

Providence Presbyterian Church
Rev. David Pettit
March 7th, 2021
Exodus 20: 1-17 and John 2: 13–22

This morning's scriptures feature two mountains: Mt. Sinai and Mt. Zion. As Colorado people we understand the significance, though in the ancient Near East, the mountains were where the gods lived.

For me, I've spent a fair amount of time hiking in the mountains. I started backpacking at twenty-three. I had just finished one year as a youth director. I was tired and discouraged and had unused vacation time. So, I borrowed some old equipment from a friend, and not really knowing what I was doing and woefully ill-prepared, I hiked into the central high peaks of the Adirondack mountains mid-September. I followed the Opalescent river, climbing up to treeline and up the trail to the summit of Mt. Marcy. Like Moses, I climbed out of reach of the noise and immediate demands of everyday life. It was my first experience of that combination of exhaustion and exhilaration of summiting a peak.

Hiking and backpacking became my release for many years, finding that stress could not thrive at higher elevations, starved of its Oxygen. The higher I climbed, the more peaceful it felt. I loved to backpack because you get back in far enough that you could escape most other hikers. It was you and wilderness. And the dense underbrush and bristly pines of the eastern forest hedged you in, muffled most noises. It was a reprieve—a place where prayer flowed easily.

I found that experience harder to replicate over time. It became harder to separate the busy world of relationships and work and responsibilities and to-dos that you forgot to do before you left but need to remember as soon as you get home. It got harder to leave it all behind; the stress adapted to the elevation and would cling on longer. But I would go nonetheless at every chance I got. And while the backcountry felt like a remnant of the uncorrupted world to me in my twenties, even that romantic notion eventually fell away. For even back then as I reveled in those mountains, I was aware that many of the lakes in the High Peak region had no fish, pristine mountain streams that ought to be teeming with brook trout were empty because of acid rain. These places were not as untouched as I wanted to imagine.

Well, to portray Moses as some kind of weekend backpacker would be a serious misconstrual. Moses is on the job. His trek up the mountain is still reimbursable. There is a lot of seriousness around all this. And yet, he gets to talk to God face to

face. No communicating over email or Zoom or clouds or fiery pillars. Just a good old face-to-face with the holy. A pause in the journey to hear directly from God. In light of the challenges of making decisions and leading a people through a wilderness where water was not abundant and where they felt inclined to grumble and mope every time they had to wait for dinner, Moses gets a reprieve from all that daily stress. And he gets clarity and straightforward direction.

Moses gets what we often wish for and which many have claimed to have. He gets an unmediated word from the Lord, direct, mouth to ear, face to face. Untainted by the noise and confusion and muddiness of life. He gets ten words (devarim) for what the people should be, and how they live with one another and to be distinct as God's people, straight from the mouth of God. Clarity.

Now, if you read the longer narrative carefully, there are a lot of instructions as to who is supposed to stand where, when Moses is supposed to bring the elders up, and when no one is supposed to come close. There are dark clouds and smoke. It's no wonder the people say, "we're fine staying back; you just talk to God for us." Nonetheless, Moses on Sinai becomes the gold standard, the holy mountain moment, the symbol of the God-Israel relationship and covenant.

And yet, by the time we get to our gospel passage, that simplicity and clarity have grown more complicated. Over a thousand years of history has accumulated. That pure kernel of the God-human relationship discussed with God and Moses on Sinai is now a much more complicated and human institution at this point.

People still trek up the holy mountain to find something of that connection, to be in God's presence, to find that clear air where prayer flows more easily, and God's ear feels closer, and connection is possible. Now people trek up the mountain of Zion in Jerusalem. But it is not a lonely trailhead. It is a bustling thoroughfare. The roads to Zion are packed. Crowds of people walking together with aunts and uncles and cousins, singing together the songs of Zion. The noise of it all had become part of the experience now. Crowds, singing. The long trek, the big city, the sights and sounds.

And while that communal effervescence may now be part of the fun, it has other implications as well. The smell of continual burnt offerings fills the air, a haze of smoke, as the priests churn out the sacrifices, one after the other, trying to keep up with the demand. The temple courts are crowded and noisy. The gentile court, meant to be a place of prayer, is louder than a middle schoolers' sleep-over. Around the base of the temple mount are booths and shops. So, if you came all this way and do not have a sacrificial animal, or you ate it on the long journey, or yours

cannot pass priestly inspection, you can conveniently acquire one there at the base of the temple. But like buying a hotdog at mile-high, you do so at price. And if you do not have the local currency to buy your over-priced animal, there is a convenient exchange booth, at a very “competitive” rate. You pay for convenience.

Jerusalem’s economy has come to revolve around the rhythmic expansion and contraction of the city from pilgrims and temple worshippers. Passover had become its own circus. Long lines. Complicated processes. An economic reality with opportunists seeing a chance to make money with little if any interest in the event itself. That trek up the mountain and the iconic moment of ascending into God’s presence was all more complicated. That holy place has been overtaken by human, political, and economic realities.

Perhaps something of this becomes true for us as well, in a sense. We have that recall of when it was simpler, of that worship connection, that desire to know and be known by God, to sing with the worshipping community. That clarity of desire to live out one’s faith. But life and its responsibilities have clouded our minds and hearts, life’s stress, over time, has followed you into those spaces, and it is harder to pray in the place that was once a place of prayer. Many things contribute to that loss of prayer. It may be the unresolved questions or grief or hurt. It may be the comfortable distractions that we have welcomed. For Jesus, it was the corruption of the process and the institutions. Taking advantage of people. Turning the temple into a marketplace. Israel’s accommodated to Rome’s power in exchange for Rome’s perks.

