

Holy or Holey?  
Exodus 19:3-  
by Pastor Laura Walters

The scripture reading this morning comes from the book Exodus, chapter 19, and I'll start with verse 3.

“Then Moses went up to God. The Lord called to him from the mountain saying 'Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob and tell the Israelites you have seen what I did to the Egyptians and how I bore you on eagles wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the people. Indeed the whole earth is mine but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words you shall speak to the Israelites.' So Moses came and he summoned the elders of the people and set before them all these words that the Lord had commanded him and the people all answered as one, everything that the Lord had spoken we will do.”

This is the word of God for the people of God.

The story here is three months since the Israelites have left Egypt. They are now at the foot of Mt. Sinai. Mt. Sinai is the place where Moses first encountered the Lord. He was out with the sheep and all of a sudden he noticed the burning bush and it was there that Moses and the Lord had a conversation and the Lord said "Moses I want you to deliver my people from Egypt." He wasn't too sure about that, they had a bit of a conversation, but let me share part of that with you. Back in Exodus 3, Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt." God said, "I will be with you and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you, when you have brought the people out of Egypt you shall worship me on this mountain." I don't know if I would enjoy that kind of a sign, once you finish up then you'll know. I want to know before I start the task, at any rate, that was the sign and throughout their conversation and Moses decided to go ahead, maybe his arm was twisted a little bit, but that sign has come to pass. They are there are the foot of Mt. Sinai and the sign has come, they're here.

Leaving Egypt they saw the many plagues that God did to the Egyptians. The Israelites saw God's power. As they were leaving, God guided them in the fire, he guided them in a cloud, they crossed the Red Sea. I'm not sure how that looked like, there are various commentaries that talk about what the Red Sea is, but I like the commentary that comes to life in the movie Prince of Egypt. It's animated, and as they get to the Red Sea and Moses puts his staff in, that water just goes up really high, and you can see the whales swimming by, and they cross the Red Sea on dry ground. They get to the other side and the Egyptians are after them and the Egyptians don't make it across. The water

comes back down, some of them drown, some of them don't get started. That's power!! This is God. He is rescuing the Israelites.

It wasn't too long after they had been rescued that they were complaining, "Oh why didn't we just die in Egypt. We're out here and there is no good food and there is no water." It was a few days. If you look at the scripture, there's the song, they're singing their praise for having been delivered and then they turn around and complain. You'd think it would last a little longer, unless you have children (wait, I didn't say that). Anyhow, they're complaining, but the Lord provides for them again. There is fresh water, manna, quail--you don't even have to cook it, it's just there when you wake up. I would like that. So, they are here, as the Lord has promised.

This mountain is the place where God first started to reveal his holiness to Moses and now the Israelites are there and he wants to continue to share his character and tell them who he is. The people need to know the character of God. It's critical for them and it's critical for us. The reason is, God is holy, and by the definition of holy, anything unholy cannot exist in its presence. They don't mix. We cannot put unholy things in the presence of holiness. If we want to be in the presence of God we must be holy people, and God knows that. He wants us, and so he is going to tell us what it means to be holy so he gives us the covenant. This is the statement of what God is like, his character that we would need to copy.

So what does it mean to be holy as God is holy? We might expect that being holy involves a lot of praying, giving a lot of sacrifices, fasting, spending a lot of time at the tabernacle in religious behaviors and although a lot of these things are mentioned in the covenant and the chapters that immediately follow this event, the emphasis is not on these religious behaviors. We discover the emphasis is on our actions as we live with others and with God. The Ten Commandments will be our starting place. Part of God's character that he tells us to copy is to have no other Gods, avoid idol worship, do not misuse the Lord's name, have a day of rest, a sabbath day, honor your father and mother, do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not lie, and do not covet. Those are the Ten Commandments, but as we keep reading a lot more of how our life is supposed to be lived is flushed out. Do not mistreat or oppress strangers. He wants us to be kind to all people. If you lend money to the poor you shall not charge interest. Do not follow a crowd to do evil. You can read more for yourself throughout Exodus and Leviticus. The point is, God's holiness is a holiness that involves actions, our behavior.

