

2/14/2021

Sermon Series: The Big Picture

Exodus 20:1-21

Then God gave the people all these instructions:

“I am the Lord your God, who rescued you from the land of Egypt, the place of your slavery.

“You must not have any other god but me.

“You must not make for yourself an idol of any kind or an image of anything in the heavens or on the earth or in the sea. You must not bow down to them or worship them, for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God who will not tolerate your affection for any other gods. I lay the sins of the parents upon their children; the entire family is affected—even children in the third and fourth generations of those who reject me. But I lavish unfailing love for a thousand generations on those[b] who love me and obey my commands.

“You must not misuse the name of the Lord your God. The Lord will not let you go unpunished if you misuse his name.

“Remember to observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. You have six days each week for your ordinary work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath day of rest dedicated to the Lord your God. On that day no one in your household may do any work. This includes you, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, your livestock, and any foreigners living among you. For in six days the Lord made the heavens, the earth, the sea, and everything in them; but on the seventh day he rested. That is why the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and set it apart as holy.

“Honor your father and mother. Then you will live a long, full life in the land the Lord your God is giving you.

“You must not murder.

“You must not commit adultery.

“You must not steal.

“You must not testify falsely against your neighbor.

“You must not covet your neighbor’s house. You must not covet your neighbor’s wife, male or female servant, ox or donkey, or anything else that belongs to your neighbor.”

When the people heard the thunder and the loud blast of the ram’s horn, and when they saw the flashes of lightning and the smoke billowing from the mountain, they stood at a distance, trembling with fear.

And they said to Moses, “You speak to us, and we will listen. But don’t let God speak directly to us, or we will die!”

“Don’t be afraid,” Moses answered them, “for God has come in this way to test you, and so that your fear of him will keep you from sinning!”

As the people stood in the distance, Moses approached the dark cloud where God was.

The Big Picture: Community Part 2: Sinai

So you probably have noticed, the sanctuary is decorated differently from last Sunday! The paraments or the altar cloth color has changed from green to purple, the altar looks completely different than usual (these beautiful wooden candle holders were made by Pastor Gary and they are just beautiful! I've been waiting to use them for a very special purpose). And then also you'll see some new arrangements up here in front of the pulpit and lectern – they aren't exactly flower arrangements, though. They are made of pieces of wood and dried grassy stuff and greenery, all kind of like bare looking materials looking. And there's some stones up here around them, too. Why all these changes, you might be asking?

This past Wednesday was the first day of a new church calendar season called Lent. It's a season of 40 days (minus Sunday's) leading up to Easter Sunday. And many of you were here for the Ash Wednesday service but, I want to put **this slide** up for us again as a reminder and for those who weren't able to make it on Wednesday. Lent is a time when we:

Look to the cross and see God's love for us there

Examine our lives and see our sin

Negate some pleasure in your life to identify with the suffering of Jesus

Turn away and repent from our sin

With all these actions, during Lent we, as followers of Jesus, are actively and intentionally seeking to empathize with Jesus' 40 days in the desert wilderness as he was tested and tempted in every way – body, mind, and soul. And we do this because by identifying with Jesus' suffering and learning to depend on God in the wilderness, we can better do what Paul says in his letter to the Hebrews, *“let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.”* (Hebrews 12:1b-2a, NIV) Another translation of the Bible says it this way: *“let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us. We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith.”* (NLT)

Lent is about this very thing for followers of Jesus – throwing off the sin that so easily trips us up and setting our eyes toward Jesus, toward the cross where the greatest action of love was ever made, his sacrifice of his

life for ours. As Jesus spent 40 days in the desert wilderness, we allow ourselves to enter into our own season of intentional wilderness, because it's there where we will learn to depend on God all the more.

And so, these decorations around the pulpit, lectern, and altar are meant to make us think of the wilderness - harsh and tough, prickly and rocky, even just a little, within the walls of this beautiful sanctuary of ours.

So now that we have a sense of our own journey within this season of 40 days, let's turn to our good ole' friends, the Israelites, who don't know it yet in this part of the Biblical story, but they're at the beginning of a 40 year journey through the wilderness.

But instead of *me* giving a recap of our Biblical story so far and where we are now, let's let The Bible Project do that...

