

A COVENANT PEOPLE

Exodus 19:2-8a

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(online worship only)

Many of us have been binge-watching television shows more than ever these last three months. You watch one 43-minute episode, run to the bathroom, run to the kitchen, come back to the couch, hit play again, and then watch a synopsis of what you've just watched...the narrator says, "Previously"...and then you're given a reminder of the highlights of the last few episodes. Even if I've **JUST** watched the previous episode, I have a tendency to doze sometimes at night on the couch, so I always appreciate those recaps.

The story Beau read for us might make more sense if you remember the larger narrative. So, "previously, in the book of Exodus", here's a recap. God has rescued the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. To convince the Pharaoh to let the Hebrew people go, God sent plagues. God helped Moses lead his people across the Red Sea. When the people began wandering in the desert and complained of hunger, God provided manna and quail for them to eat. They arrived at a place called Rephidim, where God provided water, and now they have arrived at the foot of Mount Sinai.

This passage is our lectionary reading for this day from the Hebrew Scriptures. For some reason, the lectionary has us begin reading at verse 2 of chapter 19. But here's what verse 1 says. Verse 1 lets us know how long the people of Israel have been wandering. Verse 1 reads, "On exactly the third-month anniversary of the Israelites' leaving the land of Egypt, they came into the Sinai desert." They had been wandering in the wilderness for exactly three months. We can imagine what three months of wilderness is like. We have been living under the disruption caused by pandemic for exactly three months. Our first online service was March 15.

We can identify with people who have been wandering, not quite sure where they're going to end up. We can identify with people who question their leaders, people who quarrel among themselves, people who wish they could return to the way life used to be.

God speaks to Moses on Mount Sinai. God says to Moses, "Give this message to the people I have called you to lead. Say to them, 'I am making a covenant with them. I will be their God, and they will be my people.'" The people of Israel are chosen to have a special relationship with God, a relationship of special, sacred responsibility. It's almost as if the nation of Israel will be a test case...God is saying, "Let's see if they can

figure out how to live harmoniously, and if they do, we can then use them as an example for everyone else.”

Note who it is God chooses as covenant partners. Not people who are wealthy landowners - these people are homeless! Not people who have power, but people who have experienced oppression.

God chooses this downtrodden group of people to become, in the words of our passage for today, “my most precious possession.”

Think what this tells us about God! And doesn't it remind you of the people Jesus will choose to become his followers?

If you were to watch next week's episode, we'll call it Exodus chapter 20, you would see that God begins to spell out the details of what Israel must do to hold up its end of the covenant - beginning with the ten commandments.

What does it mean to be in covenant with God? First of all, it means obeying the first commandment - “You shall have no other gods before me.” Everything starts there, with putting God at the center of our lives.

Eugene Peterson explains covenant this way: “Covenant is the word used to mark the organic, living connectedness of God and us that makes us a community of God, **NOT** disconnected individuals on our own.”

And Walter Brueggemann says that to be in covenant is to be bonded in tenacious loyalty to each other. We are in a bond of tenacious loyalty with God. We are in a bond of tenacious loyalty with each other. And we are in a bond of tenacious loyalty with every other creature, indeed all of creation.

Let me blend those two definitions together this way. We are not disconnected individuals on our own. We are organically connected to one another and to God in a bond of tenacious loyalty. **PAUSE**

I find it fascinating to think that the people of Israel were wandering for three months and then they are given this new identity as people of the covenant. Their focus shifts from the past to the future. They stop wishing they were back in Egypt. They're going to make a lot of mistakes, but they have those commandments now which ground them and tell them who they are. **The covenant gives them their identity.**

What is our identity? Who are we, after three months of wandering through the wilderness of coronavirus? Like the Israelites, our attention has shifted. We are now being called to respond to the events that have grabbed the headlines for the last three weeks. Sometimes it seems that the response is easy. Sometimes it seems the response should be easy.

But I have been involved in some intense conversations over the past few weeks. The question of how to understand and respond to the issue of racism is complex. It is **not** easy.

There is no question that racism is a sin, that it grieves the heart of God. All sin is separation - sin is anything which separates us from God. Racism is a sin that separates us from God, from our brothers and sisters, and from the world God asks us to help restore and heal. Racism keeps us from the abundant life for which we were created, for **there is no abundance for some until there is abundance for all.**

At least one family in our congregation is experiencing a serious rift because of disagreements over how to respond to the problem of racism. Hearing their story reminded me of the families torn apart during the Vietnam war when in home after home, all across America, sons were ripping their draft cards in two in front of their fathers who were veterans. It wasn't just youthful rebellion on the part of the sons, it wasn't just stubborn refusal to try to understand on the part of the fathers. It was the pain that comes when two world views clash. We're experiencing that again right now.

The division today is exacerbated. In the 1960's we all received our news from the same source. Now our world views are being shaped by our

media choices. If we were only debating the issues, we might be able to learn from each other. Now we are forced to debate which news stories are true, and we only become more frustrated, depressed and cynical. But don't blame the media. **We** are the consumers of media. It's up to us to find reliable sources, question everything, and be very aware of biases that exist.

The story of Exodus tells us that the people of Israel wandered for nearly 40 more years. Not only do we not want to do that, but we can't. We don't have the luxury of time. The crises we are facing demand a sense of urgency.

I believe that, for most of us, the first step is education. I am heartened to see that books on understanding racism are flying off the shelves. I will be offering a book study this fall once I decide which book will lead to the best group discussion. I welcome your suggestions as to what other responses you feel our church is called towards. Extra credit if you propose an idea and then are willing to take the lead on making it happen!

In addition to reading and learning, I find myself drawn to listen to what the Spirit is saying through these questions — what does it mean to be in covenant with one another in this church, knowing that we are a big

tent church that includes people across a wide political spectrum? How do we live in a spirit of authentic covenant with people of color while we physically live in communities that are extremely segregated?

I do know this. We are called to be in covenant, which means that we are called to affirm our loyalty to God, first. We do not worship the truth as it comes to us from MSNBC or from Fox news or from any political party or movement. Our primary and ultimate faithfulness is to God, and we know God's values - the God who created each one of us is a God of justice, who defends the rights of those who are most vulnerable.

At the end of our passage for today, the people of Israel, full of enthusiasm and optimism, say, "Yes! We're excited to be covenant partners with you, God. We'll do everything you ask of us."

Of course they don't. They break commandment after commandment, but God never gives up on them. God sends the prophets with messages, begging them to turn their lives around. Over and over again, God says, "Return to the commandments - I've given them to you as a way to live in harmony with one another. Follow them and you'll be so much happier!" Hundreds of years go by, always this dance - the people turning their back on God, and God holding out hope that they will return. In the book of Hosea, one of the prophets, God says, "I still love my people.

I will take Israel to the wilderness and begin again. I will speak to Israel's heart and start over. I will do whatever it takes to create a people of righteousness, justice, loyalty, mercy, and faithfulness, people who know me..."

With these words of love, God tells us that **as long as there is covenant, there is a new beginning possible on earth.**

There has always been this dance, this rhythm. People disobey the commandments. Sometimes willfully, sometimes because we really aren't sure what our next right step should be. But God always holds us in grace and love, longing for us to return home.

Let's figure out our next right steps together, as people who are in covenant with God, with one another, and with every other person with whom we share this beautiful and fragile planet.

Let us pray. Holy God, thank you for calling us into relationship with you. Give us wisdom as we discern how to understand and respond to the pain so present in our world today. May we courageously follow where you lead us. In Jesus' name. Amen.