

## Walking by Faith: The Secular Priesthood

[Exodus 19:1-6](#)

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[Real Audio \(3 MB\)](#)

Three months after the Red Sea crossing the Hebrews came to the base of Mt. Sinai where they made camp. Here they were about to have a terrifying service of worship. Worship is always scary business.

Like the Hebrews, when we worship we are camping at the base of a holy mountain. At the top of this mountain is your Creator, the one who parted the waters of the Red Sea, the one who is holy and righteous and who expects a little holiness and righteousness from you. The call to worship is given in our text today: "You have seen what I did to the Egyptians and how I bore you on eagle's wings and brought you to myself. If you obey my voice and keep my covenant . . . you shall be a priestly kingdom and a holy nation" (19:4). That's the voice from the top of the mountain.

At the bottom of the mountain you and I tremble because if the point of life's journey is to learn to obey God's voice, we don't think we are getting the point. Not only do we not obey God's voice, we don't hear it most of the time. It is drowned out by all the other voices around us, voices that tell us we're on our own in the desert, and we'll never make it to the Promised Land unless we try harder and achieve more. Or try consuming more things or try a different job and different relationship. Eventually, we realize we have tried so many different things to get our dreams that we have wandered a long way from God.

Now we wander into worship and camp for an hour at the base of God's mountain where we finally hear God's Word read and proclaimed. If we are paying attention, we ought to be a little sacred. "On the morning of the third day, there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled. Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God" (19:16).

Every time this church invites you to come and take your place at the holy table of Jesus Christ, be clear that we are calling you to meet God. The invitation to this sacred encounter begins the same way it did for the Hebrews. "Remember what I did," God said, "Remember how I bore you on eagle's wings and brought you to myself. Remember that it was never about your hard work. Remember that it was I, the Lord God, who changed your destiny from slavery to freedom."

When Jesus instituted this sacrament for us, what were the words he used? "Do this in remembrance of me." You can break your back trying to get your dreams but that will never save you. So Jesus said, "Eat this bread, remembering it was my broken body that saves you." You can sweat blood trying to get life just right, but that will never save you. Again Jesus said, "Drink this cup remembering it was my blood spilled on the cross that saves you."

Remember. Remember. Remember what God has done. That is the most important voice you need to heed. Because it is only as we remember the past that we can see how to move to the future. The light that God gives us, the light you have been looking for out in the desert, doesn't shine in your eyes. If it did it would blind you. The light to our path, the lamp to our feet, shines from behind us.

That is why in worship we say creeds and read the holy words of Scripture that were written thousands of years ago. And it is why we participate in the church's old rituals, why we love to sing the old hymns, and why we keep telling the same old gospel story. Because the greatest danger to our future is that we will not remember our past.

The past proclaims, "I know you're confused about how to get to the Promised Land. Don't worry, because it was never about you. It has always been God who has carried you on eagle's wings. That was true when you saw it and when you didn't. God has always carried you, and he will carry you all the way home." All

you have to do, according to Moses, is obey the voice of God.

Notice that this covenant is conditional. In other words it is an "if...then" contract. If the people obey God's voice, he will carry them all the way to the Promised Land. It was then that God gave the people the Ten Commandments. The law was a way of remembering that the people who were once slaves have been transformed into "a priestly kingdom." By obeying the law they remembered what God had done, and they remembered to honor their part of the covenant. But this brings us back to our deepest fear in worship. Because, like the Hebrews, at the base of the holy mountain we remember that we have not remembered.

That is why worship begins for us with the prayer of confession. Today we prayed, "We have tasted that the Lord is good, yet we sin, and turn from the way of salvation. Forgive us, O God, help us remember. . ." We confess this at the base of worship, because in telling the hard truth about ourselves, we can then hear the deeper truth of the Gospel: "In Jesus Christ we are forgiven." We are never going to climb the mountain to find God. This table proclaims that in Jesus Christ, God has climbed down to us because in Christ, he was dying to forgive us our sin.

