



PASSIONATE PRESENCE

SERIES: THE TABERNACLE: GOD'S PRESENCE WITH HIS PEOPLE

Exodus 34:10-28

13th Message

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March 17, 2019

Last week Ryan finished his series on the Book of Joshua, describing how Israel entered into the Promised Land and took possession of it. Today we take a step backwards in the Old Testament to the Book of Exodus, to the period when Israel was at Mt Sinai on its journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. We return to our series on the tabernacle after a break of over a year. Once again our space has been transformed into a tabernacle by our Visual Arts Ministry. Since it's been so long let me give a quick review of the story so far.

Out of all the people on earth God called out Abraham into a new relationship with himself: "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you...so that you will be a blessing" (Gen 12:2). He also promised him a home for this future people. Abraham didn't live to see the fulfilment of this promise. Instead his descendants lived in Egypt for four centuries, where they were fruitful, multiplied and filled the land. But this was a threat to Pharaoh so he subjected them to harsh slavery. The Lord took pity on this suffering people. He delivered them from the oppression of Pharaoh and from their misery in Egypt. He brought them through the wilderness to Mount Sinai to meet with him. Here at Sinai he entered into covenant with them: "I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you." He had brought them *to* himself and *for* himself. God and Israel were now bound together as covenant partners. The people now belonged to him. God had taken all the initiative; this status of being his people was a gift from beginning to end. Were there strings attached to this gift? Was it a completely free gift with no expectation of anything in return? No, God did expect something in return.

The Ten Commandments, which essentially forms the treaty document between God and his people, begin:

"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

"You shall have no other gods before me." (Exod 20:2-3 ESV)

Because the people now belonged to God, they owed him their allegiance, their loyalty and devotion. Their obedience was not to earn his favor but the way of living life under his favor already given. Their obedience was the way of living a faithful life of allegiance to their sovereign who had brought them into his benevolent domain, into his kingdom. In return for his great generosity God wanted their hearts. He wanted their affections. He wanted their undivided loyalty and devotion.

But within forty days Israel broke the covenant by worshiping a golden calf. This was an act of treason, a breach of allegiance. They had quickly abandoned the God who loved them. They gave their allegiance to another. They gave their allegiance to one who was not worthy of that allegiance: a golden calf made by human hands. How can something made by human hands be worthy of one's allegiance?

In four sermons last year we looked at the Golden Calf episode, at Israel's sin and at the response of both God and Moses. Moses shat-

tered the two stone tablets, the treaty document binding God and Israel together. The covenant was broken. God disowned the people, repeatedly telling Moses, "They are *your* people, not my people." But Moses abandoned neither the people nor God. He acted as the faithful mediator between a holy God and a sinful people. Repeatedly he said to God, "No, they are *your* people." Loyal to both sides, he stood in the breach, putting his own life on the line to avert the Lord's anger from breaking out against the people to destroy them. Then Moses asked God to show him his glory. God invited him to come up Mt Sinai with a fresh pair of stone tablets. He hid Moses in a cleft in the rock, and proclaimed to him his name, this name that we recited earlier:

The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin. (Exod 34:6-7)

The immediate response of Moses was to fall down and worship. His immediate response was to give homage and allegiance to this sort of God. This is a God worthy of such loyalty and devotion.

Then Moses made one more daring request: "Pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance" (34:9). Forgive us and take us again as your people! Forgive us and take us for yours. Moses had nothing to bring except the people's sin and a pair of blank tablets. Would God be willing to write on those tablets? Would he be willing to take this sinful people as his people? Would he forgive them and reinstate them?

Forgive us and take us for yours. Lord, you know who we are; will you still love us? Who has not felt this way? We feel that way towards one another: if she really knew me would she love me? We feel that way towards God: knowing who I am, how can he love me?

Forgive us and take us for yours, O Lord. With this plea hanging in the air, we pick up the story.

And he said, "Behold, I am making a covenant. Before all your people I will do marvels, such as have not been created in all the earth or in any nation. And all the people among whom you are shall see the work of the LORD, for it is an awesome thing that I will do with you.