Video: Look up on YouTube "The Bible Project: The Law" from October 15, 2015. Or type in this link to your internet browser:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3BGO9Mmd_cU

There we go – it covered all the big “C’s” of our story so far: Creation, Catastrophe, Covenant, and Community (the Exodus) which is what we covered last week – which was the event that deeply shaped God’s people

as a people who had been protected during the **Passover** and then rescued, brought out from the land of the people who had enslaved them for 400 years. And now, we come to the **second half** of the “Community” chapter of our story, characterized by the commandments that God had given Moses to give to the people as he met with God on Mt. Sinai, **10 of which** are the verses from Exodus 20 that Kristen/Dina read for us (sorry for so many verses, Kristen/Dina!) We couldn’t just read 5 of the 10 commandments, right? We had to hear all of them!

The book that we’re reading through, *The Story of God, The Story of Us*, helped me understand the purpose of God’s commandments in a deeper way when I read the Community Part 2 chapter. It says this: “What is the point of these specific conditions? (meaning the 10 commandments...and all the other laws to follow in the Old Testament). The Israelites had lived among the multitude of Egypt’s gods for centuries, and so [these commandments were given] to help them understand that they were to worship God (the one true God) alone...these practices would nurture them from a group of slaves into a holy nation--people made in the image of God who would reveal the character of God to the peoples around them.” pp. 88-90

And so, God had Moses write down kind of a “how to be God’s holy people” cheat sheet for them with these commandments. But the problem was... that these people could not seem to “pass the test” – even with the cheat sheet! Most of the rest of the Old Testament books continue to show how the Israelites just can’t seem to get it right – no matter how many cheat sheets of laws God gives them - and later on in Israel’s history God even sends tutors (aka prophets) who each try to tell the Israelites the right way to be God’s chosen and holy people.

Well, Moses and the Israelites end up wandering in the desert for 40 years because they can’t seem to get their act together and live the way God wants them to live – people who understand that they are blessed to be a blessing. So...if they can’t seem to listen to God in the wilderness, when there is *only* God to depend on, they don’t do a good job convincing God that they (these “stiff-necked people”) as he calls them will be able to depend on him when they move into the Promised Land?

It’s like a kid saying, “Mom, dad, can I get a new bike?” and the parent says to their child, “Johnny, you just wrecked your bike...what makes you think I can trust you to take care of a new one? No, you’re not getting a new bike, at least not yet, until you can prove to me that you’re

more responsible.” Moses’ generation never proved to God that they were ready to live in the freedom and prosperity of the promised land because of how much they fell back into their old, sinful ways they were used to in Egypt. God told Moses over and over, and Moses told the people over and over, but it took a loooooong time for this unruly, massive, wandering group of ex-slaves to learn what it means to be God’s people.

But ya know what...? I know I can’t judge those Israelites because I know inside my own heart I’m unruly and I wander away from God’s ways and I sometimes feel like I’m still a person living under slavery to sin and death...even though I know Jesus – the one who has already overcome sin and death by his death and resurrection. The story of the Israelites’ failure to follow God’s ways over and over and over, is our story too. Each of us has that same human original flaw that pulls us toward the very things that are not good for us. That is exactly why we need Jesus. That is exactly why we need the power of God’s Spirit in our lives – to help us overcome the power of sin and death.

During our Thursday night zoom Bible study last week we were talking about this pull toward darkness and away from light as we studied

the beginning of John 1. And as we talked about this, someone reminded us of the hymn “This is My Father’s World,” one of his favorites as a child, and the line that he pointed out was the one that says,

“This is my Father’s world:

O let me ne'er forget

That though the wrong seems oft so strong,

God is the Ruler yet.”

As John 1:5 reminded us again Thursday night, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” And that light that John 1:5 is referring to is Jesus – the One who has come to set the captives free!

We all have this rebellious heart within us – this original flaw that makes us bent toward sinning... and it is only by knowing and following Jesus, allowing the Holy Spirit to prune things off in us and grow new fruit, and consistently reflecting on our lives and repenting from our sins that we can allow God to soften our hardened hearts, hearts that are just as naturally hard as those Israelites from our Biblical story. Do you want a hard heart or a softened heart? The choice is ours to make, every day, step by step, moment by moment with Jesus.

And so is the journey of Lent. Lent is our invitation into the desert, to the wilderness, to learn to depend on God all the more.

Video – Motion Worship “Desert Prayer”

Our flesh and our hearts may fail,

but God is the strength of our hearts

and our portion forever.

May these words of Psalm 73:26 be our prayer as we journey through the wilderness of Lent together with Jesus. Amen.