

“The Covenant”

After the disastrous episode of the golden calf, Moses and the Israelites teeter on the edge of promise. Due to Moses’ brilliant pleading on their behalf, God decided to forgive the Israelites and not destroy them. But Yahweh is still not happy with them. Because of their disobedience, God has decided not to continue among them when they make their journey towards Canaan. He will only send an angel to be with them.

In our text today from Exodus 33:12-23, we have what can be called the “next steps” in the relationship between Yahweh and the Israelites. Moses knows that only upon the condition of Yahweh’s continued presence is Israel’s existence viable. He realizes Israel will not survive as a people without the presence of Yahweh.

But Moses knows he must get an agreement from God. He was able to save the Israelites from the fury of God’s wrath, but he needs a long-term covenant between Yahweh and the people. The details of this covenant are the core of the sermon text today.

Most legal disputes are settled without going to trial. In fact, about 95 percent of them are settled at some stage of the litigation. Most courts now require litigants to go through mediation to save costs and save expenses. Mediation has

been successful in getting cases settled. But some cases do not settle until a jury is picked and attorneys can evaluate the strength of their cases.

The attorneys, on behalf of their clients, have to write an agreement which incorporates the terms of the settlement. In an injury case, such as a car wreck, it may just involve the payment of money and release of liability of the party alleged to be at fault. Other settlements may involve future promises on behalf of one or more persons. For example, in a family court case, the parties agree to how they will handle custody and visitation with their children. There are also obligations of child support, alimony and paying off certain marital debts.

So, what we have today is Moses crafting a covenant agreement with God. Moses has never been one to keep his mouth shut in his encounters with the great I AM. Even in the midst of his own uncertainty, Moses speaks his mind to God. Since their first encounter at the burning bush, Moses has opened up more and more to Yahweh. They have become more and more intimate, their relationship encouraging Moses to open his heart to God and God to reveal more of Godself to Moses.

There are two speeches by Moses. First, Moses wants to know about the future. “Whom will you send with me?” Moses needs to know the mode of God’s presence with Israel. He is not a fan of God’s earlier refusal to journey with the

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October 18, 2020

Israelites and he presses the Lord for a different outcome. He appeals to the special relationship they share, beginning from God's original command to "bring up this people." Moses is clear and insistent that Israel belongs to Yahweh and that Yahweh cannot escape responsibility. Besides, he adds, God knows him by name and is favorably disposed to him---that should make a difference, right?

More than once Moses expands the circle of concern beyond himself to include the wider community. "Consider, too, that this is your people." Moses stresses, as if reminding the Lord that the problems with the golden calf should have been no surprise. God knew who they were when God chose them. Despite their fear and grumbling and their inability to trust God through times of uncertainty, the people belong to God by God's own choice. God knows them and has called them, in spite of their flaws.

In Moses' second speech, he is worried that without evidence of Yahweh's continued presence, Israel will appear to be on its own. If this happens, Moses' leadership will be fragile and ineffective. He is concerned the people will fall back into idol worship and other sins if they do not have Yahweh's presence. He wants a tangible sign of God's presence.

Moses is also clear that it is only Yahweh's presence that will mark Israel as distinct. If Israel is truly going to be "your people," Moses tells God that he must accompany them in order to give Israel this uniqueness.

Yahweh eventually promises a more intense and immediate presence. He will go with the people on their journey. But Moses wants more as he negotiates the covenant with God. Yahweh agrees to certain things because Moses has "found favor." Yahweh agrees that he will make all his goodness pass before Moses and Israel. Goodness is Yahweh's friendly power for life. Goodness can be used as a synonym for *shalom* and refers to the material blessings of creation. They are a manifestation of God's good gifts, but not Yahweh's own self.

The second promise is "I will proclaim before you, my name, 'Yahweh.'" This promise embodies the full disclosure of Yahweh's sovereign character.

The third promise concerns the unfettered capacity of Yahweh to be generous. Most specifically it refers to Yahweh's resolve to be generous to Moses. To us today, it illustrates the abundant grace that God has shown to us.

The fourth promise is that God will show mercy. The capacity to act positively. We see God's promises throughout scripture. In Micah 6:8, we read that we are to show mercy, seek justice, and to walk humbly. The four affirmations seem to reassure Moses that Yahweh will give future attention to Israel in its

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hazardous journey. Life goes on for Israel because Yahweh is free, gracious and merciful.

Moses has gotten God to promise much. He takes advantage of their shared intimacy and pushes for still more. He says, “Show me your glory, I pray.” Moses seeks not only to *speak* face to face by also to *see* face to face. In short, Moses wants a sign.

Moses has asked to see God’s glory, God’s awesome, shrouded presence. It is not difficult to imagine Moses’ desire. How great it would be to carry a tangible sign through a wilderness of uncertainty as he and Yahweh grow into a deeper relationship. Perhaps we share that longing for a concrete experience or material object that could remind us of our belonging to God. How great it would be to have water that rushes from a rock or even an antidote to every physical or systemic sickness that infects our world and seeks to injure and kill.

God takes Moses’ position seriously but will not grant the request to have an unobstructed view of God’s glory. God will not let even Moses crowd into the core of God’s own life. God draws a protective cover around the inscrutable mystery of God. Why does God do this? The lesson is that there has to be some mystery to God for our faith to be strong. We cannot always have those concrete

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manifestations that we want to prove God is around. We have to believe in his presence no matter what.

What do we take from the story for us today? First, there is the ever-present mercy of God. Even after the incident with the golden calf, God still has a relationship with the Israelites. The amazing response of God to the events of the golden calf is at the heart of biblical faith. Yahweh reasserts the power of the old promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He reiterates the enduring promise of the land. Because God continues in fidelity, even after the calf, Israel must continue in obedience.

This enduring grace and mercy gives us assurance that God will always be with us as long as we keep our faith in him. Our continued sins and mistakes do not separate us from him because of the grace and forgiveness he has shown and will continue to show towards us.

Moses' performance is a model for daring, insistent prayer. The prayer is deeply theological, concerned with the presence of God. Moses' mind stays fixed on the presence of God as the crucial issue for his people. Moses acknowledges not only the sovereignty of God but also his considerable freedom in prayer.

What Moses does is a model for the power of intercessory prayer. This model of Jewish prayer offers much to learn for Christians, whose piety is

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characteristically too “deferential.” In other words, we usually are not willing to ask for what we really need in fear of upsetting God. But the text today shows we need to go as far as we need to go to serve our needs and the needs of others. We are not to use God as an ATM but we need to be bold in what we ask from him.

Finally, in seeking the fullness of God, God gives Moses a safe place to shelter, a solid rock on which to stand, and the assurance of protection of God’s own merciful and compassionate hand. Secure on this footing, Moses will glimpse the trailing evidence of God’s glory just as it passes just ahead of him. As one commentator puts it, it is like God plays peek-a-boo with Moses. Moses is permitted to look, to see the rear end of God, but not the face. It may not be a full look at God’s glory but for today, at least, this is enough. God’s promise to reveal God from behind is proof that God does not back out on the promise.

We may not be able to view God in his full glory either. But we are assured of his presence by two things. First, Jesus Christ came to earth as the incarnation of God and people were able to look upon him. Second, through the gift of the Holy Spirit we constantly have the presence of God in our lives. The presence of the Spirit gives us the confidence we need as Christians. The power of the Holy Spirit in us makes us a distinct people to take the message of Jesus Christ into the world.