

Sunday Exodus 24: 1-12
 Lesson 5: Our Mysterious but Approachable God
 Scripture: Exodus 24: 1-12

Context:

Our lesson series moves to the Old Testament to the book of Exodus. The pericope today focuses on part of the Covenant Code God makes with the people of Israel. In today's lesson we will learn about the forgiveness from God we receive which helps us to understand covenant more fully.

It is important to understand the context of codes in biblical times and how people understood ancient laws. The Covenant Code found in this chapter of Exodus gets its name from the reference to the "book of covenant" in the narrative of the ratification ceremony found following Exodus 24:7.¹ Like other codes of the time, the Covenant Code consists largely of casuistic law with very particulars given to the "ifs" followed by a "then."² There are also a few apodictic laws, which are more general and usually are more for less detailed cases such as "Whoever curses his father or his mother shall be put to death" (Ex. 21:17).³ In many ways, the Covenant Code sounds similar to the legal codes of the surrounding areas of the time.

However there are also huge differences, which distinguish the Covenant Code from other criminal and civil laws. In the Covenant Code we have laws focusing upon the laws around worship. It is here God give expectations of how the people are to worship and solely belong to God.

The passage for today's lesson concludes the Covenant Code with the people having an opportunity to come before God. God invites Moses and the elders to convene and worship. The people for the time being are kept at a distance. There is pomp and circumstance as there are twelve stone pillars set up to represent the twelve tribes of Israel. Young Israelite men are appointed to slaughter animals and offer sacrifices to the Lord. Moses uses the blood ritually and as a symbol of the covenant of the people. There is an altar and the altar is made a sacred space.

Once again, the covenant scroll is brought out and the people make a promise to follow the Covenant Code and fulfill their end of the covenant. They respond affirmatively of how they will fulfill their promise. The elders are then allowed to go closer to God and experience God's awe at a banquet. After this happens, Moses is given a private invitation to sit with God and also receive special instruction. We know what will be to follow is the giving of the commandments for the people to obey as their civic law of the land.

¹ Michael D. Coogan, ed. *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures*, (Oxford: University Press, 2011), 128.

² Ibid., 128.

³ Ibid., 128.

Application

The book of Exodus is replete with stories of God appearing to people and giving them direction for their lives. The case we read today presents a less often told account of God actually appearing before the Israelites. As we read the text, we can hopefully imagine the grandeur and awe of the moment.

The grandeur of the occasion is phenomenal and yet also reminds us of how the Covenant Code should give a perspective on what is expected of the people of God. In both cases, the elders and the people experience God in transforming ways. And yet only a little later in the text, they will rebel against God and forget the covenant they have made. No longer will they remember the scroll of the covenant or the lapis mystique surrounding God. They will turn to their own ways and build idols in their midst. They will forget the very words they uttered.

As I read this passage and wrote the context piece, I was multitasking and was listening to the commissioning service of the Alabama-West Florida Conference. I listened as commissioned elders and deacons, laity, and denominational leaders made powerful vows. At moments, my breath was taken away as I heard the words exchanged and the promises made.

Yet I know there will be struggles along the way for all parties. At times we all forget the words that we utter, maybe perhaps not intentionally. We all grumble, complain, and sometimes don't support others as much as we should. We forget our roles and our calling by God.

Even though our words and vows may fail at times, God does not. God is faithful to God's promises and if today's story tells us anything, it is of God's steadfast presence even when we fail to acknowledge it. And God will stand as we come back to God and repeat the words again.

Covenant is a powerful word for the world we live in today. We might be more familiar with a contract where two parties agree for something to happen or be done. There is the understanding that if one party reneges, then the contract is dashed to pieces.

We should all be grateful that in the book of Exodus, God isn't in the business of dealing out contracts. If that were the case, both the Israelites and us would be in trouble. The Covenant Code helps to protect both parties, with the weaker party receiving more than a fair bargain.

I think I like watching things like commissioning services and events with ritual where we are reminded of the power of words and the importance of call. I like participating in them and then pondering where I have heeded the vows made and places of growing edges for me. Each time I learn something new and from time to time have heard a new call from God to do something.

Perhaps something for you to try and think about this week are the words you have spoken in rituals or ceremonies. Have you fulfilled the vows you made or have you forgotten the power of them? I think from time to time we all need a wake up call where we are reminded of who God has called us to be.

What does the word covenant mean to you? Why are the words we say so important, especially those in a ritual or a service? What services or ceremonies have you attended where you felt the presence of God? Why is it important to think about the awe of God? What vows or covenants do you need to reexamine and reflect upon?

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