

Holy Moses! There's Fire on the Mountain: God's Covenant with Moses

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FCMF # 1

Scripture

Exodus 34:3-10 (selected verses): No one shall come up with you, and do not let anyone be seen throughout all the mountain; and do not let flocks or herds graze in front of that mountain." ...The Lord descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name, "The Lord." ...And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth, and worshiped. He said, "If now I have found favor in your sight, O Lord, I pray, let the Lord go with us. Although this is a stiff-necked people, pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance." He said: I hereby make a covenant. Before all your people I will perform marvels, such as have not been performed in all the earth or in any nation; and all the people among whom you live shall see the work of the Lord; for it is an awesome thing that I will do with you.

Exodus 20:1-18 (selected verses): Then God spoke all these words: I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me ... You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God... Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work... Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor. 18 When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance..."

Exodus 31:18: When God finished speaking with Moses on Mount Sinai, he gave him the two tablets of the covenant, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God.

Sermon

Holy Moses!

So, I'm guessing that y'all know the story of Moses.

But in case you've forgotten some parts, here's a quick overview:

He was born in Egypt during one of the darkest chapters
in the history of the Jewish people.

He was born to an enslaved people who were being ruthlessly
oppressed by the most powerful nation at the time, Egypt.

And so these people, Abraham's progeny,
the same folks that God had chosen to be his special people
and who were supposed become a great nation, were slaves.

This was the group of folks that God had promised to Abraham
would one day be more numerous than the stars in the night sky.

God had called them out to be a distinct part of God's starry constellation and through whom God would bless the entire world.

But it was in fact this prodigious multiplication
that got them into trouble with their Egyptian overlords.
The most powerful empire in the world had become increasingly anxious and concerned as they began to see their enslaved population
as a potential threat to their own existence.
And Pharaoh's response of first born male infanticide,
was indeed quite sinister!
Now killing every first born son, they thought,
would be enough to stem the tide of Hebrew overpopulation.
But what they failed to take into account
was the possibility that disobedient Hebrew midwives,
would refused to carry out such dastardly orders!

And so Moses and a whole lot of other baby boys were kept alive.
Saved from death we know that he was later
"found down by the river side,"
by a princess of Egypt, floating in a little boat made of reeds.
He was then raised in the royal household
but he would eventually learn of his true identity.
And after he killed an Egyptian for abusing a Hebrew slave
he fled for his life out into the deserts of Sinai.
There he wandered the desert as a nomadic shepherd,
where he married and began to raise a family.
But God had other plans and one day
God managed to get his attention with a burning bush,
a bush on fire but one that would not stop burning!
And as he drew closer, God spoke, telling Moses
that he must return to Egypt to save God's chosen people.
Which of course in due time, he did.

Led by a cloud during the day and a fiery pillar at night,
Moses took that motley crew through the same desert
he had gotten to know during his earlier exile.
And when that cloud did finally stop over a mountain named Sinai,
God again spoke, calling Moses to join him on that mountain.
Moses was instructed to come alone and while on that mountaintop
God renewed his covenant with Moses and his newly freed people.
And the sign of that covenant was simply two slabs of rough hewn stone.
Quite different that the colorful show of rainbows
or the cosmic show of a star filled night sky.
Two simple rocks, but upon them were God's new law,
ten simple instructions carved by the finger of God.

God gave to Moses a written set of rules
for his chosen people to follow, a Law that was short and sweet.

Now, in order to be a part of God's people
one must listen to and follow God's Law.

(Editors note)

Now Moses actually had to climb this mountain twice.
You see the first set of Godly etched stones, well, Moses broke them.
And no he did not trip and drop them by mistake,
Moses broke them in his anger throwing them to the ground,
in his disgust over how God's chosen folk were acting.
I mean even before he made it back to base camp,
God's chosen had already violated at least two commandments!
By worshipping another god, by making graven images
and by profaning God's Holy name!

But in their defense, Moses had been gone for quite sometime
on his first trek into that mountain.
Long enough I suppose that folks were getting a little edgy,
growing tired of waiting, and becoming anxious and bored.
After all the mountain was obscured, shrouded in clouds and all
that they could see or hear was lightening, fire, thunder and smoke.
Was Moses even alive?
How could anyone survive such a spectacle?
So they talked Aaron into taking gold to craft a young bull,
something to worship that was a bit more tangible
and a whole lot less scary than thunder and lightening.
Or maybe it was merely boredom?
Forty days is a long time to just sit and wait,
and as we know, "Idle hands are the devils workshop."

