

Sermon, 5 October 2008—Proper 22

Exodus 20:1-20; Psalm 19; Philippians 3:4-14; Matthew 21:33-46

Mount Sinai is the pivot of the history of Israel. Before this, they are an extended family; after this, they are a nation. The giving of the Law raises the other end of the beam so that, from now on, the children of Abraham are the people of Israel. Something marvelous is taking place.

However, something tragic is occurring on Sinai as well, something tragic enough for us even to consider the political birth a consolation prize. Once again in the history of salvation, God, for love's sake, wrests hope from loss. The entire journey of these escaped Hebrew slaves through the wilderness, during which they complain and pout and throw tantrums, is about leaving behind, not only Egypt, but the formation they received in Egypt. We laugh with sad recognition at their endless "are we there yet?," which is followed by "this is it?" when they get there. But what that really points to is the unimaginative inertia of psychological childhood, the mind of slavery, the preference for dependency. God, in these ten words spoken from the heights of Sinai directly to the chosen people, is calling them to self-discipline and self-awareness and maturity. But their response is a failure of relationship, a protective shrinking, a choice of safety over glory.

These stories were written down, not at the time, of course, but centuries later. In them, we watch the writers of Scripture, not simply tell the story of the people of Israel, but go through a process of self-scrutiny and of self-analysis and of self-criticism. They are offering to guide us through troubling questions: what are human beings like? what is the human way of relating to God? what is the hidden and persistent flaw that keeps us from being what we might be? and always what is God calling us to be?

Remember what happened on the ascent to this pivot point and what will happen on the descent. As the story is told in the Book of Exodus, God achieved for himself glory over the gods of Egypt by deploying ten horrific annihilating plagues, reducing the land of Egypt to ruin and the Pharaoh to quivering wretchedness; and Moses told these former slaves to strip their former masters of their gold and to leave Egypt behind. They received this freedom, though, only as a gift, without the external work of achievement and the interior work of transformation. The stories that follow underscore this. Trapped against the edge of the Red Sea, with the army of Egypt closing in behind them, they screamed to Moses, “were there no graves in Egypt for us to die there?;” and Moses told them to remain still and let God fight for them, and the sea opened for them, but closed over their pursuers. In the depth of the wilderness, they wailed to Moses, “at least in Egypt we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread, but you have brought us out to die of starvation;” and Moses told them they would see the glory of the Lord in the morning, and in the morning manna covered the ground. In the heat of the desert, they complained to Moses, “why did you bring us out of Egypt to kill us with thirst?;” and Moses asked them, “why do you test the Lord?,” but, at God’s command he struck a rock and water burst out.

The story we hear today runs along the same spoiled arc of evasion; as we will see next Sunday, it will lead only to resentment and self-destructive action. This intense encounter at Sinai is what God—always a rather dotty lover and unrealistic when it comes to relating to human beings in their raw and unaltered form—had promised Moses. Remember, Moses’ response to God’s call was not an eager affirmative—he also is a true example of the human type these writers are trying to understand. At Moses’ first protest, God, rather touchingly it seems to me, says, “I will be with you; and this will

be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.”

By the way, this is already astonishing. We would expect a “sign” to be some token that reassures us *before* we take the risk of action. If you want me to put down what I am doing and do some unlikely thing, then show me first by what authority you are asking me to act. God instead tells Moses that the legitimating sign is in the future: act first, then you will find the rightness of the request confirmed by the result; what comes *after* will be your sign. (Remember that this is what the angel told the shepherds when Jesus was born: go to Bethlehem, take the action of abandoning your sheep and hastening to the village, and *there* you will see the sign.)

So, this gathering on Mount Sinai is to be the sign. It is to produce the result that will justify the risk. God had guided the chosen people towards this meeting rather like a giddy lover lures the object of his affection towards the park bench where he intends to propose; and the people had been, as people always are in those circumstances, suspicious, annoyed, on edge. Now finally, everything has come together. God speaks directly to them, as God had spoken to Adam and to Abraham and to Moses. But now God does a new thing: God speaks directly, not to an individual, but to an entire people, bringing his affection and intention and desire for intimacy, not to a solitary soul, but to a gathering of souls as if they were one.

