

The Story: Finding the Scarlet Thread
New Commands and a New Covenant
Exodus 19-40, *selected*

Last week we ended in spectacular fashion. After centuries of slavery, God sends Moses to deliver the Hebrews from Egypt, but Pharaoh changes his mind and two million Jews find themselves trapped between his army and the Red Sea. God divides the waters and they escape on dry land. When the army tries to follow, you know what happened: Egyptian fish food.

Put yourself in Hebrew sandals for a moment. You've just seen the Egyptian army destroyed before your very eyes. You look at each other. Everyone is thinking the same thing: "Is it really over? After 430 years, are we really free?" And then it starts: cheers, whooping, hollering, weeping. It must have been one of the biggest parties ever. But finally, the revelry fades, and they are still standing there but this time with a new question: "Now what? We are out of Egypt. We're free. But now what, God? What do you want with us?" In chapter 5, you will find God repeating to Moses the promise he made to Abram:

'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. 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.'

What is a priest? A priest is one who mediates between God and humanity. Imagine that this side is God, and this side is humanity. This is the priest's job (joining of hands together) bringing the two together. God said to Moses and his people, "You will be a kingdom of priests who will lead the world to me."

Sounds like a big job and frankly, after what we will read this week, it is a little frightening, because in this part of the Story, God sounds scary. For instance, when they camp near Mt. Sinai, the people are warned to stay back from it, because if they get too close, they die! What is going on here? Why would God save them, set them free, renew his covenant with them, and then warn them to keep their distance? Sounds like an old girlfriend of mine! "Come on, love me... oops, not too close. No, now you're too far away. Get back here... no, not so close." What's going on here?

Here we touch on something the Hebrew people did not yet understand, and we Americans have forgotten completely: The glory of God. The Hebrews called it “The Shekinah.” When we speak of God’s glory we mean His presence that is bright, holy and overwhelming. God’s glory appeared like a pillar of cloud keeping Pharaoh’s army from the people. As you will read this week, the Shekinah appeared at the entrance of the tabernacle, the tent where Moses met with God. It is this overwhelming presence of God, his glory, that makes Mt. Sinai dangerous.

So is God a capricious deity who likes to zap people to prove how great He is? Like the little kid with the magnifying glass, burning ants for fun? Is God playing games with his people? No. Remember, it is God who reached out to Abraham, God who called Moses, God who saved the Hebrews, God who wants a relationship with his people. Even here in the story the reason the mountain is dangerous is because the glorious God has come down on it to be near his people!

But sinful humans cannot bear the glory of God. It’s too much for us! The other day, I grabbed the handle of a cast iron skillet that had been sitting on the burner. Guess what! Hurt like a big dog. Was that skillet trying to harm me? No, but it is the nature of an iron skillet to get hot and my body is not made to take that kind of heat. We think of God as a cuddly grandpa in the sky, but that is a cheap Hallmark cartoon. The Bible reveals God as glorious and awesome—someone to be worshipped, someone to be feared, someone not to be trifled with.

So the next step in God’s plan is to teach his people about himself. They don’t know him. It’s been 430 years without a word from him. So now we come to one of the pivotal moments in the Story. What did God do at Mt. Sinai? He gave them the Ten Commandments, of course. How did God give them the Ten Commandments? Stone tablets... nope, that’s later; through Moses... nope. I bet this will surprise you: “The Lord said to Moses, “I am going to come to you in a dense cloud, so that the people will hear me speaking with you and will always put their trust in you.” Exodus 19:9. God came down upon Mt. Sinai and spoke the 10 Commandments so loudly that the people could hear what he was saying. So listen and try to imagine what that must have been like:

¹⁶On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. ¹⁷Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. ¹⁸Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the LORD descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, the whole mountain trembled violently, ¹⁹and the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder. Then Moses spoke and the voice of God answered him.

And God spoke all these words: ²“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. ³“You shall have no other gods before me. ⁴“You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in

heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. ⁵You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God... ⁷"You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God... ⁸"Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. ⁹Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁰but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God...

¹²"Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you. ¹³"You shall not murder. ¹⁴"You shall not commit adultery. ¹⁵"You shall not steal. ¹⁶"You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor. ¹⁷"You shall not covet your neighbor's house... your neighbor's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor."

The Ten Commandments, or Ten Words, as they are known, are broken into two parts. The first four teach us about our relationship with God; the second six about our relationship with each other. Remember the Great Commandment of Jesus? Love God with everything you have and love your neighbor as yourself? That summarizes the Ten Words. If you want to sum up how to know God and live his way, here it is.

So where does God start? "You shall have no other gods before me?" No, it starts: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery." The starting point is a reminder that God always acts first! This is a core doctrine of our faith: the sovereignty of God. God approached Abraham out of all the pagans in world and made a covenant with him. It had nothing to do with what Abraham did. God did it. And 430 years into captivity, when the Hebrews had given up hope, God approached Moses with a plan to rescue his people. We humans don't pursue God; God pursues us. He always has.

This is so important: the Ten Commandments are not instructions on how to earn God's favor. They already had God's favor! The Ten Words are given so they will know who God is, know how to love God back and how to live God's way.

Word 1: You will have no other Gods before me. These words are the birth of Monotheism. The Egyptians—and the rest of the cultures of the world—were polytheists. They worshiped many gods... gods of their own creation. But here, God says, "No more of that. I am the only God; you will have none other."

