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Exodus 20:22-26
Forty-first Message
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WORSHIP PURE AND SIMPLE

SERIES: CREATING COMMUNITIES OF SHALOM IN DAILY LIFE

Getting Our Bearings In a War Zone

Continuing our series in Exodus, *Creating Communities of Shalom in Daily Life*, some of you might be silently objecting to the title, since for you, relationships have been more like a war zone than a safe haven of shalom. In order to survive, you've had to insulate your heart with armor.

Several years ago, one of our members, Marty Brill, had a dream of returning the love he experienced in Romania with practical investments that would be a blessing to the people and country he had come to love. He trained one of our Romanian sons, Marcelus Suci, to be his partner. They began with a modest bakery. This became not only profitable, but also charitable, providing much needed bread for many needy and for patients in hospitals who could not afford to buy bread. They then purchased a piece of property near the University in Cluj and built a restaurant that became a haven for young people. For several years it bustled with life and developed into a community in its own right. Numerous college students who had little chance of making an income were employed there and instilled with the values of initiative and hard work. The work was further expanded this year as they renovated an abandoned downtown building into a beautiful new restaurant. The day it opened it was an instant success.

Tragically, last week, one of the restaurants was broken into and robbed of all its cash, while the very next day the second restaurant experienced a terrible fire. It's as if the dream of community they labored and toiled so hard for years to produce was reduced to ashes in what appears to have been an act of betrayal. They called me from Romania just to get a perspective in the midst of their turbulent pain.

Framing Our Life with Worship

Where do we begin to get our bearings when our relationships are anything but harmonious, or when we become victims of attack or betrayal? What is the first thing to do when you suspect your spouse is entrapped in an affair, or a co-worker has betrayed or taken advantage of you? Most of the time we are all too quick to get a lawyer and go to war. But the Book of the Covenant gives a different perspective. It will in fact give some very practical advice on how God's people are to deal with broken covenants, internal strife, and even violent crime. But perhaps the best advice the book gives is found in how the material is structured. Framing the Book of the Covenant is the theme of worship.

A Instruction in Cultivating Right Relationship with God in Worship
20:22-26

B Right relationships in Community (Exod 21:1-23:13)

A' The Experience of Right Relationship with God in Worship Exod
24:1-11

Before God addresses Israel's relationships on earth, he gives instructions on worshipping him in heaven. And after he has instructed his people on cultivating relationships in community, he concludes by

giving Israel's leadership a worship experience that is perhaps unparalleled in all the rest of Scripture.¹

Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel went up and saw the God of Israel. Under his feet was something like a pavement made of sapphire, clear as the sky itself. But God did not raise his hand against these leaders of the Israelites; they saw God, and they ate and drank. (Exod 24:9-11)

Everything God had instructed them about worship in 20:24 is now experienced, not symbolically on earth, but in the blazing reality of God's heavenly court. All of Israel's leadership is placed on the cliff of history's horizon, one step away from eternity. On those breathtaking heights they eat in the presence of the One who created and redeemed them. What nation could boast such an initiation for all its leaders?

The point is clear. As Janzen asserts, "Everyday life gains ultimate meaning only as it is oriented toward a holy God."² Authentic worship of our God in heaven radically reorients our lives on earth. So it is vital, even in the midst of an actual war, to get our moral bearings by framing our life with worship.

In a mere five verses, God gives Moses simple but profound guidelines regulating Israel's worship. Like a compact carpenter's level, these concise statements were designed to serve God's people as a quick and reliable measure of authentic worship, and to protect them from straying into the crooked and perverse religious practices that dominated the world around them.

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Tell the Israelites this: 'You have seen for yourselves that I have spoken to you from heaven: Do not make any gods to be alongside me; do not make for yourselves gods of silver or gods of gold. Make an altar of earth for me and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and fellowship offerings, your sheep and goats and your cattle. Wherever I cause my name to be honored, I will come to you and bless you. If you make an altar of stones for me, do not build it with dressed stones, for you will defile it if you use a tool on it. And do not go up to my altar on steps, lest your nakedness be exposed on it.' (Exod 20:22-26 NIV)

To make sure God's people feel the full weight of his authority behind these commands, God opens with similar language as the occasion when he introduced the Ten Commandments (19:4), calling Israel out as an eyewitness of the events.

