

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Holy Days: Resting in The Presence”

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February 14, 2021

Now Moses used to take the tent and pitch it outside the camp, far off from the camp; he called it the tent of meeting. And everyone who sought the Lord would go out to the tent of meeting, which was outside the camp. Whenever Moses went out to the tent, all the people would rise and stand, each of them, at the entrance of their tents and watch Moses until he had gone into the tent. When Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent, and the Lord would speak with Moses. When all the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance of the tent, all the people would rise and bow down, all of them, at the entrance of their tent. Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend. Then he would return to the camp; but his young assistant, Joshua son of Nun, would not leave the tent.

Moses said to the Lord, “See, you have said to me, ‘Bring up this people’; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, ‘I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.’ Now if I have found favor in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people.” He said, “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.” And he said to him, “If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth.”

The Lord said to Moses, “I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name.”

Exodus 33:7-17

Today we wrap up our series “Holy Days,” in which we’ve been hitting some of the high points of the Book of Exodus, the story of Israel’s deliverance from Egypt. We’ve done so specifically through the lens of work and rest, which are all over the place in Exodus. If you kept going after Exodus, you’d find out that the road after this point is a winding one, forty years of wandering in the wilderness. That’s why it’s perhaps appropriate that we come to the end of this series in Exodus right as we come to the season of Lent which starts next week. Lent as a season in the church in part is inspired by Israel’s 40 years in the wilderness, and during Lent, we’ll be looking at another stretch of time in the wilderness in the Bible. Instead of Exodus, we’ll be in the Gospel of Luke, looking at Christ’s forty days in the wilderness and the trials and temptations that followed. That’ll start next week.

Today, though we’re not at the very end of Exodus, we look at a passage that finds Israel uncertain, even scared, about being sent forward, away from Mt. Sinai, into the life and the journey they were called to. Let’s go to God’s Word.

[Read passage.]

Will you pray with me?

Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

For as friendly as these conversations were that Moses had with God in this tent of meeting, it seems to me Moses had been walking on eggshells the whole time, because there was an elephant in the room that wasn't being discussed. Israel is still camped at the foot of Mt. Sinai, and Moses would set up a tent outside of the camp. There in this tent, as this passage tells us, Moses would meet with God, and God would speak to Moses "face to face, as one speaks to a friend." The way it's worded makes it sound like this was a regular occurrence, but there was something they weren't talking about, at least not yet.

We're only two chapters after the passage we read last week, but there have been some monumental developments since that point. You see, in the passage last week the Lord was giving Moses instructions on how to build something called the tabernacle, a great tent in which the Lord would dwell among the Israelites—not to be confused with the temporary tent of meeting that Moses would set up outside of camp. Then to conclude those instructions, God gives a restatement of the call to rest on the Sabbath, to let both their work and their rest be a sign that they belonged to him.

It's all powerful stuff, but there was something I didn't tell you last week. All of those instructions, all of those callings to holy work and holy rest, Israel didn't actually hear them, at least not right then. You see, that whole time Moses was up on Mt Sinai. For forty days he was up there, receiving these instructions from God, but Israel wasn't in earshot. They were still down at the foot of the mountain, and as day after day went by, with no sign of Moses coming back down, they were getting worried. Where had God gone? Was God still with them?

And so, perhaps to relieve their worries, or just to have a god that didn't worry or frighten them so much, the Israelites pooled together their resources and made for themselves a golden calf, named it their god, who brought them out of Egypt, and celebrated.

The fallout was pretty drastic, terrifying even. Moses came down from the mountain to discover what Israel had done. Long story short, wrath, death, and plague were rolled into it, but when the dust settled, the Lord instructed Moses to prepare the Israelites to break camp and leave, telling him to take them to the land he had prepared for them but adding, "I will not go up among you, or I would consume you on the way."

This is where Moses is; this is where Israel is. As a people they had just committed an atrocious sin against their Lord, and now he was sending them away, saying on one hand he was sending them into the land he had promised them, but saying on the other he would not go up among them. So, they're caught in limbo. After weeks and weeks at the foot of the mountain, witnessing the visible signs of the presence of God, now they had to get ready to leave, back to reality, back to the journey, back to the grind, but it wasn't certain if God was coming with them.

Have you ever been there? Not that you've made a golden calf or anything, but worried, maybe even doubtful if God would be going with you, at your side, especially as you go back into what you might call reality, what you might call the journey, what you might call the grind, back to your daily labor, your work, the normal routines of life. That's what Israel was going into. Their normal since they left Egypt was being on the road, moving. And now they were going back to that. They had been on something of a spiritual retreat at Mt. Sinai—granted, one that went horribly wrong—but for weeks they had witnessed amazing things, times when it seemed God was closer. And when you come from those times, then when things go back to normal, you wonder, is God coming with me?

