

**First Presbyterian Church**  
**Exodus 19:1-8, 20:1-17, “Covenant and Command”**  
**by Pastor Matt Johnson, 11/5/2023**

This is the ninth week in our 12 week series on the book of Exodus.

The purpose of this series is to recognize the importance of Israel’s deliverance story for our own life and faith.

The first eight weeks looked at the oppression of Israel,  
the delivery of Moses through the waters of the Nile,  
the selection of Moses as God’s chosen partner,  
the delivery of Israel through the plagues, the Passover,  
and the waters of the Red Sea.

Last week we saw God’s provision for Israel in the desert  
through the provision of manna (which means “What is it?”)  
and quail.

Today we enter a new major section of this epic story of God’s deliverance.

While the first 18 chapters of Exodus focus on the themes  
of oppression and deliverance,  
chapters 19 -40 develop the themes of  
Covenant, Command, and Presence.

Sounds boring, but it’s not! The Bible Project’s Tim Mackie offers this description:

“(1) **Covenant**: Yahweh selects Israel from among the nations as covenant partners who will carry out Yahweh’s purposes for all the nations and for all creation. = ***Let’s get married and have a family***

(2) **Commandment**: Yahweh’s covenant with Israel comes with special terms, embodied in Yahweh’s wise instruction (law/Torah) that will shape every aspect of Israel’s life. = ***Let’s agree on how we will live together***

(3) **Presence**: Yahweh desires an intimate union with Israel as covenant partners and so divine glory comes to take up residence in the middle of the people. = ***Let’s move in together***”

[adapted from Tim Mackie’s lecture notes]

By another analogy, we can think of covenant, law, and presence  
as three strands that are woven together in Exodus  
and the remainder of the Bible to make a strong binding rope  
that connects Yahweh to the people  
in an enduring and life-giving way.

We will see these themes arise in a number of ways  
over the final weeks of this series.

But today I have a confession to make.

I have been preaching these last few weeks with a heavy heart  
because of the tension I feel between  
the story of Israel's exodus out of Egypt  
and the current explosion of violence  
between Palestinian and Israeli people.

I have been uncomfortable to preach on the biblical themes while leaving  
the contemporary situation largely unaddressed,  
but I felt even more uncomfortable about trying to speak into  
such a complex, polarizing, emotionally fraught,  
and constantly changing conflict.

Today I am not going to wade through all the complexities of the current problem,  
but I do hope to provide a theological perspective that helps me find a place  
where I can pray for God's intervention with integrity.

As Christians our faith is directly tied to the history of Israel  
and to the promised land God gave to Israel thousands of years ago.

Does this mean we must choose sides in this awful conflict  
between Israel and Palestine?

Does it mean that we are theologically obligated to a specific opinion  
about this long running conflict that is now  
a humanitarian crisis with global implications?

Some on the political left and right will say that we *do* need to choose sides.  
But if we follow these stories until they draw us near to Jesus,  
I do not believe that we do.

While Israel's story of Exodus stands on its own,  
the themes of covenant, law, and presence  
eventually lead us to Jesus.

In Exodus 19, Israel has followed Moses to the base of a mountain.

It is the same mountain from Ex. 3 which Moses stood upon when he  
heard the voice of Yahweh from within the burning bush.

Like the first time, Yahweh calls to Moses from the mountain.

Yahweh gives Moses instructions to tell the people  
that they have seen how their God carried them on eagle's wings  
to now be present with their true Deliverer.

In verse 5 Yahweh says, "Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant,  
then out of all nations ... *out of all nations* ... you will be my  
*treasured possession.*"

What does it mean for Israel to be God's treasured possession?

My good friend, Bryan Dunagan died 10 days ago on October 26<sup>th</sup>.

We lived together while in seminary at Regent College,  
we played flag football together, studied and prayed together,  
talked about preaching and ministry and relationships  
with our girlfriends who later became our wives.

He was 44 years old and senior pastor of Highland Park Presbyterian Church  
in Dallas, Texas.

Bryan was so full of life, and so incredibly goofy,  
and in his memorial service

(which was on All Saints Day, Nov. 1<sup>st</sup>)

everyone who spoke mentioned how much Bryan loved his kids.

He just couldn't stop bragging about his kids.

Bryan was a phenomenal athlete, and one of his recent running partners  
said his secret weapon to beat Bryan was to get him talking about his kids.

Because he would go on and on about them and how excited he was  
about what they were doing, and that would leave him just  
winded enough that this guy could sneak ahead of Bryan.

Bryan's children were sacred to him. He loved them with all his heart.  
And now for those kids, their memories of their father's love  
are a special possession they will treasure their whole lives.

The Hebrew people had a word for that -- *segulah*. It means special possession.  
That is how God felt about Israel, they were uniquely treasured by Yahweh  
among all other nations.

But this was not a specialness that *excluded* other nations.  
It was a special choice for the *inclusion* of other nations.

We know this because Yahweh tells Moses that Israel will be  
a "Kingdom of priests."  
This is a really nice sounding phrase, but it's meaning can slip  
by us if we aren't careful.

