



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Thunder

Exodus 19:7-25

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Last week I began with a quote from Calvin. He wrote that the two most important things we can know are, first, who God is and, second, who we are, particularly as we relate to God. Both of these important areas of knowledge meet when it comes to how we are to approach God. And we don't always get it right. In fact, we often get it wrong. On the one hand there are Christians who put all the emphasis on the transcendence—the otherness and the holiness of God—and make him virtually unapproachable. If we do approach, we come grovelling as miserable worms, making sure all of our liturgical I's are dotted and T's crossed lest we offend and end up like Nadab and Abihu, who offered strange fire on the Lord's altar and were instantly consumed by the flame. And on the other, we have Christians who approach God with utter casualness and no grasp of the holy at all. The "Jesus is my buddy" attitude. There's no reverence and no awe as they sing songs where you could replace "Jesus" with "Baby" and they'd still make sense. The idea of confession isn't even on their radar.

These days, in our part of the world, we're more prone to falling into the error of being overly cavalier in how we related to God, but that doesn't mean there aren't folks who don't struggle with the fear side of things. Last week we looked at the first part of Exodus 19, this morning we'll look at verses 7-25. Last week we looked at God's calling to his people: you are my treasured possession, a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation. The Lord didn't just redeem his people from slavery. He redeemed them for a purpose and we looked at what that meant for them and what it means for us. In that passage, Moses went up to the mountain to meet with the Lord. Today we'll look at the

second part where the Lord comes to meet this people he has redeemed for himself. What does it look like to encounter God?

Let's look at Exodus 19:7-9. Moses has been up on the mountain. The Lord has given the terms of the covenant. "I will be your God and you will be my people." Moses goes up and down the mountain at least a couple of times here and in the coming chapters. Exactly how many times is debated because the chronology isn't clear. The Ten Commandments are given in the next chapter. I'm with the folks who argue that they're singled out because of their importance, but that they were probably given to Moses on his first trip up the mountain. They're part of the covenant stipulations. They're part of what the Israelites are responding to in these next verses. So now Moses goes back down to the people and here's what follows:

So Moses came and called the elders of the people and set before them all these words that the LORD had commanded him. All the people answered together and said, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do." And Moses reported the words of the people to the LORD. And the LORD said to Moses, "Behold, I am coming to you in a thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak with you, and may also believe you forever."

Moses explains to the people what the Lord has promised *and* he explains what their end of the covenant looks like. This is why I think it's likely that the Ten Commandments were given while he was up there. They form the foundation on which the rest of the covenant, the *torah*, and everything that goes with it is built. "I will be your God. I will be faithful to you. And this is what it will look like for you to be my people. Are you willing to do this?" This is what Moses is communicating to the people.

And the people respond—I imagine them shouting it out rather enthusiastically—"All that the Lord has spoken we will do!" They've grumbled a lot over the last three months, but the fact is that the Lord has borne them out of Egypt on eagle's wings. He's

brought them to the very place he had promised he would bring them. He's manifested his power over gods and men and even over nature. He's shown his faithfulness to them, doing everything he said he would. And now he's here, up on the mountain. While Israel's history is a history of embarrassing fickleness, at this point they're ready to commit and they do. "All of this we will do." And with that the Lord announces that he's coming and that he will speak. Specifically, he says that he's going to manifest his presence as a thick cloud.

This makes sense from the standpoint that the Lord has already been manifesting his presence as a pillar of cloud since they left Egypt. But it also links what's about to happen here with what happened back in Genesis with Abraham. In Genesis 15 the Lord established his covenant with Abraham. He had Abraham kill and butcher a bunch of animals, laying out the carcasses so that they formed a path and then, in a vision, the Lord manifested himself as a sort of smoking pot or torch and passed back and forth between the animal carcasses. This was how he solemnised the covenant with Abraham. We don't have time to dwell on the details this morning, but the Lord used symbols that Abraham knew from his culture. Some of the language of Genesis 15 is used again here. In fact, these are the only two places this Hebrew word for smoke is used. And it's appropriate because God is establishing a new covenant with Israel here at Mount Sinai. "I will be your God and you will be my people. I'm about to come down to explain to you what that means for you."

