

October 15, 2017
Lesson 7: God's Written Covenant
Scripture: Exodus 20: 18-26

Context:

This week continues with the scene of the Israelites and Moses at Mt. Sinai. Last week we were introduced to the terror of the scene that included smoke, lightning, fire, and horns that rattled in the wind. This week continues on with the response of the people to the whole scene after the Decalogue (The Ten Commandments) have been presented to the people. They are still terrified. While standing at a distance, they ask for Moses to be their conduit and to continue to speak to God for them. Moses reassures the people that God is not out to get them; that instead they are to be in awe of God

It is then that God continues to give them instructions about the covenant with them and ways in which they are to understand who God is and what is pleasing unto God. This is the first time that God speaks directly to the people without an intermediary, making it a very important part of God's covenant with the people of Israel. The real clincher of the covenant after the Decalogue is that God will be with all the people of Israel even in the ups and downs of their time. The words God speaks to them gives hope: those who are called to obedience know that the God who so speaks is a God for them, and for their best interests, not against them or standing over them as a threat.¹ God is not out to get the Israelites even when they mess up.

But God does give instructions. The first instruction is to reiterate the commandment about not making an image of God out of silver or gold. Thus, we are reminded it's more about loyalty than it is doing things to check off a list in obedience. The second instruction is to make altars that are supplied by burnt offerings on simple stone and not built to the heavens so that all can see what is underneath their tunics as they go up the stairs. There are several things going on here including the concern for the proper worship of Yahweh to be understood as a natural extension of the issue of idolatry.² Some scholars believe that the reference to nudity is more in line with idolatrous worship, in which Israel is supposed to be distinctive.³ For example, not having prostitution altars where prostitutes would engage in sexual activities with worshippers on the altars. Other suggests that it is to focus on the simplicity of the space and for the altars to only be built at the locations where God has appeared and given it a name.⁴ For example, think of Jacob's ladder with Bethel when he placed a stone there to remember the promise that God made him and the dream that took place there. Throughout the time of the Israelites, there were probably altars and spaces built that

¹ Terence E. Fretheim, "Exodus," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 1991), 242.

² Ibid., 243.

³ Ibid., 243.

⁴ Ibid., 243

were more concerned with size and grandeur than with offering up sacrifices or even being open to the people to worship.

Each of those places will be where God will dwell and will be places where God's faithfulness will be shown to the people there. It is part of the covenant and the altars will help them remember that their lives are in God's hands. God made a promise and God keeps God's promises.

Application:

Have you ever studied an altar before? As I shared with my congregation on World Communion Sunday, it's one of the first things I do when I visit a worship space. I want to study the altar and see the materials that are there. I think the obsession began as a child going to different churches as a preacher's kid. That tradition became an official ritual when I went on the John Wesley Heritage Tour as part of my studies at Birmingham-Southern College. Part of the trip included going not only to the churches/meeting rooms associated with Wesley, but also to cathedrals. Whether wood or stone, I was enraptured by the sight of them. How many people received the body and blood of Christ from the elements placed there? How many people worked to make that altar? Perhaps the altar was made in a small village by a carpenter who knew that this project was one the most important he would undertake to place in the tiny parish church. Maybe the altars in cathedrals were chiseled by local quarry workers and placed there in that majestic space where they offered their best to God. The possibilities of the stories are endless; and some of them are actually recorded.

The same goes for altars around the world. They all have a story to tell. There's the ones that are in small country churches that are simple, yet the altar has been there for years and hundreds of souls have felt God in coming to receive the elements. Or the altar from your favorite camp that is outside in the midst of God's beautiful creation. There's even the table in the prison classroom where people are reminded that God's love includes them when the time comes for the chaplain to preside over Holy Communion. Altars remind us that God is with us.

And altars also remind us that we serve and belong to God. Our lives are to be in service to the Triune God we worship. The true task begins when we leave those altars and go into the world. Will we serve God by being the hands and feet of Christ? Or will we chase and build idols that we think represent God: the idols of wealth, nationalism, or exclusivity. Those idols are out there inviting us to worship them. They divide people, neighbors, and even countries.

God calls for us to turn away from those things; to come and worship our Lord by following the example we are given through Christ. We are to embrace simplicity, see all people as our neighbors, and to hear that God loves all. The altar table we come to says: "In Remembrance of Me." God loved us so much that we were given Jesus who not only died for us but showed us the way to live and interact with others. May we see that God is not only at our altar table and place of worship, but in those across our land and even across the oceans in places we may never see.

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