentalist movements.

When humans face cultural shifts, we tend to cling to imagined times when things were secure ... the memory of a time that never really was.

You want to see what letter-perfect fundamentalism is?

Look at the Taliban ... those guys are really faithful to an ideology that takes laws given for a culture 3,000 years ago and seeks to live them in detail today.

Many of those regulations were right at a certain point in human evolution.

But we've progressed.

And God is still with us ... He didn't get left behind in ancient Palestine.

As we say in the United Church of Christ, "God is still speaking."

God's Word did not stop when the ink dried on a 3,000-year-old rule.

We don't stone children who speak back to their parents, we don't condemn people who wear tattoos, we don't expect women to isolate themselves during their monthly cycles.

God is always inviting us to grow beyond ourselves – and that is part of the Biblical narrative that both precedes the giving of the Sinai covenant and that continues through the rest of the Bible.

Jesus and Paul pushed beyond the boundaries of their times, confronting tribalism, and social boundaries separating Greek and Jew, free and slave, man and woman.

And we've witnessed the rise of another expression of anxiety in our evolving culture: the rise of hate groups.

You and I are called to stand against that movement which has tendrils reaching far into society ... way beyond the torch-carrying, swastika waving fringe.

My former father-in-law was a Jew living in Vienna in the 1930's.

That was an educated and cultured society.

They heard about the fringe group of brown shirts who were marching around trying to stir up trouble.

But few people took them seriously.

We all know how that story ended, and within a few years my father-in-law and his family had to flee their home, leaving most of their belongings behind and barely escaping with their lives.

Europe provided fertile ground for the Nazis, in part, because they had never come to grips with their long and ugly history of anti-Semitism ... so, unexamined and unconfessed, it festered just under the surface, even in cultured centers like Vienna, Berlin and Rome.

The various white supremacist groups today feel like they've come out of nowhere – but it was in my lifetime that the Klan was alive and well in much of the country, including just a hundred miles up the road in Bakersfield.

It was within my lifetime that lynchings went unpunished.

These groups have a surprisingly broad appeal because good people have not examined their hearts, and because our nation has never really faced and confessed our history.

I love America.

Each of us is blessed beyond what we imagine just because we live here.

But we also have a dark history that we've tried to repress.

We were founded on a genocide of unprecedented proportions, and much of our economy was built on the backs of slaves.

Even after we rejected slavery, we codified segregation with Jim Crow laws just one century ago.

The Jim Crow laws were put in place to segregate every aspect of life, from restaurants and schools, to drinking fountains and neighborhoods.

These laws were implemented on the Federal level by none other than Woodrow Wilson, a Democrat and the president we associate with a liberal agenda like the League of Nations.

As long as we don't also face all this and confess these sins, we will continue to be haunted by their shadow, just as a person is who has not faced and reconciled with their own psychological shadow will live a neurotic life.

Our faith calls us to be more ... to love our neighbor as ourselves ... and by actually doing that to become a holy people.

1 Peter 2:9 But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

To be a Christian, then, means to push forward beyond the boundaries of our culture ... not to look back at cultural assumptions of the past.

God did not give the Law as a means to salvation.

You can't earn salvation by passing the test with a perfect score.

Nor has God given the Law to somehow make us better, more spiritual, self-actualizing people.

The Law is not just about us ... it is about our neighbors.

As we'll see next week, the point of the Ten Commandments is about making a free and safe community for all.

Do not bear false witness against your neighbor because they are not free if they are worrying about false charges.

Do not covet your neighbor's house, because they are not free if they are worrying about their possessions being stolen.

Do not lust after your neighbor's spouse so that she can feel safe.

When it is the day of rest, make sure that all of your neighbors -- from your sons and daughters right down to your sheep and oxen -- get to rest just like you do.

Paul understood this:

Galatians 5:14 For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

So, this now explains where today's passage has been heading:

Exodus 19:6 “...*you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.*”

“Holy” means set apart for a reason ... and what is that reason?

To show the way, to model the way, to be the way of loving our neighbors.

Nations become strong, mighty and expansive for their own glory, wealth and power.

God's call to the insignificant, wandering former slaves camped at the base of a desert mountain is to be something different ... and as part of the on-going narrative of the Bible, this call is for you and me as well.

To know God, is to be bigger than yourself.

To greet the alien as a brother.

To see the impoverished as valuable as the ruler.

To let go of the illusion of a past that never was, and risk for a world that could possibly be.