Observe what I command you this day. Behold, I will drive out before you the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. Take care, lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land to which you go, lest it become a snare in your midst. You shall tear down their altars and break their pillars and cut down their Asherim (for you shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God), lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, and when they whore after their gods and sacrifice to their gods and you are invited, you eat of his sacrifice, and you

take of their daughters for your sons, and their daughters whose after their gods and make your sons whose after their gods.

“You shall not make for yourself any gods of cast metal.

“You shall keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, as I commanded you, at the time appointed in the month Abib, for in the month Abib you came out from Egypt. All that open the womb are mine, all your male livestock, the firstborn of cow and sheep. The firstborn of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb, or if you will not redeem it you shall break its neck. All the firstborn of your sons you shall redeem. And none shall appear before me empty-handed.

“Six days you shall work, but on the seventh day you shall rest. In plowing time and in harvest you shall rest. You shall observe the Feast of Weeks, the firstfruits of wheat harvest, and the Feast of Ingathering at the year’s end. Three times in the year shall all your males appear before the LORD God, the God of Israel. For I will cast out nations before you and enlarge your borders; no one shall covet your land, when you go up to appear before the LORD your God three times in the year.

“You shall not offer the blood of my sacrifice with anything leavened, or let the sacrifice of the Feast of the Passover remain until the morning. The best of the firstfruits of your ground you shall bring to the house of the LORD your God. You shall not boil a young goat in its mother’s milk.”

And the LORD said to Moses, “Write these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel.” So he was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights. He neither ate bread nor drank water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments. (Exod 34:10-28)

I. A new covenant (34:10)

And he [the LORD] said, “Behold, I am making a covenant...”

Immediately Moses has good news: “I am going to make a covenant.” The Lord *will* write a new treaty on those blank tablets. He *will* take this people back into covenant with himself. He *will* forgive them and reinstate them as his own. It is true when he says he is a God forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin. It is true when he says he abounds in loyal love. At this moment he still refers to them as “*your* people.” But once his word is written on those blank tablets they will once again be *his* people, bound to him in covenant. “Forgive us and take us for yours,” Moses dared ask. God said, “Yes!”

Tim Keller, in his book about marriage, which I use in premarital counseling, writes:

To be loved but not known is comforting but superficial. To be known and not loved is our greatest fear. But to be fully known and truly loved is, well, a lot like being loved by God. It is what we need more than anything.¹

We all long to be both known and loved.

“To be loved but not known is comforting but superficial.” We all long to be known; we inwardly ache to be known. We may have many Facebook friends but still feel unknown. Having more and more friends does not lead to us being better known. We may post a lot about ourselves on social media, but still feel unknown. We have so many friends and are surrounded by so many people. The world has moved from rural environments to densely-populated urban environments. We are living closer and closer together. But we have

an epidemic of loneliness; it’s a crisis. I’m sure some of you here feel lonely, wondering if people really know you.

Or we feel that people don’t know the real us, don’t know who we really are. Children wonder if their parents really know and understand them. In premarital counseling I seek to help the couple begin to know and understand each other—a lifelong task. One of the dangers is that the person they profess to “love” is not the real person but a projection, an idealization, someone seen through rose-colored glasses, or a project in need of much work.

Who has not ached with this longing to be known? To be loved but not known is comforting but it’s superficial.

On the other hand, “to be known and not loved is our greatest fear.” Just as we ache to be known, we’re afraid to be known. If people really knew us surely they would not love us. How could they love us? Surely they would reject us. So, even as we’re desperate to be known, we dare not allow ourselves to be known.

I recently read the memoir of a nurse from the south of England who fifty years ago went to live and work on a remote Scottish island, in a very small community. She marveled at the strong community. They had all known each other from birth. No one ever locked their doors; they didn’t even shut their doors, but just wandered in and out of each other’s homes. They knew what each other needed without anyone even asking. They knew all the foibles and idiosyncrasies of each other; they knew all the secrets. And still they were always there for each other. They were always there for each other because they knew and loved each other. They were deeply known and deeply loved. As I was reading this book, I kept thinking this is what church community should be like: to be known yet still be loved.