While we're here, it's also important to note that this is a new covenant. It's not just a renewal of the covenant the Lord had made with Abraham. That covenant is still there. But this new covenant is bigger. It's between the Lord and the people of Israel. In it we begin to see a partial fulfilment of the covenant with Abraham—a fulfilment that will finally be fulfilled in another new covenant established by Jesus. But as we get into the law given by the Lord to his people in the coming chapters, it's important to remember that context of that law. The law was given specifically to the people

of Israel in the context of this covenant. As the Lord's people, they were set apart and holy and this law, this instruction, this *torah* was given to teach them what it looked like in that context to be the Lord's people. I say this because we can get into all sorts of problems if we try to understand and interpret and make present-day applications of the law while forgetting the covenantal context in which it was given. We'll talk more about this in the coming chapters. Just remember that what the Lord is doing here is establishing a covenant with Israel and that a covenant goes two ways, with stipulations that each party pledges to uphold.

But, and now we're getting back to this idea of how we approach the Lord, how are the people to respond to the Lord's coming down? Do they rush up the mountain in an enthusiastic frenzy? Do they run up to experience the cloud for themselves? We'll continue to with verse 9:

When Moses told the words of the people to the LORD, the LORD said to Moses, "Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their garments and be ready for the third day. For on the third day the LORD will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. And you shall set limits for the people all around, saying, 'Take care not to go up into the mountain or touch the edge of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall be put to death. No hand shall touch him, but he shall be stoned or shot; whether beast or man, he shall not live.' When the trumpet sounds a long blast, they shall come up to the mountain." So Moses went down from the mountain to the people and consecrated the people; and they washed their garments. And he said to the people, "Be ready for the third day; do not go near a woman." (Exodus 19:9b-15)

So, first, the people are to be consecrated. What does that mean? The Hebrew word has the sense of setting something apart. But not just set apart in a general sense like I set apart

old rags for use in the garage or the good sheets for the guest bedroom. It's about setting something apart specifically for the Lord's use. Once something is consecrated, it belongs to the Lord, it's for his use and no other. Think again of the altar or the various implements used for sacrifices in the temple. They belonged to the Lord. They could no longer be used for common purposes. Think of the recipe for incense used in the temple. It belonged to the Lord. No one was allowed to use that same mix of spices for any other purpose. It was holy. And here the Lord instructs Moses to consecrate Israel, to set them apart. This is where "I will be your God and you will be my people" is formalised.

And there's nothing casual about it. It's a three day procedure. It doesn't seem that we're given all the details of what took place over those three days. It may have been a time for the people to ponder all of this and to prepare themselves with a time of reflection. But the focus is on ritual purity. As we'll see later in the law, ritual purity isn't about sin. Sin certainly renders a person impure, but so can other things—like sex, which explains the command not to touch a woman for these three days. The idea of ritual purity had to do with being set apart. The regulations given in the law are rooted in Ancient Near Eastern customs, so they don't always make sense to us and often lead to the mistaken idea that certain things—sex for example—are sinful. That wasn't the point. But some things we can still understand, like the command for them to wash their clothes. They're being set apart to be the Lord's people and they're about to be in his presence. It makes sense to clean themselves up, much as we clean ourselves up and wear our "Sunday best" in preparation for worship. To meet the Lord is serious business.

But it gets even more serious. It's not just a matter of the people consecrating themselves. They're to draw near to the Lord, but not too near. The Lord tells Moses to set a boundary around the base of the mountain. The mountain is the Lord's and no one is to touch it. In fact,

the Lord is so serious about this that he establishes the death penalty for anyone who dares touch the mountain. Anyone who touches it is to be shot with an arrow or stoned. Interestingly enough, even the person who touches the mountain and forfeits his life, is set apart—sort of becomes part of the mountain—and since no one is allowed to touch the mountain, no one can touch the person who touches the mountain. Such a person has to be executed from a distance. To meet the Lord, to enter the presence of the holy, is serious business and not something to be taken lightly.