Have you ever thought that? Have you ever come out of time when God's presence seemed acute? Could have been a retreat, a mission trip, or even more broadly just an intense time, a time that wasn't ordinary, a time when you felt the Lord especially close, and there was a comfort in his presence. But then the dust settled, and

you go back to your daily life, your daily labor, and a little while later you wonder, where did that feeling go? Was God still with you?

That's what was uncertain for the Israelites; uncertain for Moses too. God was sending them on, and it wasn't quite clear whether God would be going with them. After all, they had just made the golden calf, and God had said "I will not go up among you, or I would consume you on the way."

And that was the elephant in the room. That was what had Moses walking on eggshells when he would speak with the Lord in that tent outside of camp. Moses wasn't exactly clear on this, and he didn't know what to tell the Israelites either. They were about to leave, and they didn't know if God would be going with them.

Until one day, Moses finally bucks up the courage. He says in verse 12 to the Lord, "See you have said to me, 'Bring up this people'; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, 'I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.'" In other words, "God, I don't know what to think here. What are we? We've got to have the DTR—that's the "define the relationship" talk. And Moses is being really subtle here; in some ways he's talking about his individual relationship with the Lord, and in others he's talking about Israel's relationship with the Lord, but he's bouncing between them almost—that's a whole 'nother topic, Moses the mediator, but this is a good example of it. Point is, he's asking God, "Who am I to you? Who are we to you? Are you going with us?"

And to that, despite what Israel had done, despite all the failures and shortcomings that Israel and Moses alike would do, the Lord speaks grace. He says in v. 14, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest."

Imagine the relief, the exhale, the release. All that uncertainty and anxiety as to whether they had screwed things up so badly that God would leave them, and to that fear, the Lord speaks peace, and grace, and faithfulness. "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest."

These past five weeks we've talked a lot about rest and work and what they're meant to be, how they're meant to be in harmony, and how easily they can be distorted. We've talked especially about the centrality of the Sabbath. It's a holy day of rest given to the Israelites that would be a sign to them of the Lord's favor to them, a reminder that the harmony of rest and work is baked into the very fabric of creation, a reminder of how the Lord had delivered them out of slavery. And throughout all of this time, you might have wondered what on earth you're supposed to do with it. Take a break once a week? Put work down for a day a week? I mean, sure, that can be a helpful practice. But if the only thing we hear about our daily labor is, you know, it's okay to take a break every now and then, that's not the gospel; that's not work redeemed and sanctified in the Lord, that's just work delayed.

Something deeper happens. When we hear the grace of the rest into which we are called, when we follow that call to rest from our labor, to rest in the Lord, when we commit to it, when we say, you know, whatever it is, it can wait, because it doesn't all depend on me, you know what happens? It's pretty amazing. It's not just the day of rest that changes. It's every other day that changes too. It's like we go out from rest, from time close with the Lord, time when we are disciplined in setting everything else aside that we might tune our hearts more attentively to the Lord's rhythms, and when we go back to reality, back to the journey, back to the grind, we realize that the Lord is in every other day too, that the Lord can be in every other task set before us. And that's something we could miss. That's something we might be uncertain of. But when we rest in the Lord, it recenters every other day around his glory, not our own.

It's what happened to Israel. Though after this point Israel's story certainly isn't a "happily ever after" sort of thing, the rest of Exodus is downright encouraging. If you read the rest of the book, what you'd see is a

people joining together, working together a second time, only this time not to make a golden calf, but to build the tabernacle and the ark of the covenant, a people joining together in the way God ordained, constructing this tangible sign of God's presence with them that would go with them.

What would happen if every day was like that? Of the people of God joining together in the Lord's work. Might be a glimpse of it in this "Love Your Neighbor" effort among our neighborhood houses of worship. It's not some big flashy program, but it's a reminder that everything we do can be a chance to convey the Lord's blessing and love and grace within our community.

What would happen if every day was like that? Not every day being a spiritual high, that's not the point. In fact, the point is recognizing that *not* every day would be this spiritual high or mountaintop experience or whatever name you want to put on it, but that every day in the normal rhythms of life, in your daily labor, in your journey, in the grind, is a day on which the presence of the Lord goes with you.

So friends, I hope you sense the presence of God in this time of worship on this day of rest, but I hope it doesn't stop there. I pray you hear the promise that the presence of God goes with you when things go back to normal. And amazing things happen when a people work and serve and move forward together, knowing that God goes with them.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.