

Enough To Make The Mountains Shake

Exodus 19:3-7; 16-25

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I've spent the past couple of weeks setting up this elaborate metaphor where the church is symbolized by a mountain. Quick refresher: the first week, I talked about the mountain as a place of refuge; last week, I talked about the mountain as a place of challenge. Filling out the metaphor, I argued the church should also be a place of both refuge and challenge, and I felt pretty good about this argument, both as it relates to our world and to our scripture.

Then, this week, I turned to debatably the most famous mountain in the scripture, Mount Sinai. Moses probably has more significant mountaintop experiences than anyone else in the Bible (he's definitely going to show up a few more times before this sermon series ends), and many of those experiences happen on Mount Sinai. In fact, the scripture reading this morning is the beginning of a series of important episodes, with Mount Sinai figuratively and literally standing tall in the middle of things.

So I turned to Exodus and found this chapter about Mount Sinai, and I was sure it was going to serve as a great metaphor for the church because all of the others had worked so well. But instead, it's a passage where the mountain is off limits. It's not even debatable: God clearly tells Moses to keep the Israelites away under penalty of death, and Moses reports back, "The people are not permitted to come up to Mount Sinai; for you yourself warned us, saying, 'Set limits around the mountain and keep it holy.'"¹ So after weeks of preaching "come to the mountain," I now have a text that seems to be saying "stay away from the mountain." Honestly, I'd prefer that you not apply my carefully constructed metaphor in that direction.

It would be an over-application of this scripture. The question here is not "should we come to the mountain?" but rather "*how* should we come to the mountain?"

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When I was a teenager, one of the greatest nights of youth group was when we were allowed to play hide & seek in the sanctuary. This was true despite the fact that our sanctuary wasn't exactly the greatest place to play hide & seek. It was about like this sanctuary, basically one open room with pews in it. If you're playing hide & seek in a room like this, then you inevitably end up hiding under a pew, which means you're easily found by anyone willing to drop to their knees.

This didn't matter to us. We would beg to play hide & seek over and over again, and our youth minister wisely only acquiesced about once a year, and if you missed that night you were sunk for twelve months or so, so we didn't miss very much, just in case it was the night where we struck gold.

I can only guess that we liked playing so much because it was just a little taboo. Even when there were emphases on not running or climbing, we were *playing a game in the sanctuary*. We felt like we were getting away with something.

¹ Exodus 19:12, 23

When I became a youth minister, I discovered that hide & seek in the sanctuary was also a great night for me and the chaperones because it required absolutely zero planning or preparation. This caused me to come up with a few other games that we played in the sanctuary, including a game called Human Foosball that I am actually a little wary to describe to you this early in our relationship. But trust me: the kids loved it, and the adult chaperones loved it, and most importantly it brought some teens into our church who otherwise would never have made it there.

The problem was that there are scriptures like today's, scriptures that place a great emphasis on approaching God with nothing other than fearful reverence, and games like hide & seek and Human Foosball tend to undercut our sense of reverence for the sanctuary...and, therefore, maybe, for God. So even though I'm glad we played games that brought new faces into our community, I wrestled with not wanting to be slapdash with the sacred parts of our faith, including our sacred space.

This is the dilemma of God, and church, and the mountain that is presented in today's scripture: we want to be reverent and respectful when approaching God, but we also want God to be available to all people at all times in all situations. We want God to be like a black-tie dinner and a 24-hour diner. Our God should be both mysterious and familiar, both approachable and beyond our comprehension, both awe-inspiring and "aww, shucks." God is extraordinarily capable, and I see plenty of evidence that God has managed to be all of those things. The church, as an earthly reflection of God, as the bride of Christ, should also be all of those things...and that's just much, much harder. This is why we wrestle with the question "how should we come to the mountain?"

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As always, it seems like a good idea to turn to the scriptures for help with the hard parts of our faith. The story this morning comes after the Israelites have escaped Egypt. They've spent a few chapters wandering in the wilderness, received manna from heaven and water from a stone, but they are not yet "God's people." They are an assortment of erstwhile slaves whose commonalities largely end with the trait of their new freedom.² With the exception of Moses, they have never really, truly, deeply encountered God.

They are about to. They are about to experience God in a way that will strike them with fear and awe and also in a way that will leave them yearning to know more. Experiencing both (both awe and curiosity) is exactly, I suspect, what God wanted.

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For a few years, shortly after college, my wife taught high school. She had a class one year that, on the first day, was already unraveling. We concocted a plan to have one of our younger-looking friends attend on Day 2 as a "new student." The friend would then act out mildly, and Jennifer would unload on the "new student" with a barrage of shouts and lectures before eventually kicking him out of the class forever. (If this sounds familiar, it's because we stole this idea from an episode of *Friends*.)

² Brueggemann, Walter. *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol 1, 830.

Sadly, we never actually followed through with this plan. I think you have to be tenured to get away with stuff like this. But we loved the idea, and it didn't come from a *completely* ridiculous place. It came from the understanding that students are supposed to respect their teachers, and respect comes with just a little bit of fear, and in that first encounter it's really important to help students understand the need for that respect while also hopefully piquing their curiosity.

The Israelites, ever since they left Egypt, have pretty much just whined about not having enough food, about the sun being too hot, and generally about how it would have been better to have stayed in Egypt as slaves (where of course they also didn't have enough food and the sun was too hot). They have yet to show Yahweh (or even Moses) gratitude for their liberation. It is a portentous beginning.

It is particularly problematic because God desires such a significant relationship with the people of Israel. God says to the Israelites "if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples."³ God is offering the Israelites the very best seat at the table and they're complaining that the chair is a little scratchy.