"You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself." (19:4)

"You have seen for yourselves that I have spoken to you from heaven:" (20:22)

These words not only bond the Book of the Covenant to the Ten Commandments, they also give them the same divine authority. What follows are not Moses's random musings of suggested guidance, but God's unmistakable voice on how God's people are expected to live.

Our text is shaped around five commands, four of them negative, with one positive at the center.

not make for yourselves
 not make for yourselves
 make for me an altar
 do not build
 do not go up

The four negative commands bring to light the points of fierce contention within Israel's cultural and religious world, while the positive command at the center highlights the essentials for authentic worship. The greater proportion of negative to positive commands suggests how diligent Israel will have to be to guard what is pure and true. As the history of both Israel and the Church documents, it is a rare generation indeed that succeeds in preserving the purity of their worship. We can summarize these five commands into four foundational guidelines for Israel's worship: *loyalty, continuity, simplicity* and *purity*.

I. Cultivating Loyalty In Worship Exod 20:23

Do not make any gods to be alongside me; do not make for yourselves gods of silver or gods of gold. (Exod 20:23)

Just as with the Ten Commandments, the Book of Covenant begins with a command for undivided loyalty to God. In Hebrew, the order of the phrases in verse 23 is arranged chiasmically, with its characteristic repetitive punch.

You shall not make alongside Me
 gods of silver
 or gods of gold
 you shall not make for yourselves.

The deliberate repetition and envelope enclosure (ABBA) make the command not only emphatic but also complete, meaning that no exceptions are allowed. God's sanctuary is unequivocally his; he will tolerate no images of rivals beside him. Synergistic worship is an abomination to God. God's vehemence to images is akin to the rage a husband would feel upon waking up one day and finding a framed photograph of another man on his wife's night stand.

It's difficult for us to comprehend how unique this command sounded to someone in the world of the Ancient Near East. In that world no distinction was made between matter and spirit. It was believed that by replicating the image of a god in silver or stone, one could possess the life force of that god and could then manipulate the life for one's own ends. Thus, every pagan temple was filled with images, and at their very center, in the most holy place, a sensual image of a goddess designed to promote life through lust. In contrast, at the center of God's most holy place we not find an image but his holy word, the Ten Commandments.

Authentic worship demanded that Israel be ruthless with idolatry and that she be undivided in her loyalty to God. True worship always fosters fidelity and an undivided heart, whereas idolatry divides our affections and eventually leads to a betrayal in relationships.

If Israel's history teaches us anything at all, it is clear that as God's people we are never safe from the lure of idolatry. After the Babylonian exile, Israel appeared to be cleansed once and for all of her propensity for making images. But just when you think you are sufficiently reformed and squeaky clean, along come those heart-stopping words of Jesus to the rich young ruler (Mark 10:21). This naïve young man thought he had kept all the commandments, but Jesus' words cut right to the heart and convicted him that he had violated the most basic commandment of all. He was an idol worshipper. He loved mammon. So we have to ask, does coming here on Sunday give us such an

encounter with God that the love of money and the security it offers has less of a grip on us? Are we becoming free of our addiction to consume? The proof of the pudding will be seen in how we spend our time. Is more of our time being freed from the need to acquire and being given over to the joy of serving those in need? If that is true, we are making some headway in our worship.

This is the first mark of authentic worship, cultivating an undivided loyalty to God.

II. Cultivating Continuity In Worship Exod 20:24

"Make an altar of earth for me and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and fellowship offerings, your sheep and goats and your cattle. Wherever I cause my name to be honored, I will come to you and bless you. (20:24)

In contrast to the making of idols of silver and gold, God's people are commanded to "make" altars of earth as sacred memorials in the places where God appeared to his people, revealed his divine name and renewed his promises. This continues the pattern of worship practiced by the patriarchs. After Abraham obeyed the call of God to go to a new land, God appeared to him in Shechem, promising him that his seed would inherit the land of Canaan as a gift. In response to the divine encounter, Abram "built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him" (Gen 12:7). After Isaac trusted God by refusing to contend over the wells that the Philistines had taken from him (Gen 26:17-22), the Lord appeared to him in Beersheba and reiterated the promise he made to his father Abraham (Gen 26:23-24). In response to that revelation, "Isaac built an altar there and called on the name of the LORD" (Gen 26:25). When Jacob was fleeing to Haran, God appeared to him in a dream and blessed him with a renewal and expansion of the earlier promises to Abraham and Isaac. Dazed by the revelation, Jacob awoke and thought,

"Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it." He was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven." Early the next morning Jacob took the stone he had placed under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on top of it. He called that place Bethel ["house of God"], though the city used to be called Luz. (Gen 28:16-19)

In each case, building an altar was a response to divine initiative, divine invitation, divine promise and divine protection. None of the patriarchs anticipated a divine encounter. They were not planned, asked for, coerced or manipulated. Each encounter was an act of condescension and grace by God, who freely entered their world and invited them to have a significant role in his. Overcome with awe and appreciation, the patriarchs built altars to memorialize these holy encounters that had changed the course of their lives. Israel can be confident that this same God will again be pleased to appear to them (Lev 9:4), not through magic, ritual or coercion, but because of his gracious love and commitment to them. In contrast, Israel's pagan neighbors were working feverishly in the art of imitation and manipulation, hoping to get the attention of gods who had no interest in them whatsoever. This is why Jesus was quick to rebuke those who thought they could manipulate God through "meaningless repetition" in their prayers (Matt 6:7), for this violates God's gracious generosity as a loving Father, and therefore is a false form of worship.

Because worship was God's initiative, Israel was not free to choose where she would build her altars; rather, they were chosen solely by divine appointment. Nor was she permitted to do as she pleased at these sites. Instead, she is commanded to reenact the memory of those

encounters through prescribed offerings. Two offerings are mentioned: the burnt offering, where the entire animal was consumed on the altar, expressing complete dependence on God, and the peace or fellowship offerings, where part of the sacrifice was offered up on the altar and part of it was eaten by the worshippers. These offerings signified that all was well and allowed the people to enjoy an intimate communion with the living God and one another in the present.

The mark of true worship is that it must have roots. Worship is not a mere emotional experience; rather, it connects us to the sacred history of God's great acts. Authentic worship connects us to the promises of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, the prophets, and ultimately, to Christ. It is a response to what God has done in the past, for without an awareness of the past we have no roots. But worship also has wings. Israel does not worship dead relics of the past, but in the reenactment of sacred memory, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob promises to renew his presence and bless his people in the present. "Roots and wings," the Spanish poet Juan Ramon wrote, "but let the wings take root and the roots fly."³ "These altars and their associated worship are thus different from any other place of worship, indeed any other place on earth. It is not that God will never come and bless elsewhere; it is that God promises that God will do so at these places."⁴

A brief look at Israel's first altar in Shechem proves the point. It is laden with centuries of holy memory, first by God's appearance promise to Abraham (Gen 12:7); then Jacob, who not only built an altar there but also dug a well (Gen 33:20); then Joshua built an altar at the same spot and assembled all Israel to recite all the book of the Law, with its blessings recounted on Mount Gerizim, overlooking the city (Josh 8:30-35). Who would have thought that over 1000 years later, a woman who had been abused by many men and cast off from her people was about to meet the God of that holy place? She wasn't drawing water at some dead-relic shrine, but in a place deemed holy, with living water, by the God she was encountering in the present. That woman got a lesson in worship beyond anything Israel's religious leaders had ever conceived (John 4:21-26).

God's promise in this text ought to stir our hearts, knowing that any place has the potential of being a holy place. And the prophets carry the dream to the furthest horizon, declaring that one day the whole world will be holy, "for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea" (Isa 11:9; Hab 2:14).

In summary, authentic worship cultivates loyalty and continuity.

So the question is, Where are your altars? In the walkway leading to our home I have embedded five stones in memory of God's grace in giving us our five children. The first two stones are white, representing their abode in heaven; the last three stones I selected to represent the personality of each daughter. In our back yard are three rose bushes, each representing the gift of a grandchild.

III. Preserving Simplicity In Worship Exod 20:24

The final two commands address preserving the sanctity of worship. The first warns against profaning the altar, the second, defiling the worshippers.