Faced with direct divinity, what human beings perceive is thunder and smoke and darkness and trumpet blasts and tremors so violent they shake an entire mountain, and those standing in God’s presence are reduce to spasms of jerking fear. We are told that the people of Israel “stood at a distance,” but the later comments of rabbis explained that each time God spoke, the repercussions of God’s voice hurled the people far off, as the blast waves of

an explosion would do. The people crawl up to Moses and say, “you speak to us, so we can listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die.” And Moses says to them, what God never said to Adam or Abraham or Moses, but what God says over and over after this to those on the receiving end of God’s words: “do not be afraid”—but the fear remains to this day. We don’t want God too close. Our fear of knowing God, of that deafening silence, of that blinding darkness, of that filling emptiness, of that life-giving death, arises in us every time we and God find ourselves present to each other; and that fear confounds us. It is not, as these ancient writers have Moses say, a fear that tests us and prevents us from falling into sin. Instead it is what our dear older brother Paul says: it is a fear that compounds sin, because it is a fear fixated on the distance between God and us, on our inability to justify ourselves by God’s standards. This fear does not strengthen our law-abiding superego, but causes it to despair. Our ego shrinks in us like a touched snail.

Either way, this is not the relationship God hopes for: scrupulous obedience or cowardly agnosticism. Both are ways of avoiding God; both are fear-based; both are death-dealing. Even when we remember and name these ten words, which God speaks directly on Sinai to the human beings he loves, we call them “ten commandments,” not ten disclosures of what it is like to be God, of what God cares about, of the values by which God runs the world. “This is what I am,” God says. “I am the ONE who, abiding in my self, am free to bring about the good I know and love. To know me is to know that I am ONE and not reducible to any object. To know me is to enter into rest and to honor what gives you life. To know me is to choose never again to speak vainly or maliciously, because my words are true and endure, never again to destroy life with malevolence, because I create life, never again to betray promises with wantonness, because I remain faithful to

what I love, never again to raid and rob with anxiety, because I am the source of all that is. To know me is never again to see life as scarcity, through the eyes of envy and greed. To know me is to live out what I care about. I want you to be my partner, my help-mate, my bride in the household of Creation.”

But the escaped slaves in the desert had trained themselves into dependency, not freedom. Again, physical self-concern overwhelmed them. They could not endure the abyss of God; they could not risk self-offering, radical trust, self-emptying, free-fall. So they asked Moses to stand between them and God. What, then, follows the episode we heard today? Moses ascends the mountain on their behalf and becomes the transmitter of law—and so their dependency is perpetuated. The people go back to their tents and, faced with the vacuum of a withdrawn God, they cannot endure their own emptiness and build a golden calf—a direct violation of the very words that they had heard—and they worshipped it, calling out, “these are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.” Or, if you prefer, they killed the messengers sent to them and turn finally on the owner’s son, believing enough rejection of reality will lead to security.

This, my dear sisters and brothers, is the enduring dilemma of religion: the utter otherness of God is terrifying until we taste and see that it is love, so rather than enter that terror, we create practices of conformity and reassurance and social accommodation and emotional reinforcement. Our hesitation and diffidence reduces the Words of God, the world-ordering Law of God, to a communal system to live by, which will help us feel OK and valued and appreciated, prized because it reflects us back to ourselves. Once we have done that, God can use the Law to reach us, but we cannot use the Law to reach God.

So when our dear older brother Paul says, “forgetting what lies behind, straining forward to what lies ahead,” what lies behind for him are all the concerns of survival and identity: what to eat, what to drink, who he is—a Hebrew, a Pharisee, a persecutor, and blameless—everything that in him and in us keeps us dependent on externals, everything he came to summarize as the works of the Law. These, he knows, are not God’s priorities. These, the writers of Exodus knew, are the recurring priorities of human beings, who would prefer being fed and being rescued to the freedom of direct relationship with God.

Nevertheless, thanks be to God that, in the depths below our depths, the Spirit of God searches our hearts and intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words and enables us to yearn for God and call out in love, when we ourselves, in our waking carapace, are so defended and uncertain. When that stirs in you, when you are convinced that if you deal with it directly you will die, do not turn to an intermediary, do not reinforce your dependency by interposing between you and God a book, or a teacher, or even a friend, not even a sacrament, or a prayer, but say “here I am”—as Abraham said to God—and come to know the truth of what you say: “here” and “I am.” Because on the day of your death, the promised future sign is that this statement—“Here” and “I AM”—will be the truth, God’s truth. That future result will confirm your present risk. Then, in the presence of God, by God’s grace, “HERE I AM” will remain the truth, and from that unwavering truth you will be able to worship God on God’s holy mountain and praise the Eternal Source, the Only-begotten Word, and the Life-giving Spirit forever, as we praise the One God today.