

Lectionary 11A 2017, June 18, 2017, Exodus 19:2-8a, June 18, 2017, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Kurt S. Strause

Our first reading this morning, from the book of Exodus, puts us in camp. Imagine thousands of men, women and children setting up their tents, starting their cooking fires, making cakes from the manna gathered each day in the wilderness. This is Israel, and they are settled in camp at the base of Mt. Sinai. God has already rescued them from Egyptian slavery. Moses, God's appointed leader of the Israelites, appeared before the Egyptian Pharaoh and demanded, "Let my people go." It took ten plagues, frogs, flies, the Nile river turned to blood, and finally the death of all the first born in Egypt for Pharaoh to let them go. But as the Israelites fled Egypt in haste on that night of Passover, Pharaoh's army gave chase. Moses stood before the Red Sea and God parted the waters and Israel travelled safely to the other side, and Pharaoh's army perished in the waters as they closed in. God sums up all this in verse four of our passage this morning, "You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself."

This moment in time is right before God gives to Moses and Israel the Law, specifically the Ten Commandments. God is about to invite Moses to the top of Mt. Sinai, and there God will establish his covenant. A covenant, we know, is a contract, but more than that. A covenant is a relationship of trust, protection, mutual regard and a promise to fulfill the obligations it establishes. God says to Israel, "If you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples." God singles out Israel from among all the other nations and peoples of the earth for a special and unique relationship.

I say this reading puts us in camp. For this story, like all stories in the Bible, is meant to put us right in the middle of where the action is. We are invited to see ourselves in these stories. These stories are our stories. And even though none of us were encamped at Mt. Sinai, we are there. Placing ourselves in the middle of the story becomes important in just a moment as we shall see.

As I said, God is about to give Moses and Israel the Law, the Ten Commandments. The commandments establish God's covenant with Israel. But it's important for us to understand what this covenant establishes and how it transforms Israel. This passage from Exodus tells us what God will do with Israel. Continuing in verse 6, "Indeed the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation." God declares that every nation and people on earth belong to him, but God chooses Israel for a special and unique purpose. That purpose is to be a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. We need to see what this means.

Priests are those who offer prayers before God on behalf of others. They are the go-betweens with God on the one side and, in this case, the rest of the world on the other. They are a holy nation, meaning they are chosen and set apart from all the rest by God for a specific godly purpose. The purpose will be given to them in the Law. They are to live and behave in such a way that the whole world will see what it means to live according to the ways of God. They will show the rest of the nations in the world God's will. But this will of God, these ways of God embodied in the Law, are not just for Israel's sake alone. Priests act on behalf of others. Israel is to be a priestly nation on behalf of the world. The Law, the Ten Commandments, are not just for our own individual or even communal holiness, but for the sake of the neighbor. God establishes his covenant with Israel, not merely for their own sake, but for the sake of the whole world.

Israel's response to God's initiative is an enthusiastic and solemn promise, "Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do." God rescues Israel from slavery. God establishes his

covenant with Israel. God commissions Israel with holy priesthood for the sake of the world. God gives them the Law and commands them to obey it. And they reply, “We will do it.”

Here’s where I invite you into the story, to see yourself in this story. We all know what it means for someone to tell us they will do something, and then fail to do so. Beginning with children when told to do something, “I want you to clean your room, take out the trash, mow the lawn.” “Ok mom, I’ll do it.” “Yes, dad, I’ll start soon.” But, if we are honest with ourselves, we also have done much the same. We think we always follow through with our promises and our commitments, but we know we don’t always do so. We leave things undone, unfulfilled. Our actions don’t always match our intentions or our words.

The rest of what we call the Old Testament, from this point onwards, tells the story of Israel’s up and down path in making good on their promises to God. Sometimes faithful, but other times not. Sometimes their kings and leaders obey God and fulfill the covenant, like David or Samuel. God blesses them during these times of faithfulness. But other times they are totally unfaithful, running after false gods, exploiting the poor, abusing the resident aliens in their midst. God sends prophets to warn them, allows invaders to carry them off into exile as punishment. But throughout their up and down faithfulness, God remains faithful. Israel wavers and stumbles and falls, but God stays true to his word. He never abandons Israel. He never abolishes the promises he makes.

What Israel fails to do, God does on their behalf. God takes the initiative in the midst of Israel’s failure to live up to and fulfill their side of the covenant and fulfills himself. This is what Jesus comes to do. He is first and foremost an Israelite. He lives in such a way as to fulfill the commands and promises of the covenant God first established with Israel. His life is a perfect example of what God desires for Israel, to be this holy nation and this royal priesthood. But rather than a whole nation fulfilling this covenant, this one man, who stands in place of the nation, fulfills the promises. His life of love for their neighbor, his life of devotion to the Father, his obedience even to his death on the cross, is on behalf of Israel and for the whole world.

This is why it’s so important to see ourselves in this story from Exodus. Israel promises to fulfill their end of the covenant. While their intentions are good, they fail to do so. But God is always faithful. God takes the initiative and fulfills the promises on their behalf. We too make promises before God. Solemn promises in baptism, to faithfully follow God. To serve God in worship, and in service to others. But we are not always faithful either. Our intentions are good, but our actions aren’t consistent with our intentions.

Thanks be to God we are not measured by our consistency. We are measured only by the love and mercy of Jesus who fulfills all the promises himself. What we fail to do, Jesus does on our behalf. And when we turn to God, and admit our lack of love for either God or our neighbor, we are forgiven, for Jesus’ sake. And so, forgiven by Jesus, we are sent back out into the world, to love and serve again. Amen.