

We've been moving through the 1st half of the Old Testament in this sermon series and today we're finally out of Genesis - which is packed with important stories and people - but now we're going into Exodus. Which is kind of silly to say, because Exodus actually means "the road out." But today we're going into Exodus.

So we're going into Exodus. Of course when we hear the word Exodus, we think of Moses leading the Israelite people out of Egypt and into the land God promised them - the "Promised Land". I'm going to be taking us through the passage Steve read for us earlier, so for those of you able and willing, I invite you now to open your own Bible or one next to you and look with me at those words in Exodus chapter 19:1-11 page 89 in the Bibles on the seats.

One of my values is - having a first hand experience with the Bible - that all people read and study the Bible for themselves. I believe there is added value to reading and studying the words personally rather than just listening to what someone else says about them.

In our passage for today in Exodus chapter 19 verse 3, Moses meets with God on a mountain top. The Hebrew specifically says Moses went up to God and called to Him from a mountaintop. This is interesting to me and makes me want to pause and talk about it.

It's true that as we read the Old Testament, the words mostly describe God as being above the people or out there. Especially in the Psalms. Earlier as we recited Psalm 47, which described God as "over all the earth". This is very common in the Old Testament. Mostly, it's because the understanding of people in ancient times - Old Testament days - was that the world was divided into three parts or three realms.

Here is an image of this concept - called the Three Story Universe. The three realms were

Heaven above - where God resided, The surface of the earth in the middle and below the surface of the earth, Sheol or hell - in the Bible we actually hear hell called the heart of the earth - the place where all souls went after death. The idea of God being "up there" somewhere was the basic belief.

In fact, our own Jim Burrell wrote a book called "Judgment from the Pews" and he writes that even in the 15 to 1600s, the church believed that the earth was the center of creation and universe and that it was flat. The church actually forced Galileo to recant his discovery - that the sun didn't orbit the earth, but rather the earth and other planets orbit the sun - and they sentenced Galileo to the dungeons then to house arrest during the Catholic Inquisition - all for his observations which redefined their stratified heaven, earth and hell. It wasn't until 1992 that officials of the Roman Catholic Church admitted in a formal statement that Galileo had been correct.

So the idea of God being up there or out there lasted a looong time and sometimes we still think of God that way today. But it was the birth, life, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, God-in-the-flesh, that brought a different idea and a New covenant. This new idea Jesus taught was that the Holy Spirit, the 3rd person or attribute of God - is now a gift that Jesus gives to those who believe he is their Messiah. And the Holy Spirit is with us and resides in our hearts as long as we'll have Him - so that God is now on earth with and within us - our counselor and guide - not just out there in heaven.

Speaking of the Holy Spirit. You know that in the Methodist Church, because we practice open communion where everyone is invited to take communion that wants to, we use grape juice instead of wine, but did you ever wonder what kind of wine is used in other churches? Holy spirits.

So Moses and God meet on the mountaintop and the Israelites, the people Moses led out of Egypt from slavery, are waiting at the base of the mountain. God gives Moses a message for them.

In this passage the people are called The house of Jacob/the people of Israel - we heard about Jacob last week.

Here again I'll remind you that the sermons in this series build on each other some, so if you didn't hear the other sermons, you can watch them on our youtube channel or the transcripts are on our website under "Sundays".

Jacob had a twin brother, Esau, who Jacob tricked out of his birthright - so that the sons of **JACOB**, not Esau, would continue God's covenant with Abraham (which was Jacob's grandfather) The covenant was that Abraham's descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky. Jacob's family did become numerous, so much so that when they went to live in Egypt to avoid the famine, the Pharaoh there became very afraid of how many Israelites there were. Hear this from Exodus 1:6, "Eventually, Joseph - one of the 12 sons of Jacob - Joseph, his 11 brothers and everyone in that generation died. But the Israelites were fertile and became populous. They multiplied and grew dramatically, filling the whole land. A new Pharaoh came to power in Egypt who didn't know Joseph. He said to his people, 'The Israelite people are now larger in number and stronger than we are. Come, let us be smart and deal with them shrewdly. Otherwise, they will only grow in number. And if war breaks out, they will join our enemies, fight against us, and then escape from the land.'" So the Pharaoh oppressed the Israelites and they suffered greatly.

