

10) EXODUS 33-34 - THE COVENANT RESTORED

Where is the gospel in Exodus?

- In the gracious, unmerited freedom of a people from slavery; in the rising up of faith, hope and the courage of love against incredible odds.
- In the gracious, unmerited forgiveness of sins of idolatrous worship and reckless living; in second, third and fourth chances to begin again, and in room to grow from mistakes and failures rather than being decimated by them. People who forgive us are God's gospel love extended to us.

Is God reaching out to us through indigenous people, for example, calling us to make things right and extending a hand to us in the process?

CHAPTER 33

- Chapter 32 ends in judgement. Although God has changed God's mind about destroying Israel, the sin of the golden calf cannot be ignored v.34. God sends a plague on the people v.35 (the consequences must often be faced and are often faced by circumstances precipitated by our bad choices). If we think of Israel not as a community of individuals (some destroyed and some saved) but rather as one collective (where some inner spiritual purging and pruning must happen for the plant to heal and grow), then God's "judgement" is like tough love necessary for the collective personhood of the people to grow on the journey of forgiveness to a new life of greater trust and healthy relationships with their God above, beside and within them.

- The somber mood of judgement continues in chapter 33. Although God will send an angel to lead the people, God will keep a distance, for if God comes close God may destroy them for they are a "stiff-necked people". When we are deeply invested because we care and we love and we have been hurt, we need to know when to take the time apart and create the space within so that love will heal us within and show us how to engage the person who has hurt us without the hate and bitterness filling up our hearts. This takes time when the hurt goes deep. God needs the space and the time.

- vs. 7-11 - God and Moses commune together. They are close and intimate. Only Moses is pure and unblemished enough to be this close to God at this time. Moses is a part of the best of us, that remains connected to God, that remains pure of heart, even as we have compromised ourselves in our thoughts and actions.

- vs. 12-16 - Moses asks for a) clarity about God's will and favour "so that I may know your ways" and b) the commitment of God to God's people. Moses is praying for discernment for how to proceed in his leadership, for vision and for love not to give up in the face of hurt and disappointment with the people. If God confirms God's commitment to the people, Moses can internally confirm his commitment too. The dialogue between God and Moses is like an inner conflict within Moses seeking clarity of direction, healing and reconciliation.

- vs. 17-23 - God promises God's presence and guidance with two actions. A) God reaffirms God's relationships with Moses and the people by uttering again God's name (an act of self-revelation by God). When new love rises up in us and we feel ourselves expand and grow anew, it is akin to God's revealing God's self to us as a love we are encountering altogether new rising up within us. Our renewed capacity for love is a sign of healing. B) God will appear to Moses in physical form. This action is intended to inspire assurance and confidence in Moses and the respect and submission of the people to Moses as spokesperson for God. What visible symbols reveal God to us at critical times of life when we need assurance? Is it another person's smile and care for us, a bird's call, a beautiful flower, a sunset, a rainbow?

CHAPTER 34

- Chapter 34 describes the renewal of the covenant made at Horeb/Sinai which itself was a renewal of the covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15.

- This time, Moses must produce the tablets originally produced by God. Moses is the means to the restoration of the covenant as he was the means for God's punishment on the people. Moses (representing the best in us) is love restoring and healing within us, even as he is also the courage in us to seek God and the good again in the face of consequences we must pass through when we have made mistakes that have led to harm.

- Although the renewal of the covenant is similar to the first one in terms of content and conditions (10 commandments, Moses on Sinai 40 days and 40 nights), the people in this case are totally passive. Moses alone accepts the renewed covenant on behalf of the people. This only emphasizes the growing role of Moses as mediator for the people as well as the people's dependence on the grace of God for the blessings of the covenant and its promises. Sometimes we can only sit and wait openly and receptively while the healing happens within, a healing journey we cannot control or put on a timeline.

- vs. 6-7 contain a song of God in which God affirms God's self as one whose love surpasses all bounds in terms of constancy, faithfulness, and abundance. At the same time, however, God holds people accountable for the wrongs they commit.

- vs. 8-9 contain Moses plea, once again, for God's forgiveness of the people. God responds by giving fresh promises of his blessing and victory for the people entering their promised land.

