

ON EAGLES' WINGS

VII. 'God's Special Treasure'

10-23-05
Ken Peterson

Exodus 19:1-8

TEXT: *'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt,
and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.
Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant,
then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession.
Although the whole earth is mine,
you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.'* (Ex 19:4-6)

INTRODUCTION

Two cows were grazing in a pasture when they saw a milk truck pass. On the side of the truck were the words, "Pasteurized, homogenized, standardized, vitamins A & D added." One cow sighed and said to the other, "Makes you feel sort of inadequate, doesn't it?"

There is much in our world to make us feel inadequate. All of us experience put-downs and one-upmanship. We strive for acceptance by others. One of our great needs is to capture a vision of what God thinks of us. A materialistic world view may define us as merely highly evolved mammals but the Bible informs us we are made in the image of God. While right now, we may not have the power and glory of angels, the Bible informs us we are going to judge angels one day (1 Cor. 6:3), which to me implies we will be even above them.

Gaining a healthy sense of who we really are in God's eyes is a difficult process. It has been an underlying theme in these first 18 chapters of Exodus. God has come to His people's aid when they were suffering and in terrible bondage, threatened to be wiped out. In miracle after miracle, He has revealed to them His nature and His love for them. All this is treated as an example of God's redemption through Christ for us in 1 Cor. 10:1-6;

- including Christ, the Lamb of God's death for our sins,
- the passing through the waters of the Red Sea as modeling our baptism,
- the cloud as the Spirit leading them
- and the manna as Jesus the Bread of Life.

It is now three months after the exodus and Mt. Sinai is about as far as they can go in the opposite direction of the promised land. Here it is that they stop for an extended period of instruction from God. It takes a lot more than freedom to form people into a community as "one nation under God with liberty and justice for all," to quote from our nation's pledge to the flag. Salvation is a wonderful, quickly transforming work of grace. Becoming a community of God's people is quite another matter. It is slow work.

In the first three months of their salvation, there are 14 references to the people's incapacity for community: they "complain" nine times, "quarrel" three times, and disobey twice. Last Sunday

we considered two major occasions for their grumbling. In an instance we didn't consider last week when they ran out of water again (Ex. 17:1-7), Moses narrowly missed being stoned to death. Then, when Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, visits in Ex. 18, he is alarmed because Moses is spending all his time from morning to evening settling arguments and fights in this quarrelsome bunch. Jethro helped Moses organize a judicial system to spread out the work load. This is not an inspiring beginning for God's people. While they've experienced God's saving power, they have a lot to learn about getting along in community.

Here at Sinai, God begins a serious tutorial in what it means to live as God's people in relationship with each other. He begins by telling them who they really are in relation to Him. Then he gives them the rules to live by, summarized in the Ten Commandments, followed by detailed instructions on worship. This all comprises the whole last half of Exodus. The first half is the story of salvation and deliverance. The last half about how to live in that salvation. This morning we're looking at how God begins their Sinai school.

READ Ex. 19:1-8

“MY TREASURED POSSESSION”

We've come full circle now. This is probably the place of Moses' earlier call from the burning bush in chapter 3. It is generally thought Mt. Horeb and Mt. Sinai are the same. Now it is not just the bush on fire, but the whole mountain. It is no longer just Moses listening to God's call but all of Israel. Listen again to God's opening statement:

...I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.

Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant,

then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession.

Although the whole earth is mine,

you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' (Ex 19:4b-6)

Here are three awesome definitions of who these Israelites are.

1. “My treasured possession”– the Hebrew conveys something very costly, of high value.
2. “A kingdom of priests”– they are called out to minister to the rest of the nations on earth.
3. “A holy nation”– this new life is meant to be lived in peaceful community.

Watching these people over the last three months, would you have even guessed at such a definition of them? I'm reminded of a charming story of a little girl who visited a sculptor as he started work on a fresh block of marble. Many weeks later, the girl came by again to see a lion taking shape from the marble. Astonished, the little girl tilted her head to one side and asked, “Did you know all the time that there was a lion inside?”