Preserving the Sanctity of the Stone

"If you make an altar of stones for me, do not build it with dressed stones, for you will defile it if you use a tool on it. (20:25)

Some parts of Israel, especially the rocky terrain of the hill country, were not conducive to building altars out of the ground. So God explains that they are free to use stones in the building process, but are forbidden to use "cut stones, for if you wield your tool (lit. "sword") on it, you will profane it" (20:25 NASB). In recounting the memory of

divine encounters it would seem quite natural for us to want to give a helping hand to mother nature and reshape the uneven surfaces of natural stones in order to beautify the altar. What engineer would not want each stone cut to fit with precision, or what artist would not long to make the overall appearance aesthetically pleasing to the eye? But God forbids it; Israel is strictly forbidden to wield a tool on the stones. Commentators differ on the reasons for this. In Alter's view, the reason is found in the unusual use of the term "sword" translated "tool": "The Hebrew *herev* patently means 'sword,' here a kind of metaphoric stand-in for 'chisel,' and pointedly used because of its association with killing. Rashi succinctly catches the implication of the term: 'The altar was created to lengthen a man's days and iron was created to shorten a man's days; it is not fit that the means of shortening should be branched over the means of lengthening.'"⁵

Janzen, on the other hand, suggests, "The use of unhewn stones continues the theme of simplicity begun with the altar of earth. The reference to desecration through the use of a chisel suggests that simplicity is not the only motivation." But what that reason is, he says, "We cannot be totally sure."⁶ In examining the larger context, I think we may have an answer.

Several key terms in these verses combine to create resonant echoes of God's activity in Genesis 1 and 2. The leading word in our text is the verb "to make" (*asah* - used four times). It is also the primary verb in the creation account as God "makes" his universe and mankind, "Let Us *make* man in Our image, according to Our likeness" (Gen 1:26). The verb "to build" in verse 25 (*banah*) is reminiscent of God, who "built" the woman from man's rib (Gen 2:22). The material of the altar, "earth" (*adamah*), is identical to the material God used to form the man, dust from the "ground" (*adamah*, Gen 2:7). And the reference to "nakedness" is reminiscent of the conclusion of Genesis 2, when Adam and Eve were both naked, with no shame, and the opening of chapter 3, when the devil in his craftiness will make them feel shame through their nakedness.

These multiple echoes from the creation story suggest that true worship occurs when our actions on earth imitate God's actions in heaven. God *makes* man out of the dust of the *ground*; man in his image, *makes* an altar out of the *ground*. The greatness of mankind is not found in the glory of the dust, but in the divine life that inhabits it. So too, holiness in worship comes not by man's work beautifying the altar, but by recounting the divine moment when the Holy one descended to this ordinary place. "God does not reveal himself in a place because it is holy; a place is holy when God reveals himself there."⁷ If the focus is misplaced, we will transform our worship of the living God into a perverse fashion show serving dead idols.

Anyone who has toured the Holy Land knows the shocking disappointment when they discover once humble "altars" of divine visitation covered over in plated gold and massive ornamentation. In Bethlehem, one is struck with the beauty of the countryside preserved in its simplicity. Shepherds still shepherd their sheep and farmers winnow their grain as they have done for centuries. But when you enter the Church of the Nativity, holy memory is overrun by ornamentation, so that it is difficult to recreate the original encounter in your imagination. Shechem, the site of Abraham's first altar and Jacob's well, is now overshadowed by the construction of a huge church. It makes one appreciate the fact that it remained unprofaned for at least 2000 years, so that when the Samaritan woman came to draw water, she discovered living water from the God who was present instead of lifeless images of gold and silver.

Perhaps this is why altars were to be kept holy in their simplicity, so that their beautification would not detract from the glory of the living

God. In the New Testament we discover that as we are the true temple, and the same guidelines apply: “But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us” (2 Cor 4:7). To preserve the focus on the “treasure,” Paul exhorts women “to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God” (1 Tim 2:9-10).

Authentic worship fosters fidelity, continuity and simplicity. The final command is designed to protect the worshippers from defilement.

