

19 July 2020

Covenant
Exodus 16-34

When the people of Israel retell the story of the Exodus, they usually focus on the power of God. But not always. Another part of the story is how the rescued children of Israel responded to God's deliverance and sometimes the Psalmists remembered that part. We read Psalm 78:12-20:

- ¹² In the sight of their ancestors he worked marvels
in the land of Egypt, in the fields of Zoan.*
- ¹³ He divided the sea and let them pass through it,
and made the waters stand like a heap.*
- ¹⁴ In the daytime he led them with a cloud,
and all night long with a fiery light.*
- ¹⁵ He split rocks open in the wilderness,
and gave them drink abundantly as from the deep.*
- ¹⁶ He made streams come out of the rock,
and caused waters to flow down like rivers.*
- ¹⁷ Yet they sinned still more against him,
rebellious against the Most High in the desert.*
- ¹⁸ They tested God in their heart
by demanding the food they craved.*
- ¹⁹ They spoke against God, saying,
'Can God spread a table in the wilderness?*
- ²⁰ Even though he struck the rock so that water gushed out
and torrents overflowed,
can he also give bread,
or provide meat for his people?'*

Perhaps you've had this experience. You've set yourself some major goal and focused all your energy on achieving it. Then you do! Hurray! You got accepted to your school of choice! You got the job! Then you look around and all you see are the new challenges facing you. It's like, I don't know, like escaping from Egypt by the mighty hand and outstretched arm of the Lord, walking on dry ground through the middle of a sea, seeing your pursuers utterly routed, singing joyously to God in thanks for your salvation, then looking around you. "Oh, we're kind of in a desert, aren't we? Um, can I have a drink of water?"

So there the people of Israel were, in a rocky desert on the Sinai peninsula, and one of the things it turned out they hadn't packed nearly enough of in their hasty departure was water containers. By means of a pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night, God led them into the desert. Three days into the desert and then the water ran out. Just in time, they came to a spring . . . and it was undrinkable. They called that well *Marah*, which means, "bitter," but it wasn't just the water that was bitter. "Well done, Moses! Good job, God! Got a backup plan, maybe?" So Moses cried out to the Lord, who showed him a piece of wood and said, "Throw that in. The water will be fine." And it was.

Before long it wasn't just water. The food they'd brought with them ran out. "Maybe God *should* have killed us in Egypt. Starving to death in the desert isn't any better, you know. Do you remember the good old days of slavery? When we had food?" They'd been slaves a long time. Freedom is hard.

So God spoke to Moses. "All right, here's what we're going to do. The people need bread, and I will give it to them. They need meat, and I will bring it to them. Every evening, quail will fly into the camp, and the people may eat them. And every morning, they will find bread waiting for them on the ground." And Moses reported it to the people.

The next morning, when the Israelites got up, there was a white, flaky substance scattered all around, like a really heavy dew. It didn't look like bread. In fact it didn't look like anything. When they saw it, they said, *Mah na?* which is Hebrew for, "What the . . . ?" And then Moses explained the ground rules. "That's the bread," he said. "God is giving it to you, but he didn't bake it for you. *You* have to gather it, knead it, and bake it yourselves. Oh, and one more thing: you can only gather enough for one day. God will provide more tomorrow. Trust him."

So the people gathered up the "whatthe" – *manna* – and made bread, and it was pretty good. And some of them, the ones who believed that God helped those who helped themselves, went ahead and gathered just a little extra for the next day. And when they got up in the morning, the stuff they'd laid aside just-in-case was crawling with worms.

"I told you," Moses said. "You need to trust God day by day."

"We *do* trust him. We were just making sure, you know?"

"That may be a definition of trust that makes sense to you," Moses said. "It does not appeal to God."

And so the people learned to trust God, but human trust has a short attention span. God provided the manna and quails every day. The people were fed and had daily testimony to the reality of God's provision, but the next time they ran short of water, the people forgot all that. "See? I told you God brought us out here to kill us!"

And again God spoke to Moses. "Take your staff and strike that rock."

Moses did, and water gushed out of the rock, and the people drank, and they were grateful to God for, I don't know, maybe as much as twenty or thirty minutes. Until the next challenge. There were other challenges, too. For instance, the desert wasn't entirely uninhabited. There was a nation there under a king named Amalek, a nation that felt about the Israelites as nations seem always to feel about poor refugees, and Amalek sent an army out to destroy them. So Moses gathered an army of his own, which he sent out under the command of a young man from the tribe of Ephraim, named Joshua. Joshua and his irregular army were badly outnumbered, but God told Moses to hold his staff out over the battlefield, and as long as the staff was raised, Joshua's men drove back the people of Amalek until they were utterly destroyed.

God delivered the people from crisis after crises by the hand of Moses. But life isn't made up entirely of crises, calling for dramatic action. There are also the little joys and pleasures

of day to day life. For those, we have small claims court. And Moses was doing that, too. Every day he sat before the people, and they lined up to complain about their neighbors' noisy parties and about that broken shovel that "was *perfectly* fine, nearly brand new, before I lent it to Ithamar!" Fortunately, about then Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, who was a priest of the Midianites, brought Moses' wife and sons to him. Jethro watched Moses hear cases for a day, then took him aside. "What are you doing? You're going to kill yourself."

"I know. I'm exhausted. But God called me to lead these people."

Jethro said, "Do *not* give me that bull, Moses! You wouldn't do this if you didn't enjoy it. You *like* being in the middle of everything. Pure arrogance, that's what it is! As if nobody could settle an argument but you. Appoint judges to do that! It's great that you were called by God and all that, but that doesn't make you smarter or stronger or better than anyone else. You're called, not special."

