

6) 16-19: THUNDER & LIGHTNING, FIRE & SMOKE: GOD APPEARS AT SINAI

1) Prelude to chapter 19.

A) After the Israelites cross the Red Sea, they wander in a wasteland east of the sea and they complain to Moses about the quality of the drinking water (15:22-27) and the lack of food (16:1-3). The water is sweetened and the food is providentially provided (“manna” (bread) in the morning and “quails” (meat) at night). The people’s real complaint, however, is with God (16:7-8) since Moses, Aaron and Miriam are just mediators of God’s guiding rule. The people are being tested by the hardships of life. Will they learn to trust God through it all? The bread and meat are given just for the day. They cannot be stored for tomorrow (“give us this day our daily bread”). The real issue again is trust. Will they trust God to give them sustenance and grace sufficient for the day? The importance of the Sabbath is indicated by God’s making special provision for it (16:22-30).

B) People move on to the wilderness of Sin (Zin), and they complain to Moses again about water (17:1-7) so much so that Moses appeals to God for help. Moses produces water from a rock, and again the issue is identified as the testing of the people and their incapacity to trust their God. How much is the trauma of enslavement and bitter abuse affecting their capacity to trust, even as ongoing hardship would make any of us weak in our capacity for faith and hope?

C) The Amalekites come onto the scene (17:8-16) and they will be a constant thorn in Israel’s side throughout their history (see 1 Samuel 30). Joshua also comes onto the scene and his victory here is a prelude to his leadership upon Moses’ death and the battles to take place between Israel and the peoples inhabiting the promised land. Unlike indigenous peoples who welcomed Europeans, the Amalekites are hostile to them. Will such hostility shape the Israelites’ approach in entering the land looking for space to settle?

D) Moses’ father-in-law - Jethro - comes to visit Moses (18:1-27). The people are now close to Mount Sinai (called Horeb in Chap.3). Jethro offers some valuable advice to Moses about sharing leadership so that the burden doesn’t fall too heavily on Moses’ shoulders. This is an important passage when reflecting on our own congregational structure as Presbyterian churches. In our case, shared leadership among minister and elders is not simply intended to ease the burden of the minister, but also to balance the leadership of the minister with the will and discernment of the people.

2. The Israelites reach mount Sinai - Chapter 19.

A) vs.1-2 provide the geographic orientation. We are now 3 months to the day after the miracle of the Red Sea. The people have traveled past the wilderness of Sin to the wilderness of Sinai and they are now camped at the foot of the mountain. All that happens from 19:2 through to chapter 40 and on through Leviticus and Numbers will

take place here, in the vicinity of the holy mountain.

B) The people make promises to obey God even before the commandments are given. The people's response is an anticipation of the commandments and preparation for the encounter.

C) There is a conversation between God, Moses and the people. God's purpose is to convey to them the significance of the impending events on newly liberated slaves. V.4 reminds them of God's providential care. On "eagles' wings" conveys both strength and tenderness. This image inspires Isaiah 40:31 and the beloved hymn.

D) The purpose of God's compassionate strength - v.4 – "I brought you to myself." Israel is saved for a purpose: to be the people of God with a healing mission for the world. Their experience of slavery must become part of an anti-imperial vision for how people should treat one another and co-exist together forming community.

3) The conditions of the covenant.

V.5 "If you obey my voice and if you keep my commandments." A covenant implies an agreement of two parties to live up to a mutually agreed upon set of principles (these are yet to be given). Covenants were common in the ancient world. Both parties of the agreement are active participants and the validity of the covenant depends on the faithfulness of both parties to the conditions. God's covenant with Israel now is a renewal of God's covenant with Israel's ancestors (Abraham, etc...). What happens when Israel doesn't live up to its side of the agreement? The rest of the Old Testament deals with this question and the New Testament (Jesus) is an answer to it.

4) God tells Moses the conditions of the Covenant

The Gospel in the Old Testament is this: God's choice of Israel has nothing to do with some inherent quality in Israel. It is purely an act of grace, a gift of love, from the heart.

"If you obey my voice and keep my covenant"....

A) "You shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples." Why Israel? They are small nation, difficult and stubborn people, not terribly virtuous or holy. Deuteronomy 7:6-8 tells us why Israel: because God loves them. It's sheer grace. Grace works with particular people in particular ways. It is not an abstract concept. This doesn't mean Israel exclusively or only and no one else. God is free to have other special relationships with other people too. God's love is inclusive but true love is also particular and unique to those loved. Each of us is loved with a purpose. Our lives are about figuring out such a purpose in prayerful communion with God. What is God calling us specifically, in who we are and what we've been through and learned and so forth, to be and do?

B) "The whole earth is mine." The God who so chooses this tiny, insignificant nation is

the creator and sovereign of the whole universe. All that exists and all that takes place is within God's sovereign rule of love.

C) "You shall be a priestly kingdom." "Priestly" implies mediation. Israel is to mediate God's loving purpose for the whole world. This is consistent with God's call to Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3: In you shall all the families of the earth be blessed). Through Israel God's love is to be revealed and shared. How will Israel reveal what God's love looks like in the way they will worship and live with each other and creation? Will they inculcate reciprocity as God has intended in creation?

D) "You shall be a holy nation." Holiness means to be "set apart" from the world, but not for the purpose of feeling superior, but for the purpose of serving the world with a special, sincere love that comes from their experience of God. Set apart is about being given a special responsibility to care for the world, a unique commission. All of us must find our unique commission as uniquely created creatures of God. How will God's love shine through us into the world because of the unique persons we are, imperfect yet beautiful, vulnerable and limited yet also full of untapped potential, creatively so?

E) In 1 Peter 2: 9-10 the themes of being set apart as a holy people to serve the world is applied to the New Israel - the Church (the church not supplanting Israel but being incorporated into Israel, not ethnically but spiritually).

5) Thunder on the Mountain

V.9-15 - God reaffirms Moses leadership so that the people will trust and follow him. The people are prepared for the awesome coming of God (part of this preparation includes fearful reverence). Moses consecrates the people and they acknowledge their participation in a momentous event by washing their clothes (symbol of a new beginning).

V.16-25 - on the 3rd day God appears to them in a thunderstorm and then a volcanic eruption. The stage is now set for God's most dramatic self-revelation - the giving of the law in chap.20.

6) Continuity with the New Testament

Hebrews 12: 18-24 refers to the events of this passage. There is continuity between the old covenant and the new, and Israel of old with the new Israel, yet there is also a significant difference. Christ is the basis of a new covenant which is superior and more complete a revelation, and it provides a sounder assurance for the life to come. Superior doesn't mean better. Superior means a new covenant that must include a space for failure and imperfection. We commit to vows and promises we often fail to keep. But God's love must expand its steadfastness to meet us in our failure, to forgive us and empower us toward resurrection. This is why the cross and the new covenant with Jesus at the centre is "superior" to the old. Such forgiveness anticipating healing and resurrection is already anticipated in the Exodus story. Stay tuned.