Word 2: Don't make any idols, "because I am not a touchy-feely god that you can carve and fondle. Don't make any idols. You can't carry me around like a good-luck charm."

Word 3: Don't misuse my name. "Don't think that because I have revealed my name to you that you can use it like a magical spell."

Word 4: Every seventh day, I want you to rest and worship me! "Stop working (an amazing order to a nation of slaves!), just rest and enjoy me!" Those four are the "love God" rules.

Then Words 5-10, the "love humanity" rules: Honor your father and mother. Notice this is the starting point for all human relationships. Speak well to, speak well of, care for them, respect them. Then come the "do nots:" Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not say false things about your neighbor. And finally, the only heart commandment: Do not covet other people's stuff.

That's the Big Ten.

Just imagine! God descends upon Sinai in fire and thunder and lightning, his glory touches the earth, and the people hear his voice: "Do these ten things, and I will lead you to the Land I promised and you will be my Kingdom of Priests." So how did the people respond? "Everything the Lord has said we will do!" They say it twice. "Everything the Lord has said we will do!"

That lasted about twelve chapters. Remember what happened? Moses goes back up on the mountain, the people get nervous and they ask Aaron to make a golden calf. Just a little supplemental god to hedge their bets in case Moses doesn't come back—kind of like reading the horoscope on Monday after reading the Bible on Sunday. So much for "doing everything God told them!" Right out of the chute, they broke commandments 1 and 2! Moses comes down, shatters the tablets, and orders 3,000 of the ringleaders killed.

God is disgusted and tells Moses, "I'm fed up. You go ahead, go into the land I promised you. You can have it. "But I will not go with you, because you are a stiff-necked people and I might destroy you on the way." But here Moses stands for his people: "If your presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here." And God relents. "Okay, I will do what you ask. I will go with you."

Then Moses asks something even more audacious: "Now show me your glory." Why would Moses ask such a thing at such a time? I think he needed to be recharged. I think he was so discouraged that, if he was going to continue in this job, he needed a glimpse of God's glory. God says, "You cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live." But out of his love, he hides Moses in the cleft of a rock and covers him as he passes by. All Moses sees is God's back, but in that brief glimpse of God's glory Moses' face becomes so radiant he had to wear a veil when he spoke to his people. Otherwise they were too frightened of him.

That's a great story, but the Ten Commandments are passé, right? Now that Jesus has come, we don't have to worry about them anymore, right? Wrong. In fact, here is a glimpse of the Scarlet Thread. Moses, the lawgiver, went up on a mountain to receive the Law. Jesus, at the start of his ministry, went up on a mountain to re-give the law... the Sermon on the Mount. And did Jesus say, "Now that I'm here,

you don't need to worry about them anymore?" No, he reaffirmed them and made them harder! He made them a matter of the heart. "It isn't enough that you don't murder," Jesus says, "You must love your enemies. It isn't enough that you don't sleep with a woman," Jesus says, "If you look at her with lust, you have committed adultery!" Wow. If we think that, because we follow Jesus, we are off the hook for obeying God's Commands, think again.

Surely one of the questions this part of the Story asks us is, "As a follower of Jesus are you obeying the most basic of God's laws?" The American Church today is filled with sloppy Christians who take for granted the grace of Christ—who disobey God's laws and don't give it a second thought. How about you? Which of the Ten Words are you ignoring because you are confident that Jesus will give you a pass? For instance, is there anything in your life that is more important to you than Christ—your wealth, your reputation, your power, your libido? If so, you are worshiping false gods. What about idolatry? What are the trinkets you are most devoted to—your home, your car, your golf, your Seahawks? Do we worship them? Is your patriotism an idol? Is your love for country more important than your love of Christ? And do you rest? Are you able to stop working for even one day a week and commit that day to the Lord? Do you neglect or mistreat your parents? Do you turn in phony receipts or cheat on your taxes? Are you cheating on your spouse, are you using the internet to access porn or troll for dates? Are you so envious of what other people have that you resent them for it?

The sad fact is there are plenty of people who call themselves Christians but who choose not to obey the most basic laws God ever gave. And when you go your own way—make your own rules, follow your own path, worship your own idols—God says, "Fine. Go your own way. But I will not go with you." I wonder if there is anything more terrifying than the person who presumes upon the grace of God, thinking they can live any way they want and still call themselves Christians? It doesn't work that way. Faith is obedience. If you want to go your own way, God will let you, but you will not like it. It leads to death. The story of Moses gives a glimpse of Jesus who says to his disciples, "Why do you call me Lord, Lord and not do what I tell you to do?"

And here's a second, powerful glimpse of the Scarlet Thread. Think about this. In Exodus, we see God descending upon a mountain and his glory is so awesome and overwhelming, that people die if they come too near. 1,400 years later, we see God descending upon a mountain and he dies so that his people can come near. Moses said, "Show me your glory," and Yahweh said, "Only a peek, you cannot bear any more." But 1,400 years later, the Apostle John writes, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. And we beheld his glory... Glory as of the only begotten of the Father."

I wonder, who here this morning needs to be recharged, like Moses? Who here tonight is discouraged and tired and needs to say to the Lord, "Show me your glory!"

I need a glimpse of your glory." With Moses, let's pray this prayer: "If your presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here!"