“To be fully known and truly loved is like being loved by God.” God knows who Israel is: she is a sinful and transgressing people. But still God says, “Yes, I’ll take you.” He loves her, forgives her, and binds her to himself in covenant. This is the “overwhelming, never-ending, reckless love of God” of which we sang. So it is with us. He knows who we really are and still he loves us.

We want to be known. We want to be noticed. We want to be loved. We want to be found. Becoming a follower of Jesus is allowing yourself to be found by God. Jesus told three related parables about a lost sheep, a lost coin and a lost son. What they shared in common was that they were lost and in need of finding. Do you feel that God has found you? Or do you feel lost and longing to be found? Do you feel known by God? Or are you afraid to be known by him? Do you feel you need to hide from him? Or do you think you have to clean yourself up before you can allow him to know you?

The story of the Golden Calf contains good news: God knew that Israel was a sinful people. But still he forgave and took this sinful people to be his people. This is the good news of the gospel: Christ died for sinners, not for those who have their act together. Jesus came to find the lost. He is the Good Shepherd.

2. A Jealous/Passionate God (34:14)

The rest of God’s speech to Moses is a lengthy series of commands (34:11-26). These commands repeat ones given earlier when God made the initial covenant. They are commands which Israel had confidently agreed to keep: “All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient” (24:7). But Israel had quickly proven itself unable to do so. One could focus on these commandments which the Lord repeats, but that would just leave us feeling a heavy

burden: all these things that we have to do. Many people think that this is what the Christian life is about: the “shall’s” and “shall not’s,” especially the “shall not’s.” I think there is a more helpful way to read these commandments, one that hinges on verse 14. I consider this to be the most important verse in the passage, even though ESV puts it in parentheses:

you shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God. (34:14)

The Lord is a jealous God; indeed his name is Jealous. In the Bible God has many names: *El-Shaddai*, God Almighty; *El-Elyon*, God Most High; *Yhwh Yireh* (*Jehovah Jireh*), the LORD who provides; *Yhwh Rapha*, the LORD who heals. And many, many more. These are all beautiful names, rich in meaning and of great comfort. But “Jealous”? I never see “Jealous” on any list of the names of God. To us jealousy is a negative trait, similar to envy or covetousness. We are jealous of what someone else has that we wish we had. Jealousy is aroused by unsatisfied longings. What can arouse the Lord’s jealousy? He has everything; what can he be jealous of? His jealousy has nothing to do with envy or covetousness. He commanded Israel to worship no other god, for he is a jealous God. Indeed this is the second commandment (20:5). Israel is to worship no other god because she belongs to him. If she worships other gods, the Lord is not jealous of those gods because he knows they are not gods at all. They are inappropriate objects for the affections of his people. His jealousy is directed not towards those so-called gods, but towards his people. He is jealous of their affections, of their loyalty and devotion. He is jealous of their love towards him.

Such jealousy is rooted in passion and can be translated as such. The standard Jewish translation renders it as Impassioned (JPS). Old Testament scholar John Goldingay, in his new translation, renders it as Passionate: the Lord, “whose name is ‘Passionate,’ is the passionate God.”² Here we have a name we can put on the list of God’s names: Passionate! Here we have a name we can hang onto: Passionate! He is filled with fervor, fervor for his people. Such passion is rooted in intense love. The Lord has set his affections on his people Israel; he loves Israel. He has taken Israel into a covenant relationship with himself, a relationship which elsewhere he describes as marriage. The marriage covenant is the one human environment in which jealousy is appropriate.

If you were to summarize God in one word what would that be? Love: God is Love. God is satisfied in the love that flows within the Godhead between Father and Son. The Father loves the Son and the Son loves the Father back. God pours out his love on this creation that he has made. And he pours out his love on the people he has made. He has made people to be loved by him. He is passionate about this. We are people to be loved.