Those who belong to God must act in these ways because that's the kind of God he is. The point of the covenant isn't for us to have a checklist of do's and don'ts that we've done and haven't done and now I think I've got the gold star in my crown so now I've

made it. The point is to be able to be walking with God in his presence. So, God asks those children of Israel, back at Mt. Sinai, with a reminder, he says "You have seen what I did to the Egyptians and how I bore you on eagle's wings and brought you to myself," so he is reminding them of his greatness, and then he wants to give them the covenant, "Now therefore obey my voice and keep my covenant." and as I read, Moses takes this to the people and all the people answer as one, everything that the Lord has spoken we will do.

They were probably thoughtful in that, but why wouldn't they say yes. I don't know if they really thought twice about it. Of course they would live up to these expectations. They might have seemed a little bit tough, but this was God, they had seen his great power, they had seen how he had provided for them, of course we could say yes to God, that would be no problem. In fact, when we read more about this covenant that they made, the Israelites were willing to say to God, "We would die if we break this covenant." They were willing to go that far. There wasn't going to be a problem for them and I think if we had lived back in Old Testament times and could see those things, it wouldn't be a problem for us either. I wish a lot that I could have a burning bush like Moses, because then I would know for sure. And, if your graduating, what am I going to do with my life then I could just talk to God out of the burning bush and then I can know for sure. As I read the Old Testament, sometimes I think God, "Couldn't you talk to me like that?" and then I would know and I would be able to follow you with ease so it must have been very easy for them. But, we know, that the rest of the Old Testament is a story of their terrible failure.

They couldn't imagine doing such a thing, they couldn't imagine breaking this covenant. But, within one month they were dancing around a golden idol, praising IT from having delivered them from Egypt. No problem? They had a big problem and they didn't know it and it isn't any different than us. The covenant reveals the holy character of God, like I've said the intention is that we should share his holy character so that we can have a relationship with him and that's what he wanted for Israel and that's what he wanted for us. The problem is, I can't do it, and they couldn't do it. There are lots and lots of pages of them not being able to do it. We have an inability as humans to live this holy life. The human heart is inclined to itself not to God. We call it the fallen. We received that as children of Adam and Eve, we are people of the fall and we are prone to sin. Mostly it comes out of self-centeredness. We determine for ourselves where our pleasure is. Our interests are the only ones in the world. We are just simply consumed with ourselves and we are determined to have our own way and please ourselves at all costs. That might not be all of you, in fact I'm a pretty good person myself.

So, it surprised me when I found out that I tended to some of this self-centeredness. I have a really good friend, who I live with. He likes to drive fast and on occasion he has

been picked up and received a speeding ticket. Being the good person that I am I scowled and said "You know, it's not just the \$80 ticket here, the insurance goes up, I wish you would driver better. Besides, relax your shoulders, enjoy life." Well we were going through the advertisements of possibly changing insurance and this or that and they pull up your record and oh, there's a ticket on there, but it's going to go off and we have two months to go and the insurance will lower. Huh, that will be great and then guess what, my friend got another ticket. I shook my finger, because this is getting a little expensive. Well, there was another day, I have another person that I live with who is a friend of mine, and he was really getting on my nerves. Its' funny how 9 year olds can do that (sorry Nicholas), but anyway, as we got into the van an I was a little irritated with him and he was incapable of shutting his own door, I threw the van in reverse and I just backed out, because I had had enough, and then there was a crunch. I put the vehicle into park and I said "Gary, I ran into your car!" and he came out and said "Oh I heard" and he gave me a big hug. Later on, the discussion about the cost of speeding tickets versus the cost of repairing your van came up and it's a little more expensive to repair a dent, even if they're little. I was humbled, how could I point my finger and then have someone return to me graciously and say "that happens." I learned a lesson, not only about driving and not pointing my finger, but just holiness in general and how to respond with grace. That helped me be a person who can respond with grace. I don't always, but I'm trying. So, you see, even really good people do these things. You might have a story.

