

Keeping God at a Distance¹
Exodus 20:18-19
First Presbyterian Church
August 2, 2020

Introduction to the Reading

What helps you when you are feeling anxious or unsure? What gets you through the hard times? One thing that helps me is to know that there is someone – even if it is just one other person – someone who has been through something similar and has come out on the other end. I think this is one of the reasons I suggested to Heather that we offer a sermon series on the Book of Exodus in the middle of a pandemic. I don't mean to be overly dramatic, but I think our lives right now find many connections with the lives of God's people in this second book of the Bible. As with the Israelites just freed from slavery, the world as we knew it is gone and we are not at all sure what lies ahead. Just as the Israelites in the wilderness depended on God for their very survival, we are having to trust God more fully than many of us have ever trusted before. So, this morning we come to an incredibly important juncture in our ancestors' journey – Mt. Sinai – where God gave his people the commandments that would continue their education on just who this God was that had brought them out of Egypt... commandments which would show these just freed slaves what they needed to do to remain free... and as we will see, commandments that express God's self-giving love towards his people. The thing is... it wasn't too long ago that Heather and I preached an entire series of sermons on the Ten Commandments... so today, rather than focusing specifically on the commandments, I want us to focus our attention on what happens just after God speaks them... which we learn in verses 18-19 of Exodus 20.

Bible Reading

When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die." (Exodus 20:18-19)

Prayer for Illumination

Prepare our hearts, O God,
to accept your Word.
Silence in us any voice but your own,
that, hearing, we may also obey your will;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Sermon

Whenever you and I complain that God does not speak to us – which I do with some frequency and perhaps you do as well - we need to remember that we asked for it. God once spoke directly to us... but we decided it was too much and begged God not to do it anymore.

¹ Two sources were especially helpful in the preparation of this sermon: Barbara Brown Taylor, "Four Stops in the Wilderness," *Journal for Preachers*, 2001 and Steve Rodeheaver, "At a Distance" in *The Voice: Biblical and Theological Resources for Growing Christians*, Christian Resources Institute.

This story we're immersed in this summer covers Israel's exodus from Egypt... which we might think of as a very long Lenten season - not forty days like ours, but forty whole years... which, by the way, is Bible code for "a very long time." When the Hebrews were still working six days a week making mud bricks for the Egyptians, the wilderness looked pretty good to them. No work... no whips... no foreign masters with their foreign gods - just a quick, quiet passageway to the promised land. Of course, that was before they got there... before the sand coated them like a second skin... before their hunger felt like it was gnawing through the lining of their stomachs... before their lips cracked from too much sun and too little water. Before... the wilderness looked pretty good... but when they got there, they began to murmur and complain and even dream of being back in Egypt.

I suppose like anybody on a difficult journey, they would have preferred to sleep through it - to take their Melatonin and wake up in Canaan feeling rested and ready. Instead, they found themselves basically wandering around in the wilderness... which is a very difficult place to wander. In the wilderness, everything is exaggerated... it's like everything is 110% of what it is elsewhere - the heat is hotter... the cold is colder... the bright is brighter... the loud is louder... and the scary is scarier. Without all the usual background noise, there is nothing to distract you from reality... the ordinary filters no longer work. What you see is what you get, and nine times out of ten you get a lot more of things than you want. If you have ever spent even one-night sleeping on the ground without an air mattress, then you know what I mean. What looked like a perfectly flat place turns out to be a fifteen-degree slant. You keep sliding down to the bottom of your sleeping bag, and when you haul yourself back up again it's always on top of that same root that has already bruised your hip. Of course, you can usually survive all this if there aren't any bugs... because under the right circumstances, the buzzing of even one tiny fly inside the tent can test your soul more severely than any devil could.

Perhaps this is why the wilderness is so often a place of spiritual testing in the Bible. It was for the prophet Elijah... it was for John the Baptist and Jesus... and it certainly was for the Israelites making their way from Egypt to Canaan. If you've been with us the past few weeks you know all about these tests... fear of death... extreme hunger and thirst... complete exhaustion. And now the latest test taking place here in the shadow of Mt. Sinai. According to Exodus, God originally SPOKE the commandments DIRECTLY to the people. Moses didn't read them, since they hadn't been written down yet. No, Moses' only job was to call the people together and get them ready to hear the voice of the Lord... which as we read was about to be heard over a considerable commotion. The sky cracked with lightening and boomed with thunder. The mountain was smoking like a live volcano... and just in case someone might mistake this for a purely natural phenomenon, there was also the sound of a trumpet blasting away overall, the other noise. Then, with no introduction... no clinking of a water glass... no clearing of the divine throat, God suddenly began: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me." And on and on it went - you shall... you shall - you shall not... you shall not... these "never-been-heard-before-words" rising above all the other racket so that the people would never be able to forget them even if they tried. The thing is... that it's SO loud... the people quickly decided this was more sound than they wanted... and God was SO PRESENT, they also decided this was more God than they wanted.