That climate of oppression is what God calls Moses to change. God tells Moses to go to Pharaoh, though Moses was a bad speaker, and to persuade Pharaoh to let the Israelite slaves go.

You remember the way God persuaded Pharaoh through Moses - with 10 plagues From the first plague of turning all the water to blood, to the last plague of the death of the Egyptian's first born - both people and cattle. If it's been a while since you've read the story of the 10 plagues and the escape of the Israelites - or if you've never read it before - as your pastor, I encourage you to make time to read it this coming week - It's Exodus chapter 7 thru 11. It's good to read and re-reading these stories for ourselves. It helps us remember our Biblical history.

I like what Rabbi Ron Stern of Stephen Wise Temple in LA had to say about the Exodus in his sermon during Shabbat worship just a few weeks ago. Rabbi Stern said,

"The Exodus story is uniquely Jewish. At our cedars we say, a person must see themselves as if they have personally left Egypt. The truth of that idea lies in its ability to capture all of Jewish history. That history is too often a story of oppression and for us, delayed redemption. Though it is our story, we willingly allow others to appropriate it. For the African American slaves it was their story. They incorporated it into songs. They called their heroes names from our story. Harriet Tubman was the Moses of her people. The Exodus story rang true for any people or any person who has been oppressed by the shackles of human cruelty and neglect, whether its racism or genocide, homophobia, the stigma of mental illness or the yoke of poverty. That's where our declaration of human unity resonates so powerfully.

Our vision of God's unity is also a vision of humanity's shared destiny. We proclaim that God's oneness isn't just for Jews, but that all human beings, regardless of our differing cultures, languages, religions - all human beings possess an inherent dignity worthy of redemption."

That is exactly what covenant is about...redemption. God loved us and loves us so much that God provided a way where there was no way for us to be in relationship, forever with him. I talked about covenant and what it is two weeks ago. I said that it is an unconditional promise having to do with relationship - not just a legal contract - and usually not including stipulations for ending that promise based on certain conditions.

Understanding covenant is so important, because as I said, it also comes up for us as Christians with Jesus being our New Covenant. In our passage for today, God takes the original covenant made with Abraham - that his descendants would multiply and be God's people - and God EXTENDS that covenant.

It's been 500 to 800 years since the covenant with Abraham and now God says, not only will the family of Abraham be numerous and be my PEOPLE, but they will become a HOLY NATION - a new political entity. And that nation, by being given the 10 commandments, is begun to be governed by a specific set of laws meant to set them apart from EVERY OTHER NATION on earth. In fact, the Hebrew word for Holy - Qadosh - means set apart for a special purpose. Not only would the covenant be carved into the flesh of God's people by circumcision, it would be outwardly visible by anyone keeping to their laws - especially the one commanding them to keep the Sabbath day and set it apart from the other six days of the week. The only one of the 10 commandments never duplicated in any legal code in any other nation.

I haven't talked about this recently in my sermons, but in the past three years, I've personally been making this commandment one of my own spiritual practices - setting aside one day of the week - for me it's Friday, because every other day I have church work

commitments - I take one to rest, delight in God and be refreshed. I'm here to tell you it's very difficult to do, but it is my saving grace. Does anyone else practice this? More than any other reason, it's hard to do, because its hard to shut off the brain that wants to keep thinking about work/church things that I'm thinking about every other day. But taking one whole day off, makes all the difference in my week. Instead of resting from my work, it helps me work from my rest. It's like taking a vacation once a week. It's fabulous and I believe God knew what God was doing when he set this commandment as part of the extended covenant. If you ever want to learn more about creating your own Sabbath rest, I recommend this book - "The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry" by John Mark Comer.

Let me pray for you now, as the Holy Spirit takes these words I've shared and makes them into something crafted just for you.