And we can't dismiss this easily with a "Well, but that was the Old Testament." Brothers and Sisters, God does not change. The God of the Old Testament is the God of the new. As Christians we have to grapple with this. But first, the third day. Look at verses 16-20:

On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled. Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the LORD had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly. And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder. The LORD came down on Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain. And the LORD called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up.

On the third day the thick cloud appeared. The Lord manifested his presence on the mountain. Thunder rolled, lightning flashed, and even the mountain trembled in the presence of the holy. The people were in their camp, not even at the mountain yet, and they trembled. Brothers and Sisters, when was the last time you trembled before the presence of the Lord? We might think they trembled because they didn't yet know the Lord. They didn't

know his lovingkindness and his faithfulness and so they feared his awesome presence. It's true, they didn't know him yet as well as they one day would, but they had seen his lovingkindness, his faithfulness, and his goodness in dramatic ways ever since Egypt. But they trembled anyway. They weren't the only ones to tremble before the Lord.

Think of the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah new the Lord. He was given a vision of the heavenly throne room. Do you remember his response? "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" (Isaiah 6:5). Isaiah trembled in the presence of the holy. This is the pattern over and over throughout the Old Testament. When people encounter the Lord, they tremble, they fall, they hide their faces from the holy. Nonetheless, the people heeded the Lord's call. They heard the trumpet blast—whether that was something the Lord had Moses organize or whether it was supernatural—by it the Lord summoned his people and they came.

But yet again the Lord reiterates his instructions for the people:

And the LORD said to Moses, "Go down and warn the people, lest they break through to the LORD to look and many of them perish. Also let the priests who come near to the LORD consecrate themselves, lest the LORD break out against them." And Moses said to the LORD, "The people cannot come up to Mount Sinai, for you yourself warned us, saying, 'Set limits around the mountain and consecrate it.'" And the LORD said to him, "Go down, and come up bringing Aaron with you. But do not let the priests and the people break through to come up to the LORD, lest he break out against them." So Moses went down to the people and told them. (Exodus 19:21-25)

He tells Moses to warn the people yet again not to touch the mountain lest they die. He summons the priests, apparently

a little closer, but even they must consecrate themselves before approaching. The overwhelming emphasis here is on the absolute necessity of approaching the Lord on his own terms. Nothing and no one may enter the presence of the holy without first being set apart as holy. It is the Lord who determines who or what and how that consecration takes place. And the penalties for violating the holy are serious: death. We see this also throughout the Old Testament. Nadab and Abihu offered strange fire on the altar and were consumed by the flame. Uzzah reached out to steady the ark of the covenant lest it fall into the mud. He was well-intentioned, but he died instantly anyway. The Lord is only to be approached on his own terms and with fear and trembling.

This serves as a serious correction to Christians today who approach God with a cavalier attitude. But, at the same time, in the New Testament we no longer see God's people coming before him with the sort of trembling we see in the Old Testament. Do they still come with awe and reverence? Yes! We see that particularly in the book of Revelation. But the fear and trembling are gone. Why is that? What changed between the Old and the New. It certainly wasn't God. I think the book of Hebrews gives us the best concise answer. This is what Hebrews 12:18-24:

For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned." Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear." But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the

righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

We no longer fear and tremble in the presence of the Lord because we've come not to Mt. Sinai, but to Mt. Zion, to the city of the living God. And we have come here through a new and better covenant, through Jesus our mediator, who has sprinkled us with his cleansing blood. The Israelites were consecrated by Moses. You and I have been consecrated by Jesus through the shedding of his blood. Moses washed the people's clothes, but Jesus has washed us through and through and, through the gift of the Spirit, made us the very temple of God. Moses brought a people to God. Jesus brings his brothers and sisters to the God who is Father. And therein lies all the difference.

Brothers and Sisters, there is a sense in which we should tremble in at the thought of the holiness of God. We are sinners. But we are also sinners redeemed by the death of God himself in Jesus and that knowledge ought to stop our trembling and draw us into God's presence with confidence, with joy, with thanksgiving, and with hearts overflowing with love and gratitude for his goodness, for his faithfulness, and for his love.

