

Journey Through Exodus: The Church, Exile, and Covid-19

Session 3 January 17, 2021

In our second of three sessions we discussed Moses' encounter with God in Exodus 3, the story of the plagues, and the directive to pass on to children and grandchildren God's saving acts. We talked about how those seven active verbs in Exodus 3 show that God is active, compassionate, and attentive to his children on Earth. God is big enough to handle our objections and angry prayers, as shown by Moses' vociferous objections in chapters 3-4.

We began a conversation about what we might be learning during this "plague" of Covid. What do we want to pass on to our children?

In this third and final session on Exodus, I'd like for us to focus on two of the dominant themes of Exodus in the remaining chapters: the worship of God and God's presence.

Read Exodus 20:1-2; 25:8-9; 31:1-11; and 40:34-38.

As you read, here are some questions to ponder:

1. Why do you think the Ten Commandments show up in chapter 20? Why did God not give the commandments earlier, say, before the Passover?
2. Why might God be so intent on detailing the way to worship God and how to approach God in worship?
3. What does our worship say about the God we believe in?
4. How does God make his presence known in Exodus? List the ways.
5. What is the significance of God appearing in a cloud? Couldn't God have just handed the Israelites a map and pointed at the Promised Land and said "meet me here?"

More detailed notes follow for those who are interested.

Exodus 20:1-2

- As you read the Ten Commandments, pay attention to the opening words. They begin with what God has done to save Israel. The law does not come until grace has been announced. Compare to the way Jesus begins the Sermon on the Mount with the Beatitudes, followed by the “new law.”
- I am the Lord YOUR God...notice the relationship is becoming possessive and intimate.
- The words are spoken to Israel, but they were overwhelming. Read 20:19 to see how Israel responds. What do they do? They demand that Moses become a mediator. They are afraid that without a mediator they will die.
- “The popular English title “The Ten Commandments” is derived from the traditional, although inaccurate, English rendering of the Hebrew phrase ‘aseret ha-devarim that appears in Exodus 34:28 and in Deuteronomy 4:13 and 10:4.”¹ This Hebrew phrase means “the Ten Words.”
- I will focus in only on the first commandment: “you shall have no other gods before me.”
- In Hebrew, a literal translation would be more like “Other gods shall not be to you.” What might this mean? All those other Elohim (Hebrew word for “gods” and also “God”) are not “to be” because they do not exist. This is the beginning of monotheism.
- The verb for “to be” is used in intimate relationships like entering into a marriage or a covenant.

Exodus 25:8-9

- The sections on the Tabernacle in Exodus are probably the parts of the Bible where people skip over. They are perplexed by the Bible’s tedious attention

¹ Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus* (The JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 107–108.

to detail and figure that it describes a long dead form of worship which has no applicability to our way of experiencing God.

- The author of Exodus thought the material important enough to devote a 1/3 of the Book to its explication.
- God shows Moses a “pattern” or “model” of what the sanctuary looks like. Many commentators supposed that there was a heavenly model that the earthly version was based on.
- The word for sanctuary is *mishkan*, which comes from a root word for a transitory encampment. This is not where God *lives*; rather, it is where God’s presence is *in-dwelling*.
- Because the Lord’s holiness was dangerous to the people, there are several intermediary steps between God’s presence and the people.
- Many have observed similarities between the “sanctuary” of the Garden of Eden with its cherubim and flaming sword, and the tabernacle of Exodus.
- What is the point of the tabernacle? We discover that in Exodus 29:45-46:
 - *I will dwell among the people of Israel and will be their God. And they shall know that I am the LORD their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell among them. I am the LORD their God.*

Exodus 31:1-11

- We meet two craftsmen named Bezaliel and Oholiab who are tasked with constructing the Tabernacle. Interestingly, Exodus devotes a huge chunk of its narrative to the repetitive description of the construction of the Tabernacle. Bezaliel and Oholiab will show up again in chapter 35? Why? In between the narratives of construction can be found the pivotal story of Israel’s apostasy in chapter 32, the so-called golden calf incident. Here, the existence of Israel and the Covenant is threatened with extinction.
- The Covenant is made anew and so too are the instructions for the Tabernacle. The differences are striking, however. In the second account

beginning chapter 35, it is all of Israel which is summoned to construct the Tabernacle. God accepts offerings from those who have “willing” hearts. (Exodus 35: 21).

- Those with “ability” are to make contributions to the worship of God in this space (Exodus 31:3).
- The two craftsmen are from the tribes of Judah and Dan. We are likely given that detail to show that the Tabernacle is constructed by folk who represent all of Israel.

Exodus 40:34-38

- The ending of the Book of Exodus focuses appropriately on its fundamental theme: the presence of God with God’s people.
- God’s presence is localized in a cloud. For other references to this, look at Exodus 13:21; 14:19, 20, 24; 16:10; 19:9, 16; 24:15, 16, 18; 33:9-19; 34:5.
- Genesis ends with Israel *in Egypt*. Exodus ends with the people of God on the move, and God is with them...during “each stage of the journey.”

Daniel's connecting thoughts between Exodus, Covid-19 & NDBC:

1. Like the midwives and other “hidden figures” of Exodus, there are many “hidden figures” in NDBC and in your personal lives. These people may not be as visible, but they are acting for the common good based on deep personal conviction.
2. During a time of plagues we become numb to the accumulation of “bad news.” After the 3rd or 4th plague in a row, much like Pharaoh, we are so numb we may not be able to feel and be passionate about the fifth plague, and so on.
3. Our hearts might get hardened during this journey because of the sheer accumulation of bad news. How do we as a church and a people recover the “good news”?
4. Just like Israel in the Exodus, there is no going back to “the way it was before.” There will be a recovery of tradition as there always is, but our life together has been changed by the pandemic. How do we start living in a way that prepares us for that good tomorrow, rather than the unrecoverable “yesterday”?
5. We can begin by identifying practices that help us move forward on the journey. What are those practices?
 - a. Renewed sense of generosity (missions)
 - b. Focus on portable media (Tabernacle on the move)
 - c. Tell the stories of our octogenarians to pass on examples of faith to our children
 - d. Look for where the Spirit is at work
6. We are in a time of transition at NDBC. During transition times we encounter excitement, confusion, reservation, and denial.
7. It is common for there to be a range of emotions: anxiety, resistance, confusion, but there is also space for great creativity and movement.
8. If we think of God’s presence as “in the cloud” leading us on a journey, we will be less attached to knowing where the destination is.