

17 August 2014

Foundations: Covenant
Exodus 5-15

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! Then you look around and all you see are 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. Finally 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?"

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, quails 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. 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" – *mannah* – and made bread, and it was pretty good, actually. 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 memory. 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 gave thanks 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.

So much for the moments of crisis. Again and again, God delivered the people 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 actions and your words, and 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 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.

I need to step aside from the narrative a moment. At this point in the story, Moses is receiving the Law, and that Law makes up most of the rest of the Torah. The Torah is five books. We're halfway through the second one, and we're nearly done with the story; the rest is Law. Worse, that law is one of the hardest parts of our Bible to deal with. It isn't that it's offensive, so much, though it can be pretty harsh – I mean, sharia-law harsh; put-a-child-to-death-for-sassing-his-parents harsh. And that *is* uncomfortable, but the larger problem is that so much of it seems so irrelevant to us. There are chapters and chapters giving the measurements for building a portable temple to God, even more chapters of detailed instructions on how to go about sacrificing animals in worship, not to mention all the dietary laws restricting what can be eaten and how. Some of these laws are given weird justifications having to do with whether the animals chew the cud, and some have no stated rationale at all. (Like this one: *You shall not boil a baby goat in its mother's milk.* Really? That was a thing?) Our main issue with the law is trying to wrap our heads around the question, "Who cares?"

I don't have time today for more than a couple of suggestions for reading the law. First, recognize that these laws, like all laws, reflect their society. For instance, the Torah makes it clear that women are regarded as having less value than men. Again, like sharia law. But taking seriously the laws written for a certain society does not mean that the society itself is always right. We must separate the law from the background. In fact, we should pay closest attention to where the Old Testament laws diverge from its cultural laws. The law goes along with animal sacrifice in worship – like every other nation of that time and culture – but makes it clear that there is no quid pro quo. Israel's sacrifices are gifts of thanks, not bribes. God's favor cannot be bought. The second thing we must do is pay attention to laws that are repeated over and over. Like this passage from Exodus 22: *You shall not oppress a foreigner who lives among you; you were foreigners in Egypt. You shall not oppress a widow or an orphan. If you do, I will hear their cry, and I will punish you myself.* That law is repeated in Leviticus, in Numbers, and over and over in Deuteronomy. If you want the heart of God in the law, that's it.

But we need to finish the story. Moses spent forty days and forty nights on the mountain with God, and at the end of that time, God said, "You need to go back down now and look at what *your* people are doing. I swear, I should wipe them out completely and start over with you." And Moses said, "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." So Moses went down the mountain and found the nation of Israel dancing and offering sacrifices to a golden statue of a calf – which Aaron had made for them.

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 was also, ah, unkind to his big brother Aaron. And then, because he had 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 lead you into the Promised Land, but I will not go with you myself. If you need help, I’ll send an angel.”

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?”

“I will. I Am.”

Final word: Of all the stories of Moses, this is the one remembered most fondly in the Psalms and Prophets, the time that Moses “stood in the gap” between God and the people and offered his own life to save theirs. And God honored that, because that too is the heart of God. It’s what he would do himself. So now we leave. It has been good to be here today. We have been in the presence of God. But here’s the thing. That presence goes with you. If it doesn’t, it’s not worth going. Amen