The whole scene agitates Jesus. He sees it, and he reacts to it. Jesus still has the idealistic and romantic notion of what this worship connection was supposed to be. Jesus is the type who stands on the mount of olives and looks over the Temple, and rather than being caught up in the festival and its traditions and its noises, he weeps. O Jerusalem. He is an idealist who has some picture in mind of what this holy city was supposed to be.

So, he reacts. he drives out those who want to capitalize on a captive audience but who do not care about the Passover itself, or the people. He calls out those who have turned the Passover into this circus. He reminds those listening what this place is supposed to be. A house of prayer. A place to commune, to connect, to be reconciled, and to hear.

Now, as I have been pondering this passage this week, I feel like Jesus does not, in this moment, give us a great answer for how we redeem the places of prayer and connection in our lives. Like raising your voice and yelling at everyone to stop

yelling, this moment of tossing tables and pushing people out doesn't exactly create that moment of prayer. He does draw attention to how out of kilter things had become and to the practices that had become accepted. And he does give us this little moment to justify all our moments of righteous indignation and impulse to start throwing things around and raising our voices. But in the end, I'm sure the money changers picked their tables back up, frantically collected their coins from the dark corners and from under people's feet, dusted themselves off, and went back to work.

And I guess Jesus knows that too. It is a moment that Jesus calls attention to the situation, and to who he is, and how his own death and resurrection is an attempt to redeem the ideals of that place, of God's redemption, and of the God-human covenant.

Standing in the shadow of the temple, Jesus says "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." He is speaking of himself, of how he will accomplish through his own life, death and resurrection what no temple reform will be able to accomplish. Jesus will be the new temple, the new locus of reconciliation, the new mediator of God's heart. He makes himself the new sacrifice that can reconcile the sinner to the divine. A new sacrifice around which the called community will gather, coming from east and west, and north and south. His body broken and his blood poured out.

Even so, even as this passage reminds us of Jesus' central place inviting us to that communion and to that God-human covenant and relationship, we still get distracted. The church has had two thousand years to complicate and bungle everything up. And that tendency to let stress and responsibility and our broken humanity usurp that place of prayer is still there for us. And while throwing a table over or raising your voice once in a while may call our attention to it, tossing tables won't redeem the place of prayer and clarity and connection in our life.

This will require the personal work of each of us, to seek Christ, to attend to our hearts, to be willing to listen. To watch a child play and learn basic lessons again.

We have to re-calibrate every so often. We pause and try to get back to the rhythms and disciplines and calm that may help us pray again, to hear God's voice, to experience that love and presence again. As I think about what that might mean, I keep coming back to lines from a poem by Brad Aaron Modlin. His poem is entitled "What You Missed That Day You Were Absent from Fourth Grade" and by framing the poem with this title suggests that there are some simple things you missed that day you were absent that could help you in your adult life. He writes:

Mrs. Nelson explained how to stand still and listen
to the wind, how to find meaning in pumping gas,

how peeling potatoes can be a form of prayer. She took
questions on how not to feel lost in the dark

After lunch she distributed worksheets
that covered ways to remember your grandfather's

voice. Then the class discussed falling asleep
without feeling you had forgotten to do something else—

something important—and how to believe
the house you wake in is your home. This prompted

Mrs. Nelson to draw a chalkboard diagram detailing
how to chant the Psalms during cigarette breaks,

and how not to squirm for sound when your own thoughts
are all you hear; also, that you have enough.

The English lesson was that I am
is a complete sentence.

And just before the afternoon bell, she made the math equation
look easy. The one that proves that hundreds of questions,

and feeling cold, and all those nights spent looking
for whatever it was you lost, and one person

add up to something.

The language of this poem has that kind of simplicity that cuts through the complications and confusion, and brings us back to the basics, to a simple wisdom that we often lose. And perhaps it can suggest ways that we might reclaim the place of prayer and connection to God that is often lost in the chaos and noise, either that around us, or that inside us.

This season of lent is designed as a 40 day wilderness period where we can pause and hear anew. It is an apt time to ask ourselves what has clouded and distracted us

in our places of prayer. How do we re-calibrate. To find the rhythms that will help us connect with God again, to attend to our hearts rather than be distracted by a myriad of other things. May we pause long enough to remember what is at the heart of things. That we can break from the unthinking rhythms to see the world around us freshly, to have our hearts weep for the brokenness of the world. To call out how well-meaning institutions somehow become mechanisms for injustice. To hear the call again, to turn towards Jesus. Not just as a good teacher. Not just as a good example. But as the new mediator of God to a community called to be reconciled to God, and to live out that relationship in everything from peeling potatoes to loving our enemy.

Jesus Cleanses the Temple

(Mt 21:12–17; Mk 11:15–19; Lk 19:45–48)

¹³ The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴ In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. ¹⁵ Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶ He told those who were selling the doves, “Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!”

¹⁷ His disciples remembered that it was written, “Zeal for your house will consume me.” ¹⁸ The Jews then said to him, “What sign can you show us for doing this?”

¹⁹ Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”

²⁰ The Jews then said, “This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?” ²¹ But he was speaking of the temple of his body. ²² After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

The Ten Commandments

(Deut 5:1–22)

20 Then God spoke all these words: ² I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; ³ you shall have no other gods before me.

⁴ You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.

⁵ You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, ⁶ but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

⁷ You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

⁸ Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work. ¹⁰ But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. ¹¹ For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

¹² Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

¹³ You shall not murder.

¹⁴ You shall not commit adultery.

¹⁵ You shall not steal.

¹⁶ You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

¹⁷ You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

¹⁸ When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, ¹⁹ and said to Moses, “You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die.” ²⁰ Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin.” ²¹ Then the people stood at a distance, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was.