We need to think in terms of an ancient culture's experience:

Who is a priest in an ancient religion?

What does an ancient priest do?

The priest stands a representative of the people before God,  
acts on behalf of the people in offering sacrifices to God,  
and speaks for God to the people.

Imagine standing in a field looking at a tall oak tree.

Now imagine there is someone way up in the tree  
who is hidden by the branches so you cannot see them.

But there is a third person standing at the bottom of the tree.

This person can see both you and the person up in the branches.

And this third person holds a mirror at a 45 degree angle  
so that when you look at the mirror,

you see the person in the tree,

and when the person in the tree looks at the mirror  
they see you.

In this situation, you are like Israel, the person in the tree is like Yahweh their God  
(which, I know, is ridiculous), and the person holding the mirror is the priest.

The role of the priest is to be a connection point between God and creation,  
reflecting the people to God and God to the people.

Now we can see why this phrase, “Kingdom of Priests” is so unusual.  
Israel is not only to be God’s Kingdom *with* priests,  
but a Kingdom *of* priests.

So let’s keep with the tree analogy using the phrase “Kingdom of Priests.”  
If God is in the tree,  
then Israel is the Kingdom of Priests holding the mirror.  
If Israel is holding the mirror, then who are they pointing the mirror at?  
*ALL THE OTHER NATIONS.*

Israel is God’s treasured possession who represents God to all of humanity  
and represents humanity before God.

This is what the prophet Isaiah meant when he wrote in Isaiah 49:6,  
“It is too small a thing for you to be my servant  
to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept.  
I will also make you a light for the Gentiles,  
that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.”  
This is the role of covenant in God’s Salvation plan.

We can include now the 10 Commandments from Exodus 20,  
known as the Law of Moses.

The 10 Commandments begin with four commands focusing on  
exclusive worship of Yahweh, the one true God and keeping  
the Sabbath day of rest set apart for Yahweh alone.

Then we find six commands that focus on relationships  
with family and others in the wider community.

Together they paint a picture of total harmony with God and creation.

But that is a picture Israel was never able to live up to.

It is a picture that nobody can live up to.

So the function of the 10 Commandments is to reveal  
our inability to accomplish this vision on our own.

It shows us our need of something greater than our own efforts.

The book of Hebrews says the law was a tutor that pointed us to Christ.  
This is where we see the covenant and command  
of Exodus 19 and 20 lead us to Jesus.

In the New Testament, we encounter Jesus, the Son of God.  
Jesus the Israelite who lived out the covenant of God  
and fulfilled all the 10 commandments of God.  
And we see Jesus, the lamb of God.  
Jesus the Passover sacrifice, once and for all.  
Jesus who stood in for Israel *and for all people*.

How is this possible? How could a Jewish Messiah represent every nation?  
Because Jesus was called *just like* Israel,  
to represent only the Jews before God  
but also the whole of creation.

Jesus was our Great High Priest who held the mirror to represent  
everyone and everything on earth before God in Heaven.

And in Jesus all of God's promises to Israel were brought to fulfillment.  
Nobody could ever be God's chosen partner in the world  
the way Jesus was, and nobody needs to be that  
because when we come to God in faith  
we are joined with Christ and reconciled to God.

The covenant of Israel and the command of Israel are fulfilled in us  
(both Jews and Gentiles) by grace through faith in Jesus  
our great high priest.

When I allow myself to be drawn into this perspective before God,  
I finally feel that I have a place to pray from regarding  
the atrocities of the present day.

As Christians we affirm the importance of the land promised to Israel,  
we understand the importance of that place,  
and we know that God's promises to Israel still stand.

*AND* we know that God's promises to Israel are fulfilled  
in the great high priest Jesus the Messiah.

I do not expect practicing or non-practicing Jews  
to take this perspective, I do not expect Muslims  
to take this perspective.

But as a Christian, if I believe that Jesus perfectly represents Israel  
and all of humanity before God,

then when I see pictures of kibbutz that are rent apart  
by slaughter and horror,

and when I see pictures of Gaza city where families hold  
their dead children in their arms,

do I have to pick a side?

No I don't believe I do.

I can see beloved creations of the Living God experiencing hell on earth.

I can cry out to God for mercy on every one of them.

I can know that God is on their side regardless of their  
nationality or ethnicity.

So when our hearts break and our stomachs turn at that specter of war in Israel,  
Palestine, Ukraine, Myanmar, Nigeria, Sudan, or anywhere else,  
we can know that God is on the side of the suffering,

because Christ's suffering on the cross was for all of us.

As the people of Christ we can stand with those who suffer

and we call out to God for a just peace that serves the interests  
of the suffering creation.

The big point here is that God calls us all *segulah*.

Through Jesus the Israelite, our priest and representative,

Yahweh has invited all people to be marked as treasured possessions,  
we are all called beloved, we are all included in the perfect fulfillment  
of covenant and command by God's immeasurable grace.