- The law that is given to Moses is similar to the 10 commandments in structure, but its content shifts somewhat. It is more directly a response to the golden calf sin. It focuses on Israel's relationship with the surrounding nations and the need to remain separate and dedicated to the Lord their God. Thus, there are statements about idolatry, about ritual festivals and about the Sabbath, all intended to carve out and maintain a distinct identity of Israel around a singular devotion to their God. This also means that Israel is

enjoined to have attitudes hostile against its neighbours. To spiritualize this understanding, how can we understand those things that we must keep away from (things that may become destructively addictive and corrosive of our care for others and for ourselves)? “Hostile” doesn’t have to mean hate. Hostile must mean keeping away from something or someone destructive or corrosive to us (e.g. alcohol or a toxic relationship). The temptation to idolatry through Israel’s neighbours and the danger of assimilation and a loss of identity are critical for Israel. The people have been enslaved and they are only now rebuilding their identity with all their traditions, laws, rituals, ceremonies and festivals. They are vulnerable to being swallowed up by the surrounding peoples who have never been enslaved and are well rooted in their identities.

- v.17 focuses on forbidding idols. v.18 offers the first of several passages referring to the 3 great annual festivals in ancient Israel: Passover/unleavened bread in the spring, festival of weeks (later Pentecost) again in the spring, and ingathering or booths (also called tabernacles) in the autumn. Unleavened bread is connected to the Passover and weeks/booths to the Sabbath. Also connected to the Passover is the dedication of the first born vs. 19-20. Vs. 22-26 indicates that the keeping of festivals is linked to God’s victorious actions in expelling other nations from the land of promise (other nations that have refused to make space for the refugee Israel seeking a place to call home and build lives of safety).

- The first covenant is broken because of the people’s sins, but it is restored by the mercy of God. Moses, like Jesus, receives instructions and confirmation of his call 40 days and 40 nights.

- vs. 29-35 tells how Moses’ face glowed because he was close to God. Moses’ role as mediator is enlarged and combined with his glowing face, is clearly in view by the gospel writers when they write about Jesus on the mount of transfiguration (Matthew 17: 1-8). Jesus too is glowing and he is speaking with Moses (and Elijah, who also had an encounter with God on this mountain centuries after Moses). God speaks words of confirmation about Jesus. Moses wears a veil over his face so as to hide the glow since the people could commit idolatry if they fell down and worshiped him (like they did with the golden calf).

- Moses in Exodus, like Jesus in the gospels, is a man tempted by his insecurities and struggles to discern his vocation (Jesus is tempted in the desert like Moses and Israel 40 days and nights. The book of Hebrews also speaks of Jesus as one tempted in every way as we are, yet without falling into sin). Moses comes through in the end and emerges as a powerful leader. He is the best of Israel. He is close to God, a mediator between God and humanity.

Aaron like Peter is badly flawed yet forgiven and given a high status as a leader among the people. Does the experience of forgiveness make him a more effective healer, close to the people, sympathetic to their flaws and frailties, a “wounded healer”?

THE MESSAGE OF EXODUS

God has called and saved a people for the benefit of all humanity.

Even when God's purposes through this relationship are threatened, God's mercy overcomes God's judgement.

There is a progression through Exodus:

- The God revealed is one whose mercy must continually expand in order to realize divine purposes in relationship to a people.
- Moses is revealed as a man whose confidence and role as mediator continues to expand as the relationship between God and humankind is threatened.
- Israel is revealed as a people flawed and vulnerable, "stiff-necked" (stubbornly stuck in their trauma distrust of God, their leaders and each other). Without the steadfast and enduring faithfulness of love, mercy and grace of God (mediated through Moses and Miriam, among others) they cannot survive, heal and thrive.

As Christians and the church, we are called to be Moses between God and the world, but so often are no better than Israel caught up in our own troubles and traumas, stuck and unable to rise above. God's mercy and grace continue to be the foundation for the renewal of our covenant with God. God's steadfast love continues to be the energy and fuel that can keep liberating us from all the negative currents within and around us that can and often do enslave us. We need ongoing transformation through fresh revelations of God and the power to rise up anew with faith, hope and love as divine gifts. We also need the vision of a promised land where we may live in greater harmony with one another and mother earth, making space for imperfection, mistakes and hurts as part of how we must grow our steadfastness and creativity in loving one another.

Thank you for participating in this study!