We can't do it, let's just shut the book, and do our best and head home. The problem is, God has said to us, I want you to be in this relationship with me but I can't change that I am holy, holy, holy, and the only way we can be together is if you are holy. And so we say to God, God how can we have this relationship because we can't do it, we try, we are good people and we try and we don't do it. Even the people in the Old Testament knew that. They knew they needed something to help them, help us get that stubborn , I-centered response out of us and have a God-centered response. We can't do that in and of ourselves, but it is something that God can do for us. That is exactly what he did in Jesus. We couldn't, but God could and God can. God's spirit can make us holy. The only thing that can control our selfish nature is the spirit of God living in us. And I still can be selfish, but I can ask the spirit of God to guide me. We often talk about Jesus' death as one of, Jesus died in order to get us into Heaven, and we will talk to people, maybe in an evangelistic way, "do you know where you're going when you die?: and we want people to know if they have accepted Jesus they'll get to heaven. I struggle with that sometimes and yes, Jesus died to get us into heaven but that was the icing on the cake. That's part of the relationships. The reason Jesus died was to get his spirit into us so that we could live that holy life, so that we could be in God's presence and walk with him.

So God, through Jesus Christ, has given each of us the opportunity to say and to respond much the same way the Israelites did. " Everything the Lord has spoken we will do." And now we have the ability to say that. We are invited into this relationship with God and we have his holy spirit to guide us. Pentecost is coming up and we will talk more about the Holy Spirit and using him in our lives. But, as people that are called to be holy, I would like to invite you to think deeply about how you will live a holy life and how we will respond to that, because we can, with God's holy spirit. So I have an invitation to all of you. Each of you can receive it at your own pace and level, because the summer has a variety of tasks that we are involved in, but for this summer I would like to invite any of you to participate in a weekly meeting, either Thursday's at noon or Thursday's at 8:00 and if there is enough or there are other days that work we can make some adjustments, but this is our starting point. The meetings are for to responding to this question, or this challenge, and the challenge comes from the book "In His Steps." It's an old classic, a fiction novel by Charles Sheldon. He gives us a story of a church who has been serving the Lord, they are a nice church, but they are confronted one Sunday morning with a tramp who came in and very undefensively questioned the congregation wondering if the way they had responded to him was really the way Jesus would respond and it was a challenge for them. Out of that challenge then, the pastor invited the congregation to take a year pledge to not do anything before asking "What would Jesus do?" and then having a clear sense of what God would do, what Jesus would do in any situation, doing that. Here is how he writes that, "I want the volunteers, these people, {from McCabe} who will pledge themselves earnestly and honestly, {for the summer months} not to do anything without first asking the question what would Jesus do? and after asking that question for each one to follow Jesus as exactly as he or she knows how, no matter what the result may be." So we have ordered some copies of the book "In His Steps." They are in the clerestory and you can pick one up to read. It's an easy, fiction book, but it's challenging to your heart. You can take one, whether you want to join a group or not. But, then the invitation is to join in a group and the group would then just share their experience in how we have lived responding to this question. So, whatever situation we confront where we have asked "what would Jesus do" and followed through with that, how have we done and to just come together for support, encouragement and prayer. Any age can do this. If you can't read, your parent can read to you, so you can be a part of this through the summer. I think we are people that we seek to live holy lives, but I like the idea of this project for the summer to just raise the bar for us, because God has asked us to be holy people, so that we could be people that dwell in his presence. Let us pray.

Lord, thank you for the love that you pour out on each of us, the invitation to dwell in your presence and guide each of us as we seek to be holy in our lives here and now.