

SERMONS ON EXODUS: XIX
A PECULIAR PEOPLE
(Exodus 19:1-8)

We arrive today in our journey through the Book of Exodus at chapter 19, and the Israelites arrive in their journey through the wilderness at Mount Sinai. Both arrivals are significant. You can tell how significant it was for Israel because of the way the author dates it in relation to the exodus: “On the third new moon after the people of Israel had gone forth out of the land of Egypt,” and because there is a clear anticipation of the revelation at Sinai: “On that day they came into the wilderness of Sinai.” To underscore the point it is repeated again in essence: “And when they came out from Rephidim and came into the wilderness of Sinai, they encamped in the wilderness and there Israel encamped before the mountain.” (Ex. 19:1-2). This is the penultimate purpose of their journey. Rabbi Cassuto states, “Now begins the most sublime section of the whole Book. The theme of this section is supremely significant, playing a role of decisive importance in the history of Israel and of humanity as a whole.”¹ Israel will be encamped here for almost a year, and the description of all that takes place here will fill the remainder of the Book of Exodus, all of the Book of Leviticus and the first 10 chapters of the Book of Numbers. Thus almost a third of the entire Pentateuch is devoted to less than a year in the life of this people. Here they will receive not only the 10 words from Mount Sinai, but the rest of the laws, which the Jewish people number at 613. Here they will receive plans for the tabernacle and construct the same. Here an entire priesthood will be trained and consecrated. In other words they will receive here from God all that is necessary for their life and worship, for the service of God. Here a straggling band of former slaves is made into a nation, the people of God, that people from whom in time will spring the Messiah and Savior of the world, through whom in turn will be born the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.

I do not think it amiss to jump from this founding event of the nation of Israel to the founding of the Church. Note that it is stressed that the Israelites arrived here on the

¹ *A Commentary on Exodus*, p. 223.

third new moon after the Exodus. Rabbi Cassuto explains in detail how this means that this is now the seventh week.² Six weeks of hard journeying brought them to a seventh of rest before the mountain of God, from whence the revelation of the Law was given. Pentecost, the foundation event of the Church with the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the waiting disciples, took place seven weeks after our Lord's Passover. Is there not a parallel? Indeed, Pentecost is the Greek word for the Jewish Feast of Weeks which falls on the 50th day after Passover, and it was because of that feast that Jews from throughout the world were gathered in Jerusalem when the Spirit came. Gören Larson entitles his chapter on Exodus 19 and 20, "The Miracle of Pentecost."³ Bear that in mind.

On the third new moon after leaving Egypt they arrived at the wilderness of Sinai, and camped there before the mountain. A.P. Stanley, Dean of Westminster Abbey in the 19th century, traveled to Egypt and the Sinai Peninsular, and described the wilderness like this:

A wild and desolate region which occupies the very center of the peninsula . . . a wilderness of shaggy rock of porphyry and red granite, and of valleys for the most part bare of verdure . . . secluded from the world, in the wild and sublime amphitheatre of rocks. . . . Whatever may have been the scene of the events in Exodus, I cannot imagine that any human being can pass that plain and not feel that he was entering a place above all others suited for the most august of the sights of the earth . . . traveling in the very focus of creative power. I have looked upon scenery as strange, and on scenery more grand, but on scenery at once so strange and grand I have never looked, and probably never shall again.⁴

Out of this rocky flat plain there arise abruptly three huge red granite mountains, the highest rising to 7,500 feet, one of which, we are not certain which, was Mount Sinai. It was the very mountain on which God had first appeared to Moses in the burning bush, and told him, you will remember, as he demurred from God's call to deliver his people, "But I will be with you; and this shall be a sign for you that I have sent you: when you

² "The mention of the third new moon is not unintentional. Since the exodus from Egypt, the last two weeks of Nissan and four weeks of Iyyar had passed, and we are now in the seventh week. Since seven was considered the number of perfection, seven days constituted, according to the customary conception of the ancient East, a given unit of time, while seven weeks formed a still higher unit; and just as after six days of labour brought rest and the enjoyment of the results of that labour, so after six weeks of the travails of journeying the seventh week brought a sense of exaltation and of drawing nearer to the world of the Divine." *Ibid.*, p. 224.

³ *Bound for Freedom: The Book of Exodus in Jewish and Christian Tradition*, pp. 126ff.

⁴ Quoted in Solomon Goldman, *The Ten Commandments*, ed. by Maurice Samuel (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1956), p. 103.

have brought forth the people out of Egypt, you shall *serve* God upon this mountain” (Ex. 3:12). So this had been Moses’ goal from his very first request to Pharaoh to lead the people into the wilderness for a few days to *serve* God. The word ‘serve’ carries a double meaning. It can refer to menial service as when the Israelites served Pharaoh as his bond servants; or it can mean worship, the service of spirit, as we recognize when we speak of a ‘worship service.’ The Germans call worship ‘*Gottesdienst*,’ ‘the service of God.’ The purpose of their liberation from slavery to an oppressive master was that they should serve God, not only worshipping him on the Mount, but by serving him with the whole of their lives, which, of course, is what the Ten Commandments are all about. The allegorical message here, of course, is that all men either serve sin, a foreign master uncongenial to the best interests, or serve God; the one is an oppressive bondage, the other a joyous freedom.