And Moses said what wise men have always said to their fathers-in-law: "Yes, sir."

Finally, three months after leaving Egypt, they arrived at the mountain where God had spoken to Moses from the burning bush, Mount Sinai. Leaving the people, Moses went alone up the mountain, and there God spoke with him again. "Tell the people this: You saw how I brought you out of Egypt. Well, I did it for the sake of covenant. I want to be your God, and you to be my people. Keep my covenant, do what I tell you, and I will never leave you. Indeed, I will make you a holy nation, a kingdom of priests to all the world. Tell the people that."

So Moses went down the mountain and summoned the people. When he told them what the Lord had said, they replied, "All that the Lord says, we will do." Then Moses told them to prepare themselves. "Wash yourselves and your clothes, spend the next three days in prayer, sanctifying yourselves, because the Lord is coming to meet you."

On the morning of the third day, the mountain rumbled. There was lightning and thunder and a dense cloud and a sound like the blowing of a ram's horn. This was not the presence of God; these were just the faintest traces of God's coming appearance. But even at this the people were terrified. They quaked and threw themselves on their faces, and God said to them: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt. I'm the only God there is. Worship only me. Don't make any images of me to worship; I'm bigger than your imagination. Treat me with respect in your words and let your actions confirm your speech. Treat your parents with respect, too. Take care of them. When you've worked six days, take the seventh day off. Rest. You need it. Don't kill each other. Don't take things from each other or lie to each other. When you get married and make promises, keep those promises. And don't spend your time fretting about what other people have. That's a miserable way to live." In that speech, there are ten separate instructions, which the Bible itself calls the Ten Words, and which we've somehow ended up calling by the more legalistic term, the Ten Commandments.

But the people of Israel, despite their promise to obey all God's words, didn't really hear. They couldn't get past the thunder and ram's horn and dark cloud. They said to Moses, "God is scary. We don't want him to speak to us anymore in person. We'll die! You talk to him for us, all right."

Moses replied, “Don’t be afraid. I mean, yeah, you should be afraid, but don’t run. It’s good to be with God. Really.” But the people refused, and so Moses went back up the mountain, taking no one but young Joshua, who had become his personal assistant.

Up on the mountain, Moses received the Law. Capital L Law. And the Law that Moses received is what makes up most of the five books of the Torah. We’re halfway through the second of those books, and we’re nearly done with the story; all the rest is Law. And I’m not going to take time today to deal with the Law. It kind of slows the narrative, you know. In a couple of weeks, once we’ve finished the story portion of the Torah, I’ll come back and talk a bit about what we Christians are supposed to do with all those ancient laws, but for now, let’s move on.

So Moses stayed up on the mountain, receiving the law from God. He was there for forty days and forty nights, and at the end of that time, God said, “Can we pause for a minute? You need to go back down the mountain now and look at what *your* people are doing. I swear, Moses, I should wipe them out completely and start over with you.” And Moses said, “Calm down, God. You can’t do that. All the other nations will think you just brought them out here to kill them. Remember your promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Whatever they’re up to, let me go talk to them.”

Here’s what they were up to. After Moses had been gone for a few weeks, people’s attention began wandering. Trust has a short attention span, remember? They went to Aaron and said, “Aaron, you have any idea where your brother is?” Aaron didn’t. “Or when we can expect him?” No. “So here’s the thing. We don’t think he’s coming back at all. You saw all that smoke and fire up on the mountain. He’s probably up there cooked to a crisp, and since he was our contact with the Lord, we’re thinking maybe we should look around for another leader – you, maybe – and maybe a God that isn’t so scary. Could you make us one?”

Aaron frowned. Somewhere – fairly recently – he had heard something about not making gods. Where was that, anyway? Oh, well. If it was important, he’d have remembered it. “Sure,” he said. “Tell everybody to bring their golden earrings to me – men, women, children, all of you – and I’ll see what I can do.” Aaron melted the gold down and made a calf, and the people bowed before it, calling out, “This is the god who brought us out of Egypt.”

That was the scene Moses found at the foot of the mountain. I think it’s fair to say that Moses lost it. He was carrying the law with him, engraved on stone tablets, and when he saw the graven image of the calf, he smashed the tablets, then went down the mountain, smashed the calf, ground it to dust, threw it in the water, and made the people drink it. He also reamed out his big brother Aaron. (“What were you thinking?” “I don’t know, Moses, I just put the gold in the fire, and out came this calf!” I’m serious; that’s what he said.) And then, having just smashed forty days of notes, Moses had to go back up the mountain to meet again with God.

“That was interesting,” said God. “Weren’t you the one calming *me* down a bit ago?”

“I might have lost my temper a little. But I’m over it now.”

“Well, technically, they *had* promised not to do that very thing, just a few weeks before. Sometimes anger is warranted. And, even though I forgive them, that doesn’t mean I protect

them from all the consequences. I will still direct you to the land, as I promised, but I will not go with you myself. You're on your own from here on."

And Moses said, "No."

"I beg your pardon?"

"If you don't go with us, it's not worth going. You told me on this very mountain that you would be with me. Well, I've gotten used to that. If you don't go with us, I'm not going anywhere."

"Good Me! You are one pushy son of a Levite, you know that, Moses?"

"I don't care. And it has to be all of us, not just me. If you're not going to deliver us all, then go ahead and kill me now."

And God smiled. "I knew I liked you. All right, let's get started on a second copy of those laws, before they forget them again."

"You'll go with us? You're still our God?"

"I will. I Am."