I've always found our Prayer Book to be the best example of how we strike this balance between approaching the Lord manifesting himself in thunder and lightning on the mountain and the pure joy of knowing the same God in Jesus and the Spirit. It reminds us that at the centre of our worship—and not just our worship, but our whole life as God's people—at the centre is Jesus and that everything is about grace. The liturgy begins with an acknowledgement of God's transcendent holiness. Our hearts and their desires are open before him. No secrets are hidden. And so we ask him to cleanse the thoughts of our hearts that we might grow to love him perfectly and that we might give him worthy praise. Right at the outset, we acknowledge who he is and our relation

to him. It sets the tone. Having come before the one before whom our hearts are laid bare, we can only stand with awe and reverence.

In the liturgy we rehearse the Ten Commandments, the law. Archbishop Cranmer's thinking was that by reminding ourselves of God's perfect law, we would be reminded of our own sinfulness. We do not approach God on our own merits, but by grace and so we read the law and then we plead: Lord, have mercy.

Later in the liturgy we confess our sins before we approach his Table. We confess our sin and our shame, but we also ask for forgiveness and new life knowing that Jesus has died for our sake and that he has given us his Spirit that we might walk in newness of life. And then he hear those comfortable words: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

Even as we come to the Table we confess: "We do not presume to come to your Table, merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in your manifold and great mercies." And yet we come knowing that our bodies have been made clean by his body and our souls have been washed by his most precious blood." And so we come in reverence and awe, fully aware of God's holiness and our sinfulness, but with the reminder of God's love and grace poured out for us by Jesus at the cross, we ought also be to be moved to come before God with great confidence and with joy.

You see, we still come to the Lord on his own terms. There is no other way. But Jesus is the difference between Mt. Sinai and Mt. Zion. Jesus has washed us clean and made us holy. Jesus is the one who ultimately shows us the faithfulness and goodness of God.

In *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* there's a point at which Mr. Beaver tells the Pevensie children about

"Aslan". When Aslan finally comes to Narnia, he will set everything to rights. At first they think he's talking about a man. Mr. Beaver corrects them and explains that Aslan is a lion...the king of the wood! The children are taken aback by that. A lion? "Is he safe?" they ask in shock. And Mr. Beaver replies, "Safe? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he's not safe. But he's good. He's the king, I tell you." And in that little scene played out in the Beaver's cottage, Lewis gave a wonderful explanation of God. Is God safe? Of course he's not. Touch the mountain and die. We don't like that kind of God. We want a safe God. We want a God who lets us approach on our own terms. But, of course, a God who is safe, a God who lets us do what we want and when we want is no king. A safe God is certainly not a god who will one day set the world to rights. We broke it and letting us continue on our own terms is only going to make it worse. We must have the God who is both holy and who requires holiness of his people. But the good news is that he's also good. Only wickedness need fear him. And we have the ultimate testimony of his goodness in Jesus. In Jesus, the God is thunder and lightning on the mountain humbled himself, the king became one of us, the king died the death that we deserved, and then rose from the grave, setting the power of new creation in motion. And in Jesus the king invites us into his presence, forgiven and made new. Brothers and Sisters, we cannot help but come into his presence with awe and reverence and healthy fear—he is not safe. But in light of Jesus and the cross, we also cannot help but come in confidence and joy, having seen and known his goodness.

Let us pray: You are holy, O God, and we, by nature, are not. You made us to be your people, but we rejected that calling and vocation and chose to be your enemies. You know our hearts and from you nothing is hidden. On our own, we cannot bear your presence and stand trembling and with our faces hidden. And so we give you joyful thanks that you have not left us to stand alone. You have given your own Son to die for our sake. You have given your

Spirit to purify our hearts. And through Jesus you lead us into your presence as beloved sons and daughters. We praise you, Father, that you are not safe and that because of that you will set this broken world to rights and will not leave us mired in our sin. And we praise you, as well, because in Jesus you show us your goodness—your grace, your mercy, and your faithfulness. Amen.