It is amazing what God sees in us! He sees potential and possibilities beyond our imagining. That is why it is so important to keep coming to God for His view of who we are. This world continually devalues us. We are a number, we get lost in menu options on the phone when we're trying to get a real person, and our forms get lost amid bureaucratic mazes. Does anyone listen to us and really hear our unique circumstances? But then, listen to what Jesus tells us,

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart

from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows. (Matt 10:29-31)

These Israelites have been, in essence, “nobodies” in Egypt. For at least the last century, they’ve been slaves. Their lives have been totally controlled by their Egyptian masters. They didn’t even have freedom in their family life, for the Egyptians began ordering all male children killed at birth. The relationship between the Israelites and Egyptians has been highly abusive. And, as in any abusive relationship, the self-esteem of the one abused is in the pits. We see this in abused children or abused spouses— they feel worthless and incapable of doing much to change anything. Their wills are broken and they’ve been put down so long they’ve just given up.

Now God is giving them a new vision of themselves— a glimpse of how He sees them. God believes in them and has chosen them out of all the nations of the earth for a special mission. Remember, this is the Creator of the universe telling them this. When someone who is important to you *really* believes in you and your potential, it makes a world of difference, doesn’t it? Maybe you can remember a teacher or another important person in your life who gave you a new vision of your potential and it turned your life around.

It is against the backdrop of this positive motivation the condition is set, *if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then* When someone believes in us, it makes us want to obey them, doesn’t it? You want to live up to their expectations. You want to be greater than you are. As someone prayed, “Lord, help me to be the person my dog thinks I am.”

Perhaps that has been some of the Israelites problem so far on the journey. When we feel worthless, we care little about our behavior. When people lose a sense of who they are, they try to define their life by their circumstances and possessions. If things are going well, we’re okay. If they go badly, we grumble. If our value is tied up in things or the people we know, then all these things take on a false importance. We push, shove, and scramble to be on top of the heap. But, if we know we are loved and cared for by God, we can be content no matter what happens in the world around us because we are God’s child.

Writer, Steve Goodier, tells of an older friend of his, Bill, who developed Alzheimer’s disease. Bill had an active, productive professional life, including being on the University of Denver’s Board of Trustees. During his decline, the trustees urged him to stay on. One of the board members drove him to the meetings and brought him back home. His wife knew he remained on the board in name only and their decision to keep him was out of compassion. But Bill seemed to enjoy going to the meetings. After he returned from one such meeting of the trustees, his wife asked him, “Did you have a good meeting, Bill?” He thought for a moment before replying, and then said quite honestly, “I don’t know.” Then after a pause, he added this heartfelt comment, “But they still think I’m a people.”

At this point in their journey, this contentious bunch God has saved from Egypt need to know they are still God’s people.

But, there needs to be more than just loving affirmation here for Israel. They need to also respect God, know that He is holy. And the rest of this chapter emphasizes that.

Exodus 19:9-25

GOD IS HOLY

We live in an age that has grown rather careless about God. Today, people often see God as a great benevolent being, exceedingly permissive, and good-naturedly winking at our sins. This chapter forms a healthy corrective for that viewpoint.

The preparations for God's appearance here are elaborate. The people are to be consecrated, that is set apart for holy use, for three days. It involves washing their clothes and setting limits so they cannot approach the mountain. (I wonder if this is where the Saturday night bath came from and the idea of coming to church clean). Everything here is meant to communicate to them that this is a big deal, and it is *very* important. We prepare to meet God.

Do you remember the flap over the championship girls lacrosse team that met with the President this last summer wearing flip-flops on their feet? Many in the press saw this as disrespectful of the office. And, I think most of us realize when you are invited to the White House, you dress appropriately because it is a huge honor.

Jesus' coming has made God more approachable for us because our sins are forgiven. We can enter into His presence now. We don't need an intermediary as Moses was here. But the basic facts remain unchanged. God is holy. We are sinners, redeemed by faith in Christ. Our washing is the "washing of regeneration" (Titus 3:5). Yet, we must never dismiss the seriousness of our sin. The cross remains as the final statement on what sin does.

It is to our peril we fail to treat God with awe and respect, obeying what He calls us to. I think it was about 20 years ago that there was a serious earthquake in Mexico City. In it, a hospital collapsed, and in the rubble, there was some radioactive cesium used in radiation treatments. Children were fascinated by the glow of the material— handling it, playing with it, and even taking it home. It seemed and felt totally harmless. But, sadly, the consequences were longer in coming. Weeks later many of them were fatally ill with radiation sickness.