Immediately upon arriving at the mountain, Moses goes up to meet God, and God, Yahweh, calls to him out of the mountain, “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings” (19:3-4). We have seen how God delivered his people from their suffering *in spite of the fact* that they continually refused to believe anything that Moses told them, and how, as they journeyed, *despite* their constant murmuring, rebellion and unbelief, God dealt graciously with them, providing for their every need and defending them from every foe. Now in the first words from the mountain, God tells Moses to remind them of his gracious and mighty acts which they have seen, of what he did to the Egyptians for their sake, and—was there ever a more beautiful metaphor—“how I bore you on eagles’ wings.” Some have remarked that while other birds bear their young in their talons, protecting them from other birds that fly higher than they, eagles, which soar higher than all, bear their young on their wings to protect them from any arrow shot from below. I think the real meaning is yet more profound. Moses wrote later, describing the same event: “Like an eagle that stirs up its nest, that flutters over its young, spreading out its wings, catching them, bearing them on its pinions, the Lord alone did lead them” (Deut. 32:11-12). Martin Buber wrote,

Here YHWH is likened in His historical relationship with Israel to the eagle, who stirs up his nest and hovers hither and thither above it in order to teach his young how to fly. . . . The great eagle spreads out his wings

over the nestlings; he takes up one of them, a shy or weary one, and bears it upon his pinions; until it can at length dare the flight itself and follows the father in his mounting gyrations. Here we have election, deliverance and education; all in one.⁵

I think it is the deliverance that is most clearly in focus, however, since the metaphor follows the statement, “You have seen what I did to the Egyptians.” It is a picture of an eaglet unable to fly and falling at great speed until the father swoops down under it catching it on his back and then bearing it upward toward home on his wings. It is therefore a powerful picture of grace, of God’s rescuing a perishing people, by his love and might alone. Gören Larsson says, “Before God makes a covenant with Israel and before they hear what they must do, they must first recall what God has already done. God has saved them!”⁶ Those are God’s first words from the mountain, “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself.” That is the preface, the preamble, so to speak, concluding with that wonderfully succinct statement that says it all: “and brought you to myself.”

After this preface which reminds the people what God *has done* for them, there is the promise of what God *will do*: “Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel” (19:5-6). There are three parts to this promise. The first is that they will be God’s own possession among all peoples. The King James Version translated this “You will be a peculiar treasure unto me,” which is fine because it suggests the notion in ancient civilizations like Egypt that while everything and everyone in the country literally belonged to the king, he keep in a small safe his most precious jewels that were peculiarly his, which he would take out from time to time and delight in—a wonderful thought: “You will be a peculiar treasure unto me.” But then the King James mistranslates what follows as “*above* all people,” whereas it should read “*among* all people.” There is a decisive difference between among all people and above all people, and the error is fundamental, as should be seen in the words that

⁵ *Moses: The Revelation and the Covenant*, p. 102.

⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 128.

follow: “For all the earth is mine.” Larsson says, “It is precisely because God cares so much for ‘all the earth’ that he elects Israel as a special people. This people consequently are called to serve—not to dominate—other nations. Israel is elected for the sake of the world.”⁷ When God first called Abraham and separated him from his father’s house, he said, “I will make of thee a great nation . . . and in thee shall all the nations of the earth be blessed” (Gen. 12:2-3). God saved Israel and gave them the law and the covenant that his truth should be spread throughout the world. He said to them through Isaiah, “I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (49:6). Their mission was always universal for God’s love is universal, but it was not until the coming of Christ that the universality truly came about, announced by the angels to the shepherds, symbolized with the Journey of the Magi from the East, commanded by our Lord in the Great Commission, and actualized with the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, dispersing the apostles from Jerusalem to Judea and to uttermost parts of the earth and including the Gentiles in the covenant. We already know that what God promised to Israel in the words we just read is fulfilled in the Church; the words from Exodus are repeated verbatim in both I Peter (2:9) and Titus (2:14). But we are getting ahead of our selves.

God says that Israel will be his own special possession, his peculiar treasure, and that they shall be to him a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. By the former, a kingdom of priests, he emphasizes the role to which we have already alluded. “A priest is not concerned with his own salvation;” wrote George Knight, “his concern is for the salvation of his flock. He is the intermediary between God and man, and custodian of the Revelation. In this way Israel is to be God’s corporate priest to all mankind.”⁸

A kingdom of priests and “a holy nation.” The word ‘holy’ comes from the root ‘to cut,’ and thus the fundamental reference is to Israel’s being separated, set apart, unto God, even as Abraham was set apart from his people unto God. And here again the emphasis is on Israel’s distinction from other people for the sake of her unique mission. But in order to fulfill this mission this holiness must manifest itself in whole-hearted, or rather whole-lived, obedience to God. God’s threefold promise to make Israel his

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

⁸ George A. F. Knight, *Theology as Narration: A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, pp. 129-130.

peculiar people, a priestly kingdom and a holy nation, is conditioned upon their obedience. All this was preceded by “Now therefore if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession.” A covenant, like a marriage which is also a covenant, requires two parties making promises to each other. God’s promise precedes citing the grace with which he brought them out of Egypt and unto him self on eagles’ wings and promising them a three-fold grace. God’s grace precedes—it always does—but it also requires a response. When Moses returned from the mountain he gave God’s message to the people, “And all the people answered together and said, ‘All that the Lord has spoken we will do’” (19:8). The way is now beginning to be prepared for the great revelation, for that which has been the end in view since the Book of Exodus opened. Moses reported the people’s response to God and God, Yahweh, said to him, “Lo, I am coming to you in a thick cloud; that the people may hear when I speak with you, and may also believe you for ever” (19:9). With that kind of obedience, with that kind of readiness, and with that kind of expectation, may we ever wait upon God.

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