The rest of God’s speech to Moses can be read in the light of this self-description as a jealous or passionate God. There are negative and positive aspects to these commands. Negatively, God warns Israel to not worship other gods. Positively, he commands Israel to observe religious festivals.

3. The Danger of Idolatry (34:11-17)

Firstly the negative: he warns Israel to not worship other gods. It’s not because they are rivals of whom he is jealous, but because he knows they are not gods at all. God would travel with the people and bring them into the land he had promised Abraham. That land was full of Canaanites and various other peoples who worshiped other

gods, as we see in the Book of Joshua. Israel was not to make a covenant with any of these people nor to whore after their gods. Whoring is the language of adultery, and adultery breaks the covenant of marriage. It is appropriate language here for marriage is the analogy of a people’s relation to God.

We are not surrounded by people who bow down and worship idols and images and sacrifice on their altars. Growing up in Thailand I saw people doing this. Nevertheless, we are surrounded by many things calling us to bow down to them. We are surrounded by idols. The idol of higher education at elite schools such as Stanford, USC and Yale, at whose altar the rich and famous have prostituted themselves, as we have learned in the past few days. The idol of business success. The idol of family success. Just as the Canaanite gods would compete for the affections of the Israelites, so there are many things that compete for our affections and allegiance.

We are creatures of desire, which is a good thing. We are made to have longings. We have affections but it is so easy for our desires and affections to be disordered, to be misdirected. When God brings us to himself our affections belong to him, and he sets about bringing order to our affections through his Spirit. When we come to him in faith we have disordered affections. He knows that. All he asks is that we recognize that he is bigger and give him our love. This love will grow as we draw closer to him.

How was Israel to resist the lure of these false gods? How was she to keep her affections directed towards the Lord. An answer to that is given in the second part of our passage: the positive commands.

4. Religious Festivals: Remember Your Story (34:18-26)

The bulk of vv. 18-26 concerns Israel’s religious calendar. “Three times in the year shall all your males appear before the LORD God, the God of Israel” (23). Israel was to observe three religious festivals each year, gathering in the Lord’s presence. These feasts reminded Israel of her identity and her history. The Feast of Unleavened Bread in the first month commemorated Israel’s exodus from Egypt. She was the people whom God brought out of Egypt. The first day of that festival is Passover: she was the people whom God redeemed. The Feast of Weeks or *Shavuot* in the third month marked the beginning of the harvest, the firstfruits. It was also the month in which God brought Israel to Mt Sinai and entered into covenant. The Feast of Ingathering in the seventh month marked the end of the harvest. It was also the Feast of Tabernacles or *Sukkot* reminding Israel that God had brought his people through the wilderness from the house of bondage in Egypt to the land of freedom in the Promised Land. On the way the people stayed in tents, accompanied by the Lord, also in a tent or tabernacle.

Every year Israel remembered its story with these feasts in the Lord’s presence. Who was Israel? Israel was the people whom God had redeemed and brought out of Egypt, whom he had brought to Mt Sinai and taken for himself in covenant, and whom he had brought safely through the wilderness into the Promised Land. Israel and all she had was a gift from God and so the firstfruits and the firstborn belonged to him.

Israel’s religious calendar was later expanded with two further feasts: Purim commemorating deliverance in the days of Esther, and Hanukkah commemorating deliverance in the days of the Maccabean Revolt. Both feasts recognized God’s miraculous deliverance of his people from attempted genocide.

This liturgical calendar reminded Israel of its story and its identity. It helped keep her from alternative narratives. This calendar and history was specific to Israel, part of the Old Covenant. These feasts do not apply to us. This is not our story. We are grafted into Israel's story as the children of Abraham, but we have our own story. We remember something greater. Our story is anchored in the birth, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. We are the people who participate in the death and resurrection of Jesus, which we identify with and commemorate in baptism and the Lord's supper.