They have forgotten, already, that in Egypt this God made the river turn to blood and the sky turn dark, that this God has command over the locusts and frogs of the earth, that this God parted the sea and made—still makes!—bread appear every morning. And so God takes one more step: God stringently warns them that they are playing with their lives if they don't take the upcoming commands seriously, and then God shakes the sky with thunder and lightning, with smoke and fire, with a mountain that trembles violently, and with a deafening trumpet. Finally, God has their attention.

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It's tempting to chastise and denigrate the Israelites. Much like Jesus' disciples in the New Testament, they seem to struggle to grasp things that are painfully obvious to us now. Somehow, in the wider story of Exodus, they seem to make the mistake of not being reverent enough toward God and not embracing God familiarly. It's not surprising that God comes down hard on this failure, starting by making sure they get the reverent part.

But the truth is that we are still constantly struggling to walk this line. This is the conundrum we face in church: do Christians want a church that is imminently accessible, or do Christians want a church that emphasizes God's eminence? This is why we argue about the style of our sanctuaries, the tone of our music, and the structure of worship. Even now, we can't figure out how to represent all that God is.

When this happens, it's worth pondering if we're asking the right questions in the first place.

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To answer "how should we approach the mountain," it's important to note why God wanted the Israelites' attention in the first place. Despite the fact that we ought to respect God, this is not a demonstration of power solely for the purpose of instilling fear in Israel's collective heart. Yahweh is not using the Israelites, intimidating them to get only what is good for God like some kind of dictator or warlord. There is hope for a more genuine relationship here. God is seeking to form a covenant with Israel.

³ Exodus 19:5

If I had to choose one word to sum up the Old Testament, I think it would be covenant. It's the word we use to describe the bond between God and humanity, the relationship that God is continually seeking and that we as humans are constantly overlooking. It's probably a word worth its own sermon series at some point down the line.

When we try to explain what "covenant" is, the most common explanation is "it's kind of like a contract." That's...not a very good description. The truth is that it's closer to a union, a bond. It is a connection that requires both parties to take a risk, to offer more than they stand to gain, to join together out of a sense of love and commitment and reverence and responsibility. God is actually stepping into a fairly vulnerable position here, despite the display of power. And the Israelites ought to be humbled beyond belief that God is interested in this kind of relationship with them. This is not power without tenderness; it is power that comes from the remarkability of that tenderness.

Essentially, the fact that God descends to earth and desires covenant with the Israelites, with humanity, with us, is enough to make the mountains shake.

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When we went through our premarital counseling, the counselor said something during the very first session that still resonates with me. She said "you can have a marriage without love, but it's not much fun. You can have a marriage without trust, but it's really, really hard. You can't have a marriage without commitment."

Marriage, of course, is our most common modern example of covenant. It is a bond between two individuals where they both willingly make themselves vulnerable. It is one of the clearest illustrations we have (albeit a somewhat limited one) of this incredibly important biblical concept.

God loves the Israelites, and the Israelites love God, at least when God continues to provide for them. There is a sense of familiarity, of family love in this relationship. That's not the problem here. The Israelites are learning to trust God, a trust that includes a sense of awe and reverence, a belief that God can do things they cannot do and it's worth relying on God for those things. That's also not the problem here. The problem is that the Israelites haven't yet committed, not fully, not the way you do in a marriage or any other covenant, not in the way that God wants them to.

One of the commentaries I read calls chapters 19-24 in Exodus "The Charter of a Holy Nation."⁴ This story of God establishing covenant with Israel takes six chapters, and the story starts by accentuating the need for the Israelites to understand that they are invited into a bond, a partnership with God the Creator...and that God is asking them to commit to that partnership. The beginning of covenant is commitment.

I read this scripture dozens of times this week, and I read about it even more. It took me four days to realize that it's not really a story about power and awe or a story about familiarity and accessibility. It is, again, a story about covenant, and specifically it's a story about the start of a covenant, about commitment. The rest of the story about the start of their covenant will come next week, but it's important not to rush past this part.

⁴ Brueggemann, 830.

If we the Church want to reflect the love and character of God, if we want to live into our role as the bride of Christ, then our focus shouldn't be on the smaller questions that typically consume us. The focus does not belong on our buildings, or our worship style, or our policies. Those things are important, but in the end, they are at best secondary to the covenant we keep with God and the covenants we keep with each other. They are secondary to the commitment we make to those covenants, and to the vulnerability that we choose in order to make that commitment.

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I've been describing you, members of this congregation, to everyone who has asked me how things are going in my new setting. There are a few words that pop up over and over again, and one of those words is "committed." The members of this church are extraordinarily committed, and you don't really need a sermon on why it's important.

But sometimes the things that we are the most are also the things that we reflect on the least, and our commitment to God, to Church, to each other requires our reflection.

Another term I've used in describing this church is "open-minded." Maybe that's something you've intentionally chosen, or maybe it's something that you backed into, or maybe I'm misreading you horribly. But I hope that I'm not, because I think that choosing to be "open-minded" is very similar to choosing to be "open-hearted," choosing to be vulnerable.

If we want a covenant with God, it doesn't start with a sense of fearful awe or a desire to be accessible. It starts with being open—open-minded, open-hearted. It starts with committing to that openness. It starts here because that is how God treated us—vulnerably, openly, committedly. And if we, the body of Christ on Earth, can mirror God—desiring covenant, vulnerably, openly, committedly—with every person that we meet, then we, too, may one day be enough to make the mountains shake.