IV. Preserving Purity In Worship Exod 20:26

“And do not go up to my altar on steps, lest your nakedness be exposed on it.” (Exod 20:26)

The final injunction regarding altars is that they are not to be built with raised steps. The reason for this is a rigorous concern for modesty and purity. In those days, undergarments were not worn. Because of this, God emphasizes that extreme care had to be taken that the stage set for worship not be desecrated by inadvertent sexual impurity. To avoid the problem altogether, God eliminates the use of steps, so that the priest will not be on a higher elevation than the congregation. (This would not be a problem later, since priests were clothed with linen undergarments).

While all other nations used illicit sex as a vital part of their worship, God declares that even the thought of sexual impurity desecrates his. For at the heart of depraved mankind is the belief that one cannot impart real motivation for life without resorting to lust. This is why at the cultic centers in Canaan there were countless Asherah poles. These were very sensuous female figurines, bare breasted, designed to motivate a rather aging (could we say, “impotent”?) god, who had no real interest in you, to copulate in heaven so that you might get your much needed rain on earth.

Our world is as Canaanite in its worship of sex as was Israel’s. Go to any of our major worship centers – the shopping malls or the sports arenas – and you will always find beautiful, scantily clad women. It seems as if nothing can sell in its own right, not even soap, without resorting to lust. So what would the God of the Book of the Covenant say to his people today regarding safeguarding worship from sexual impurity? I think he would have a lot to say. Perhaps that pastors should not counsel women on an ongoing basis, or again, as Paul exhorts, “I also want women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, women should dress modestly and appropriately” (1 Tim 2:9).

But if God could only give one practical guideline, I think he would ask everyone to do what our elders recently did for all our pastors. So that we would not be tempted to sexual impropriety while studying God’s word, every computer at the church has been installed with a program called Covenant Eyes. It is designed to record every place we visit on the Internet, and then send the log to a friend. So we’re free to go wherever we want, but with the protection of having a friend right beside us, seeing what we see. I’ve found it a great benefit, and urge every family to use it. We are absolutely naïve to think that any male can avoid addiction without some kind of accountability. The pervasive use of pornography has done more to cripple men from deepening their relationship with the Lord than anything else. If worship is to be authentic it must be rigorously guarded from sexual impropriety.

In summary, our text leaves us with some simple but profound guidelines for authentic worship:

1. Authentic worship deepens our loyalty to God and protects us from fragmented hearts by exposing idolatry.
2. Authentic worship links us to the past as a response to what God has done.
3. Authentic worship is highly relational; it brings the presence of God into the present.
4. Authentic worship deepens our trust to live with abandon (symbolized by the burnt offering).
5. Authentic worship enriches our fellowship with others (symbolized by the peace offerings).
6. Authentic worship focuses on the surpassing glory of the “treasure” in our earthen vessels, not on the vessel.
7. Authentic worship preserves our sexual purity, from our thought life to our behavior.

In conclusion, authentic worship should give shape to our lives. We should begin and end the day with worship. We should begin and conclude our week with worship. As my friends from Romania were sharing their grief, I searched my heart for a word from Scripture to give them. And then it came to me – it was the truth of this text. I said “Don’t fight like the world, worship the Lord.” Then I gave them Isaiah’s image of “a garland of praise instead of ashes” (Isa 61:3) as a hope. The next day I got an email from Marty describing the little miracles that were occurring as Marcelus and his wife, Manu, were praying in response to their pain. While in America we would be waiting for weeks for insurance settlements, there in Cluj all the restaurant employees were working feverishly around the clock, scrubbing down the entire building, cleaning the charred equipment and furniture, plastering walls and rewiring the kitchen. Everyone seemed to be pitching in, and by late afternoon of the day of the fire, the restaurant reopened to the public (even though the kitchen will take more time to be up and running). It was indeed new life from the ashes, a little community transformed by love.

1 There are many instances when individuals, like Israel’s prophets (Isa 6:iff.), are transported into the heavenly court, but never is the entire court of Israel’s leadership transported en masse to “see” God and “eat and drink.”

2 Waldemar Janzen, *Exodus* (BCBC; Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2000), 249.

3 Edward Hirsch, *How to Read a Poem and Fall in Love with Poetry* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1999), 6.

4 Terence Fretheim, *Exodus* (Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 244.

5 Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses, A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), 433.

6 Janzen, *Exodus*, 290.

7 Janzen, *Exodus*, 290.