Often our casualness about God and disobeying His commands seems harmless. It seems like playing with sin is fun and rather harmless. But it is affecting us in ways we are not aware of at the time. Respect and awe are needed for us to take God seriously and obey His word. Here at Mt. Sinai, God is teaching them this important lesson. While He loves them extravagantly, that doesn't mean God can be controlled, manipulated, or made to fit into how they want things. He is to be approached with reverence.

What that reverence feels like is maybe a little like our instinctive feeling in coming upon a

scene of incredible beauty when we're hiking. It is something totally beyond our doing or control. We catch our breath and stand in awe and silence drinking it in. There is a feeling of basking in its beauty. It is wholly "other"—yet something we feel privileged to behold. Wonder and awe are adjectives that come to mind.

That is the proper perspective for us to approach God. The thunder, smoke, and loud trumpets are all ways God is warning the Israelites to not be flippant in their relationship with God. Yet it also inspires awe. It is as we understand that God is bigger, greater than we can imagine, more wonderful than can be described, that we feel a pull to become more like Him— to follow the path He's prescribed for us.

CONCLUSION

An old Norwegian legend tells of a boy walking in the woods where he found a nest that had fallen to the ground. In it was an unbroken egg about the size of a goose egg, so he took it home and put it with other eggs under a female goose. When the egg hatched, it was the strangest looking goose the boy had ever seen. It's feet were deformed with no webs and the toes were curled with claws on the end. It stumbled around trying to follow the mother goose and other goslings. The beak wasn't flat, but pointed and hooked. Instead of the lovely cream-colored down of the other goslings, this one had ugly brown feathers. And, to top it off, it made a terrible squawking noise instead of the honking sound of geese. The boy was puzzled about what he had.

Then one day, a large eagle flew across the barnyard, circling and sweeping lower and lower. This little misfit creature lifted its head and looked into the sky as he heard the cry of the eagle. Then, answering some latent inborn memory, the little guy began flapping his wings and soon was airborne soaring with the other eagle. He found his true calling. While he thought he was a misshapen goose and tried to live like a goose, he was really an eagle.

God calls us to be who we really are, created in His image. But until we realize that, we can be like an eagle trying to live like a goose. That is what God is awakening in Israel here at Mt. Sinai. But He's gone even further with us. God's call comes to us in Jesus Christ. In Him we see what He's called us to be— living with power, purpose, character, nobility, and overflowing love.

Peter seems to have our text in mind when he writes these words in 1 Peter 2:9-12. We used some of these words in our call to worship and they are good words to close on. This is who you really are in Christ Jesus.

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that,

though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

ON EAGLES' WINGS

VII. "God's Special Treasure" For Further Study and Reflection from Sermon 10-23-05

Scripture: Exodus 19

1. Is there something in this sermon that seems particularly applicable to your life now?
2. What specific things did God expect from the Israelites in Ex. 19:5? And what would be their reward for doing this?
3. Reflect on God's description of His purposes for Israel in Ex. 19:4-6. Do those descriptions also apply to us? Is there one of these expressions you find especially meaningful now?

Compare this to 1 Pet. 2:9-10. Note the similarities and differences. How does this description of a Christian make you feel?

4. We too have been chosen by Jesus. Read Jn. 15:16. Can you recall a time when someone chose you for something special or gave you a new vision of your potential? How did this make you feel? How did it change you?
5. Did the Israelites agree to follow God's instructions (Ex. 19:8)? Did they keep their promise? (Consider Ex. 32).

Is that similar to your experience? Talk about it.

6. Moses is given a tough job. How is God supporting him in this in Ex. 19:9?

Recall some of the other ways Moses has experienced God's support.

Most of us are leaders in some way— perhaps in your family, at work, in a social setting, or in a church position.

Are there ways you've experienced God's support in that position? Tell about it.

7. Read Ex. 19:16-19. Describe the sights and sounds as God comes down on Mt. Sinai to meet with Moses.

Imagine yourself there. How would you have reacted?

What are some of the results you can imagine in the people from this display and how does it prepare them for receiving the law (the Ten Commandments)?