The wilderness had worked like a megaphone that made everything too loud and overwhelming. And the people wanted God to turn the volume down and to keep his distance. And turning to Moses, they cried out with one voice, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die!" So, again – whenever you and I complain that God does not speak to us – we need to remember that we asked for it. God once came to us directly... and admittedly it was loud and smokey and there were a lot of strange words... we asked God not to do it anymore.

Now, more often than not, when preachers are given this text we default to the commandments – we unpack each one individually... we say what you can do and what you can't... and God comes across as being strict and rule oriented. What we preachers miss when we do that is how this whole experience at Mt. Sinai... and how God speaking directly to his people these particular words... we miss how this is part of a much longer story - a story of God offering himself to his people in self-giving love. This much longer story extends all the way back to Creation... to the call to Abraham and Sarah... and to emancipating them from slavery in Egypt – everything that had happened before this day was about God giving himself to his people in love. This had been God's desire from the very beginning – to move toward his people... to give himself to this people... to be in a special relationship with this people... so that through this special relationship they might become a blessing to all the world. And as part of God's self-giving grace, these Ten Words express clearly and concisely who God is – what God's intentions and desires are... they communicate God's very heart.

The problem was that this was more than the people wanted – it was more intimacy than they wanted... more words than they wanted... this was more God than they wanted. Of course, they were fine with the manna in the morning and quail at night... they were fine with the water from the rock and with the pillar of fire and the cloud. But they were NOT fine with God speaking to them directly... they were not fine with God coming that close to them, because they believed that if God got THAT close, they would certainly die. Which they would, of course... they were right about that much. They WOULD die – but not so much the physical death they feared as a death of their wills... a death of their old ways of living... their old ways of thinking... their old ways of treating each other... their old ways of relating to their gods. After all, look at what had happened to Moses... how when he appeared before the burning bush something about him died. He didn't want to come out of retirement... he didn't want to go back to Egypt where he was wanted for murder... he didn't want to have to tell the most powerful man in the world to release his source of free labor... he didn't want to go back... yet go back he did. Because somehow his life and will were changed... something died, and something came alive at that burning bush. And the same thing would happen to Israel if they had not backed off from God.

Well, this is yet another one of those places where we are too much like Israel. We're all good with the benefits of God, but not so much the "being changed" part. We're good with God's forgiveness, his comfort, his provision - but not with being transformed by his all-consuming Presence. And yet, that change... that transformation... is the whole aim of the benefits. The God we know in the Bible is single-minded in His desire to be in relationship with us. From His self-giving at this mountain called Sinai to His self-giving on a hill called Calvary, this is always God's goal – to be in relationship with us... and through that relationship to change us into holy and Christ-like people. Yet, too often we put our hands up and back away: "Whoa now, God. It's fine for you to come in fire and smoke and commandments to someone else, but don't let that come near us."

How God responds to Israel's "rejection" is another thing altogether. Perhaps first we should ask how we typically respond when someone rejects our love... what do we do when someone backs away from us when we are moving toward them? Well, that's the difference between us and God. We would stop giving. At least I would... I have! But not God. Not God – God did not stop loving them... did not stop speaking to them... did not stop pursuing their relationship. No, respecting the people's request, God spoke only with Moses... who to his great credit, dared to approach the Thick Darkness. But when they talked (when God and Moses talk) guess what the conversation was about? The conversation was almost always about his people. Through Moses his mediator God would continue to give Himself to the people – speaking to them... guiding them day and night... providing for their needs. And so, it is with us. Though WE still put our hands over our ears when God speaks... though WE still keep God at a safe distance... God hasn't given up on us... hasn't stopped loving us... hasn't stopped pursuing to us. For you see, the Lord will always find a Moses through whom to speak His Self-giving Word to us. Because that is WHO God IS. And who knows? Maybe He will even use us to speak to someone else.