The author of the book of Hebrews is fascinated by how the coming of Jesus Christ has transformed our relationship to God. He writes: "The days are surely coming says the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah; not like the covenant I made with their ancestors, on the day when I took them by the hand and led them out of the land of Egypt; for they did not continue in my covenant, and so I had no concern with them, says the Lord. This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days says the Lord: I will put my laws in their minds, and write them on their hearts. And I will be their God and they will be my people. And they shall not teach one another or say to each other, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me from the least of them to the greatest. For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more." (8:8-12)

You will notice that what is missing in this new covenant is any "if...then" language. Hebrews is quoting from the prophet Jeremiah who promised that a time will come for a new covenant that is based not on our obedience, but on the mercy of God. In Jesus Christ, that is what we have found -- the forgiving mercy of God.

Accepting that mercy will change your life with gratitude. In the words of St. Augustine, "the law that was once written in stone has now been written on human hearts." At this table we remember that we obey God not because we are terrified of what will happen to us if we don't, but because we are grateful for what has already happened on the cross of Jesus Christ. Gratitude is expressed in obedience, and not just obedience to more laws, but obedience in accepting your vocation. That calling is the same that the Hebrews heard long ago: to be priests proclaiming mercy to a world dying to find it. In Christ, you are finally able to fulfill your calling.

This table doesn't proclaim that the broken body and poured out blood of Christ gives you a second chance to get your life right all by yourself. No, it calls you to commune with Christ. That means dying to the old dreams and the old resolve of getting what you want, and being raised with Christ to a new life as a cherished, beloved son or daughter of the Father.

Is it not always at the family table that children learn their identity? At the table they take their place with other family members, hear the family stories, and learn who they really are. That's what happens at this holy table as well. Here the Spirit of God meets you and lifts you up to take your place in the holy family of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Here you listen to the great, old gospel story again and again. Your part of that story is where we remind you that you were not the firstborn member of this family, for that honor belongs to Jesus, but you were adopted by the Spirit into the Son's own beloved relationship with the Father. As you mature in that relationship you understand that you have a role to play in the family business. So you accept your calling to the royal priesthood.

Do you see how this has changed the whole notion of what it means to approach God? As the author of Hebrews continues, "You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them" (12:18-19). Notice that the mountain is no longer to be feared.

No longer do we have to cower at the presence of God because of our sins. "But you have come to Mount Zion and the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect and to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel." (12:22-24).

"The sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel." You remember Abel, who was killed unjustly by Cain. For the last three or four weeks, our nation has been focused on the blood of Abel that was unjustly spilled in the World Trade Towers and at the Pentagon. It was the blood of victims. We are longing to believe that is not the last word, and we are afraid that all September 11 means is that no matter how hard you work at life, some crazed terrorist can take it all away from you.

At this table we remember, the sprinkled blood of Jesus Christ is a better word than the blood of Abel, and that victimization is not all there is. We remember that in Christ we belong to the triune communion and that if we belong to the God above us, we will not fear anything or anyone around us. So we stand in the chaos of fallen towers and fallen illusions about life as priests who make the bold proclamation that when Christ came down the mountain, he also brought the beginning of a new kingdom that cannot and will not ever fall. "Therefore since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; for indeed our God is a consuming fire" (12:28).

The kingdom of God cannot be shaken by any act of terror. That's the kingdom that we have received by the blood of Christ. Therefore, we give thanks, which according to Hebrews means we worship with awe and reverence because "God is a consuming fire."

Consuming fire? Maybe you thought that the New Testament offered a kinder, gentler God than the Old Testament. No. What has changed from the old to the new covenant is not God, but you. In Christ, God has come to you and offered holy communion. To receive even a taste of that is to become a new creation, with the consuming vocation of being a priest who proclaims mercy.

By your grace, O God, lift our eyes above the spilled blood of Abel to see the sprinkled blood of Christ behind us, and above us, and before us that we may become your own priests of perfect hope. Amen.