

SUNDAY, MARCH 7, 2021

LENT 3B – TRADITIONAL

EXODUS 20:1-17

IT MAY SURPRISE YOU TO DISCOVER THAT EXODUS 20 BEGINS NOT WITH THE LAW BUT WITH THE GOSPEL: “AND GOD SPOKE ALL THESE WORDS: ‘I AM THE LORD YOUR GOD, WHO BROUGHT YOU OUT OF EGYPT, OUT OF THE LAND OF SLAVERY’” (VV. 1, 2). AS WE HAVE SEEN, THESE VERSES TEACH THAT THE LAW COMES FROM GOD — THE GREAT GOD OF THE COVENANT WHO REVEALED HIS GLORY ON THE MOUNTAIN. AND THIS GREAT GOD IS A GOD WHO SAVES!

AT THE BEGINNING OF CHAPTER 20 GOD SUMMARIZES THE WHOLE EPIC ADVENTURE OF THE EXODUS IN TWO SHORT PHRASES: “WHO BROUGHT YOU OUT OF EGYPT” AND “OUT OF THE LAND OF SLAVERY.” GOD WAS REMINDING HIS PEOPLE OF THE GOOD NEWS OF THEIR SALVATION. FOR CENTURIES THEY HAD LANGUISHED IN THE PRISON HOUSE OF PHARAOH. BUT BY SENDING TEN TERRIBLE PLAGUES, BY SAVING THEM THROUGH THE BLOOD OF A LAMB, BY HOLDING BACK THE SEA, AND BY PROVIDING BREAD IN THE WILDERNESS, GOD DELIVERED HIS PEOPLE. THEIR LIBERATION WAS *THE* GREAT SAVING EVENT OF THE OLD TESTAMENT.

ALMOST IMMEDIATELY AFTER HE SET HIS PEOPLE FREE, GOD GAVE THEM HIS LAW. THE ORDER IS SIGNIFICANT: FIRST THE GOSPEL, THEN THE LAW.

MANY CHRISTIANS THINK THAT THE LAW IS SOMEHOW OPPOSED TO THE GOSPEL. THEY ASSUME THAT IN THE OLD TESTAMENT SALVATION CAME BY LAW, WHEREAS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT SALVATION COMES BY GRACE. BUT THE TRUTH IS THAT SALVATION HAS ALWAYS COME BY GRACE, AND THAT THE LAW AND THE GOSPEL WORK TOGETHER FOR SALVATION IN *BOTH* TESTAMENTS. THE GRACE OF THE GOSPEL HAS NEVER BEEN OPPOSED TO THE PROPER USE OF THE LAW.

WE SEE THE LAW AND THE GOSPEL WORKING TOGETHER IN EXODUS, WHICH CONTAINS BOTH THE OLD TESTAMENT’S clearest example of salvation by grace and its fullest presentation of God’s law. IT’S IMPORTANT TO NOTE THAT GOD DID NOT GIVE ISRAEL THE TEN COMMANDMENTS UNTIL CHAPTER 20. CHAPTERS 1 — 19 COME

FIRST, AND THEY TELL THE STORY OF SALVATION BY GRACE — GOD FULFILLING HIS COVENANT PROMISE BY BRINGING ISRAEL OUT OF EGYPT. THEN COMES CHAPTER 20, IN WHICH GOD GIVES HIS PEOPLE A LAW BY WHICH TO LIVE.

DID I MENTION THAT GOD GAVE MOSES SPECIFIC INSTRUCTIONS ABOUT WHAT TO SAY TO THE PEOPLE **BEFORE** GIVING THEM THE COMMANDMENTS? ITS ALL RIGHT HERE IN THE BOOK OF EXODUS. OF COURSE, THE DEVIL WOULD PREFER THAT WE NEVER BOTHER TO LEARN OF THESE PRIOR INSTRUCTIONS. BECAUSE IT SUITS HIS PURPOSE TO QUOTE GOD’S WORDS OUT OF CONTEXT. IT ALWAYS HAS. IF HE CAN’T PERSUADE YOU TO STAY AWAY FROM THE BIBLE, THEN HE’LL TRY TO WRENCH GOD’S WORDS OUT OF THEIR RIGHTFUL SETTINGS.

THE RIGHTFUL SETTING FOR THE COMMANDMENTS IS GOD’S BOUNDLESS, FAITHFUL, FATHERLY LOVE. LOVE DOESN’T ALWAYS COME WRAPPED LIKE A VALENTINE IN PINK TIN FOIL WITH RED HEARTS. IT DOESN’T ALWAYS SHOW UP ON YOUR DOORSTEP ALL PRETTY AND SOFT. IT MIGHT EVEN BE WRITTEN IN STONE. OR ON A CROSS.