Or maybe it was the collective anxiety over the possibility
of losing their leader who had taken them through so much.
Perhaps it was fear?
Maybe doubts had begun to creep in?
Were they maybe following the wrong God?
Or perhaps there wasn't just one invisible, all mighty God?
Maybe Moses had lost his marble or had fallen off his rocker?
Perhaps his newfangled ideas about God were misdirected
and now God was proving it by punishing him?
Well what ever the reasons might have been,
Moses was not at all happy with what he found upon his return.
He was mad! Fuming, furious, livid, choose any adjective you want,
Moses was so steamed that he pulverized those two slabs of stone into the key ingredient for a
bitter cocktail that all had drink.

And he was still fuming when he and God
met up again to produce the second set of tablets.
He started to complain to God about, those "stiffed necked people"
that God had chosen and given to him to lead to freedom.

And this is where the story actually gets weird.
God then offers to get rid of them! "You're right Moses
those folks are a real pain in the you know what!"
So, I have a simple solution,
let's just let them rot right here in the desert!
But Moses' immediate response was to try and talk God out of it.
Moses pulled out all the stops,
even trying to appeal to God's vanity to save those folks
who had been a real pain in the neck since the day they left Egypt.
I mean come on Moses, as if the one and only God,
Creator of all that is seen and unseen, who lives
in eternal glory can be influenced by mere flattery?
But desperate times, I guess, do call for desperate measures.
"What will all the other nations say when they find out
that after such great efforts to save your chosen people
you merely lured them out into the desert to let them die?"
And whether it was merely vanity, or a well reasoned argument,
God decided to stick with the earlier plan and renewed his covenant again through Moses with
that ragtag collection of ex-slaves.

This is now the third major shift in God's covenant with his people.
First it was between God and Noah
and then between God and Abraham and Sarah.
Now God hammers out a new version, a simple,
yet specific list of how God's people are expected to behave.
This is another dramatic shift as we go
from an oral based tradition to a tradition of written laws.
Now there are several advantages to writing things down.
One, it's more authoritative and reliable.
Most of us have played the game, "whisper down the line,"
where a secret is started at one end of a line of people,
but after a number of whispered retellings,
something often quite different is heard by the final person in line.
And so too, oral traditions are more fungible
than are words that are carved into stone.
Secondly, written communication affords more consistency.
Subsequent generation can always go back
to the original documentation to make sure they have it right.

Three, written rules can also be more expansive.
Written laws, even if they are carved in stone,
can be duplicated and moved around.

And this is why this shift is so important.
Belonging to God's people is now open to anyone who can either read or listen to God's laws
and follow them.
Being a part of God's chosen people is no longer
just for those of the same clan who are related to each other,

or even for those who share the same nationality.
The God of Israel is now the God of all people,
 who are willing to hear God's law and who desire to follow it!
And that is my point, that God was pushing Moses
 and his people and his covenant in an every expanding way.
The sign of this new covenant were those
 simple tablets of stone that contained the Ten Commandments.
And by writing down his law, God was once again pushing
 the boundaries of who can now be a part of his chosen people.
The boundary is, once again being pushed further to the frontier.
 And just like a pebble dropped into a still pond
 the ever expanding circle of inclusion is rippling outward.

But through all of this change there have been constants.
 And one of those key constants has been God.
In all of the stories I've talked about so far,
 God spoke, God acted and God called and reached out to
 both groups and individuals in very personal and intimate ways.
God, from the very beginning,
 has always sought to be in relationship with people.
And so, it seems to me, one of the keys to understanding just how
 we ultimately belong to God, is to be found through relationship.
Maybe the covenant between us and God changes,
 not so much because God is actually changing, but because
 we humans failed to fully understand the earlier explanations?

Maybe it was never meant to be only limited
 to one clan and to whom you were related to?
Perhaps it was never intended to be
 for only the members of one nation
 or the fans who root for the same sports team?
And maybe it will not even be only for those
 who know and follow the right rules.
 (Come back next week if you want to hear more about that one!)

But, I am convinced, it was and it will be primarily about
 an active and growing relationship between each of us and God.
And I wonder, if as we move forward in our understanding
 of the nature of God's expansive and inclusive covenant,
 we won't actually find ourselves going back in time?
Going back in time to the very beginning,
 back to that garden where it all began,
 a place where God came to be with his Creation
not in thunder and lightening and in smoky obscurity
 but in that earlier intimate way where he came to
 simply walk and talk in the cool of the day.
A place of quiet contentment, of joy, of clarity and of peace.