What is your story? What is your identity? Just as there are many idols competing for our affections, so there are many alternative narratives competing for our identity, competing to own us, to include us in their way of telling the story of the world. The narrative of the American Dream: that life is going to get better and better, that we will have a nice suburban house with two nice cars in the driveway and three nicely-scrubbed kids going to good schools. But we have a younger generation which for the first time will not be as well off as its parents. The American Dream seems to be failing, and has failed for many. The narrative of nationalism, of who belongs in a nation state. The narrative of global crisis. Many different narratives competing to own us. And so we need to remind ourselves of our true narrative. We gather on Sunday mornings to be reminded of who we really are, to be reminded of what our narrative is. We gather to be reminded of who God is, what he has done in Christ, and what he is doing through his Spirit, and in light of that who we are in relation to God, in relation to one another, and in relation to the world.

This narrative is portrayed in the "Church" bay of our window. Our hands are reached up to receive the gift which God gives us through his Spirit, the gift of resurrection life, the life of the slain but risen lamb. An important part of this narrative is that the lion has conquered by being the slain lamb, not using violence but allowing violence to himself. We symbolically enter that life through baptism, following Christ and participating in his death and resurrection by our own death and resurrection, death to the old sinful self, resurrection into the new self, putting on Christ. Our hands reach up to return praise to God. We are re-born into a community, gathered around the Scriptures which tell us the narrative, and gathered around the table where we regularly break bread and drink the cup. Our hands reach out in reconciliation for we are a people who don't belong together gathering around the Lord Jesus to learn how to belong together. And our hands reach out to the world, serving as God's instruments of blessing, even as he promised Abraham, "you will be a blessing."

This narrative portrayed in the window is reflected in our PBCC Family Values:

1. Life in the Spirit by Grace
2. Devotion to the Word
3. Discipleship through Relationships
4. Participation in God's Work.

We gather on Sunday mornings to remind ourselves that this is our story, this is our narrative, this is our identity. As we gather, there is one religious feast that we are commanded to keep regularly: the Lord's Supper. By eating and drinking regularly we refresh our memory of our narrative.

My favorite communion service is on Good Friday each year. It is one service when we are not constrained by time pressures. We each bring a nail and lay it down at the foot of the cross. We say to God, "This is who I am, a sinner." At the cross God says, "Yes, I know. I know who you are. You are forgiven. You are loved. You are known and loved." Then we take the bread and the cup: the body of Christ given for us, the blood of Christ poured out for us for the forgiveness of sin, the blood of a new covenant. And we watch each other do this. We watch each other say to God, "This is who I am," and receive the reply, "Yes, I know. I love you."

One can think of communion as a very powerful way in which we counteract the idols which compete for our affections and the narratives which compete for our identity. We remind ourselves of what story we're in, and we remind ourselves of the one to whom our affections truly belong: the one who has made us for himself and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in him. Communion is a pledge of allegiance.

5. New Tablets (34:27-28)

"Write these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel." ... And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments. (34:27-28)

Moses pleaded, "Forgive us our iniquity and sin, and take us for your own." Yes, says God and through Moses writes a new covenant treaty. Yes, says God to us even more strongly, and makes a new covenant with us in Christ's blood. We are sinners. "Yes," says God. "I know. You are forgiven and loved. You are my people, known and loved."

It has been our practice for the past fifteen years to celebrate communion on the first Sunday of each month. This is the third Sunday, but it's impossible for us to not now come to the table.

The Lord Jesus celebrated Passover with his disciples. The Passover meal centers on the telling (*Haggadah*) of the story. The bread and the wine represent important elements of that story. But Jesus gave the bread and wine new meaning; he reshaped the story around himself. The bread and wine now represented his body given and blood shed. Jesus knew his disciples, knew that one would soon betray him, one would take up the sword, and all would abandon him. But still he ate this meal with them. Still, "he loved them to the end" (John 13:1).

Before we come to the table we will sing a song entitled Remembrance. We will sing, "None too lost to be saved; None too broken or ashamed; All are welcome in this place."³

1. Timothy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage* (New York: Dutton, 2011), 95.
2. John Goldingay, *The First Testament: A New Translation* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2018), 86.
3. Matt Redman and Matt Maher, *Remembrance*.

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