LISTEN TO THE WORDS GOD HAD MOSES TELL THE PEOPLE **BEFORE** GIVING THEM THE TABLETS. ***“YOU HAVE SEEN WHAT I DID TO THE EGYPTIANS, AND HOW I BORE YOU ON EAGLES WINGS AND BROUGHT YOU TO MYSELF.”*** WHY IN THE WORLD WOULD GOD SAY THAT?

WELL, THE ISRAELITES WHO ORIGINALLY HEARD THESE WORDS KNEW VERY WELL WHY. THE MEMORY WAS STILL FRESH IN THEIR MINDS. GOD WAS SAYING, ***“DO YOU REMEMBER WHEN YOU WERE TRAPPED IN EGYPT AND THERE WAS NO ESCAPE FROM BONDAGE AND TROUBLE? HOW YOU GROANED UNDER THE TERRIBLE CRUELTY OF YOUR TASKMASTERS? REMEMBER HOW YOU LOOKED AT YOUR CHILDREN AND REALIZED THAT THERE WAS NO HOPE OR FUTURE FOR THEM BEYOND CHAINS, AND LASHINGS, AND AN EARLY DEATH?***

***I HEARD YOUR CRIES. I CAME DOWN TO BUY YOU BACK OUT OF SLAVERY. DO YOU REMEMBER STANDING ON THE SHORE WITH THE SEA LAPPING AT YOUR FEET AND PHAROAH’S TROOPS BREATHING DOWN YOUR BACK? REMEMBER THE DESPAIR YOU FELT BECAUSE YOU COULDN’T GO FORWARD OR BACK AND DEATH WAS RIDING TOWARD YOU FULL STEAM, LIKE A CATEGORY 4 HURRICANE?***

***I MADE A WAY FOR YOU WHERE THERE WAS NO WAY. DO YOU REMEMBER? AND WHAT ABOUT THOSE DAYS IN THE WILDERNESS WHERE THERE WAS NOTHING TO EAT OR DRINK AND YOUR THROATS WERE DRY, AND YOUR LITTLE ONES CRIED FOR WATER? DO YOU REMEMBER***

*HOW I OPENED UP A FRESH STREAM THAT CAME GUSHING UP ALL OVER THE PARCHED DESERT FLOOR? REMEMBER HOW I FED YOU WITH MANNA AND THE BREAD OF ANGELS? DO YOU REMEMBER WHEN YOU FACED ARMIES GREATER AND STRONGER THAN YOU, HOW I FOUGHT FOR YOU? HOW I SWOOPED DOWN LIKE A MOTHER EAGLE RESCUING HER FALTERING CHICK? I SWOOPED DOWN AND BORE YOU UP ON EAGLE'S WINGS! REMEMBER?"*

THESE WORDS ARE THE CONTEXT FOR THE COMMANDMENTS. MAYBE THAT'S SOMETHING YOU'VE NEVER CONSIDERED BEFORE. DID THE LORD DELIVER THESE PEOPLE FROM 400 YEARS OF SLAVERY ONLY TO BROWBEAT THEM IN THE WILDERNESS? LOOK HOW MUCH GOD LONGED AFTER THEM AND DELIGHTED IN THEM AND PROVED HIS FAITHFULNESS TO THEM TIME AND AGAIN. WHY IN THE WORLD, WOULD HE TURN, THEN, FROM BEING A SERVING, SUSTAINING, GIVING GOD TO A SELFISH, DEMANDING DO-IT-MY-WAY-OR-ELSE GOD?

SEE, THIS LAW WAS FOR THOSE WHO HAD ALREADY BEEN REDEEMED. HERE WE NEED TO REMEMBER THE OVERARCHING THEME OF EXODUS: GOD'S PEOPLE ARE SAVED FOR GOD'S GLORY. THE PROBLEM WITH PHARAOH AND THE EGYPTIANS WAS NOT SIMPLY THAT IT WAS WRONG FOR THEM TO HOLD SLAVES, BUT THAT THEY WERE PREVENTING THE ISRAELITES FROM SERVING THEIR GOD. WITH THE EXODUS CAME A CHANGE OF MASTERS. GOD'S PEOPLE WERE RELEASED FROM THEIR BONDAGE TO PHARAOH IN ORDER TO SERVE THE TRUE AND LIVING GOD — NOT AS CAPTURED SLAVES BUT AS LIBERATED SONS AND DAUGHTERS. THE LAW THAT GOD GAVE THEM AT THE TIME OF THEIR EMANCIPATION WAS NOT A NEW FORM OF BONDAGE, THEREFORE, BUT A FREEDOM CHARTER. IT WAS JUST BECAUSE GOD'S PEOPLE HAD BEEN SAVED BY GRACE THAT THEY WERE NOW FREE TO LIVE BY THE LAW OF HIS COVENANT COMMUNITY. THEY HAD BEEN REDEEMED; *THEREFORE*, THEY WERE NOT TO HAVE ANY OTHER GODS, MAKE ANY IDOLS, AND SO ON. GOD DID NOT SET HIS PEOPLE FREE SO THEY COULD DO WHATEVER THEY WANTED, BUT SO THEY COULD LIVE FOR HIM. THIS WAS THE WHOLE POINT OF THE EXODUS. AND THIS IS ONE OF THE LAW'S MOST IMPORTANT USES: TO TEACH PEOPLE WHO HAVE BEEN REDEEMED HOW TO LIVE FOR THE GLORY OF THEIR GOD.

