

October 8, 2017

Lesson 6: God's Covenant with Israel

Scripture: Exodus 19 (16-25)

Context:

While last week examined the covenant between Abraham and God, this week looks at the covenant that God makes with the Israelites as a people. While God promised to be with Abraham and his descendants, this covenant heralds in a renewal of God's early promises: at Sinai there is a specific covenant with an already existing covenant with an elected, redeemed, believing, worshipping community.¹ Thus, covenant moves from an individual experience (God and Abraham) to a corporate experience (God and Israelites). The first part of chapter nine establishes the people as God's possession to serve the world, to be as priests to serve others, and to be a people set apart.² This is God's vision for the people and tells this information to Moses.

Moses gathers the priests and the people make the covenant to do as God commanded them to do. The people then are to prepare themselves and that is where our scripture lesson leads today as God promises to speak to Moses in the smoke on Mt. Sinai. All of this takes place right before the Lord gives the Decalogue (Ten Commandments). It is a holy moment, one of awe and trembling. The people hear God speak and now realize that this is not Moses or Aaron speaking whatever comes to mind; they are following the commands and words of God who speaks to them. There is smoke, lightning, thunder, clouds, and the sound of a horn blowing. God is present and the covenant they have just made is real.

Following this section we continue to hear God's law and the guidance to be given to the people. It is a moment where the Israelites become God's people and the God of Abraham is made known. God will show up at Mt. Sinai and God will show up wherever God pleases.

Application:

Sometimes I hear people ask why the "fear of the Lord" is never preached in pulpits anymore or as much as it used to be. Whenever that phrase is used it usually calls back to this scene that does sound terrifying. Imagine standing before a mountain and seeing lightning and smoke billowing upwards. There is lightning and thunderbolts touching the earthy. You can hear the wind and the sound of horns like those you hear whenever a battle takes place. That's where God dwells? No thank you God, I'm good. I'll stay away like you told us to do!

But perhaps we miss the point of this scene if we think it's supposed to make us "fear God" and think that we have to follow all the rules so that the thunderbolt somehow misses us. Instead, this passage reminds us of holiness and that God shows up in all sorts of ways and that we are to think of the awesome power of our Creator. This

¹ Terence E. Fretheim, "Exodus," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 1991), 209.

² *Ibid.*, 212. Also look at Exodus 9: 1-15.

scene is to remind us that God is mighty and we are not to fear because God is with us.

Recently, I've been reflecting on worship. Just this past week I led in two very different worship services at my church. One was our contemporary service and the other was our later traditional service. We received Holy Communion in both, I preached in both, and we sang in both. In the brief moments that I sometimes slip into worship mode, I get goosebumps at certain points. The band will play a song that just hits the theme of the text just right and there's a certain synergy in the room. The singer introduces a new song and you can feel peoples' excitement at singing a new praise to our Lord. Or in the traditional we join in a Creed, the Doxology, or the Call to Worship and I marvel at how all these words are being repeated in different tongues across the world. And perhaps you sing a hymn from your childhood that you sang with your grandmother or the choir sings a piece that gives you strength. On World Communion Sunday we joined together with brothers and sisters as we received the body and the blood of Christ together. Let that sink in and imagine all the millions of people receiving our Lord's body and blood. It's enough to make you feel small in a good way and to marvel at how God is at work in so many different people.

This passage isn't meant to exegete to talk about a vengeful God who will unleash terror on us if we get too close to the front lectern on Sunday and we know we've been sinning. This passage is to remind us of holy places and the covenant that God has made with us to be faithful. Even before the Decalogue with its law and order, God reaches out to be in relationship with the Israelites to show the deep love for them. God does the same for us and reaches us in different places and venues to remind us to serve our Lord to the best of our ability. Our job is to be on the lookout for God and be receptive to however God may speak.

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