EVERY ONE OF THE COMMANDS THE LORD SETS BEFORE US ARE DESIGNED TO BRING ABOUT BLESSING AND LIFE AND PEACE. HIS COMMANDS ARE A GIFT OF LOVE IN AN UNCERTAIN AND DANGEROUS WORLD.

HOW THEN SHOULD WE RESPOND TO SUCH A GIFT? BEFORE GOD GAVE THE TEN COMMANDMENTS, HE TOLD MOSES TO PREPARE THE ISRAELITES FOR HIS VISIT. THEY WERE TO SANCTIFY THEMSELVES AND WASH THEIR CLOTHES. WHEN GOD COMES DOWN TO VISIT YOUR CAMP, IT WILL REQUIRE SOMETHING OF YOU. SOMETHING LIKE REVERENCE AND EXPECTANCY. SOMETHING LIKE HUMILITY, AND AWE. HOW MIGHT YOU AND I PREPARE

OURSELVES FOR WHATEVER IT IS THAT GOD MIGHT LIKE TO GIVE US OR SAY TO US – EVEN IN THE PAGES OF SCRIPTURE?

GOD KNOWS THAT HURT AND DESTRUCTION AWAIT THOSE WHO SPEED CARELESSLY THROUGH LIFE WITHOUT REGARD FOR HIS WORD. JUST ONE WRONG CHOICE CAN SET US OFF ON A ROAD FROM WHICH THERE IS NO EASY RETURN. AND WE’VE ALL MADE WRONG TURNS. SOME DELIBERATELY. SOME OUT OF SIMPLE IGNORANCE. BUT THE BEST TURN IS ALWAYS TOWARD HIM. *FOR HE IS GRACIOUS AND MERCIFUL, AND ABOUNDING IN STEADFAST LOVE.*

GOD LOVINGLY GIVES US PARAMETERS AND BOUNDARIES – TEN OF THEM – THAT ARE LITERALLY A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH. MARTIN LUTHER MARVELED, NOT AT THE EXCESSIVE DEMANDS OF THE TEN COMMANDMENTS, BUT IN THEIR BREVITY. THINK OF ALL THAT THE LORD COULD HAVE DEMANDED OF US. LOOK HOW LOVINGLY HE MINIMIZED THE EXPECTATIONS, SO THAT WE MIGHT AVOID CALAMITY. WHEN GOD ADDRESSES US, SAYS LUTHER – GOD, SPEAKS BABY TALK. A LITERAL TRANSLATION OF THE HEBREW READS, **“YOU NO KILL. YOU NO STEAL. YOU NO LIE.”** THANK GOD WE DON’T NEED A POST-GRADUATE DEGREE TO DO WELL IN LIFE!

IN MOSES’ DAY, THE EMPHASIS WAS ON OBEDIENCE TO A GOD THEY GREATLY FEARED BUT HARDLY KNEW. A GOD WHO CAME DOWN ON THE MOUNTAIN IN A DARK CLOUD WITH EARTHQUAKES AND FLASHES OF LIGHTNING. IN OUR DAY, WE COME TO A GOD WE KNOW IN JESUS CHRIST, WHO LIVED AND DIED FOR US AND NOW PLEADS OUR CASE BEFORE THE FATHER’S THRONE.

UP THERE ON THE MOUNTAIN, MOSES LEARNED WHY ISRAEL WAS FREED FROM SLAVERY IN EGYPT. THEY WERE TO SERVE GOD ALONE. THEY WERE TO BE PEOPLE OF INTEGRITY. THE LORD’S SPECIAL TREASURE. A KINGDOM OF PRIESTS, A HOLY NATION, A LIGHT TO THE WORLD, SO THE LIKES OF YOU AND ME MIGHT COME TO KNOW THE TRUTH.

THE LAST THING THEY NEEDED WAS TO BE ENSLAVED AGAIN, ONLY THIS TIME TO THEIR FLEETING PASSIONS AND WHIMS. THAT’S HOW IT IS WITH YOU AND ME, TOO. **SO GOD SENT US HIS LOVE, WRITTEN IN STONE. LATER, IT WOULD BE WRITTEN IN BLOOD. WHO COULD QUESTION SUCH A LOVE AS THAT? IN THE NAME OF JESUS. AMEN**