

Sermon – September 19, 2021
“Do not let God speak to us or we will die”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Exodus 20:1-21

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill us all anew this day. and anoint the sharing of these words. Let them be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen

My grandsons, come, come and sit for a few minutes, rest from your work, and let me tell you a story. Do you have time to sit and to hear what God has done among the people of Israel before you were born? Let me share with you this morning what I heard with my own ears from God. This story will not take long to hear and then you can continue working on your chores. Sit, sit, and get comfortable and let me tell you about that day.

God came to us on the day of the third new moon after we had left Egypt. That would have been the 50th day after we were redeemed from slavery in Egypt, very early in our journey with God. We were just getting to know God and what it means to be God’s people. Let’s see where to start, maybe where God spoke on that morning. No wait, that will not make sense to you. Let me back up a few days and start from a different point. Let me see, where shall I begin? Yes, I think it makes sense to start with the day we first made camp at the mountain of God, Mt. Sinai. Oh, such a place in the wilderness that was. We had traveled a few days with God leading us in the cloud from Rephidim and arrived at Mt. Sinai and then spread out in the valley there

before the mountain. We set up camp and prepared to be there for a while, but as soon as we stopped traveling, Moses left us and went up the mountain to be closer to God. We could see him going up and up, and as he climbed, he got smaller and smaller on that great mountain and then we could see him no more. Even those with sharp young eyes like yours could not find him. I was about your age when this happened and my eyes also lost Moses on the mountain. Much later that day, Moses came back down the mountain and summoned the elders from the tribes. We all wanted to hear Moses' news from his climb, but would have to wait until the elders shared it with us. There were too many people traveling together for one man to be heard by everyone. When the word of what God had told Moses on the mountain came to our family, we were filled with joy and anticipation. God had told Moses, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation." What my mind fastened on in those words first was that the people who came out of Canaan 70 in number, 400 years later, were now to be a nation. We were no longer a tribe or a people in slavery, but were to be a nation. God would treasure us and we would be used by God to bless other nations, to teach them about this God who loves us, who provided for us by sending bread from heaven in the morning and giving us water in the wilderness. We would be a priestly kingdom, those who served God and would take knowledge of a loving God to all nations of the world. When we heard these words in our family, we were all excited. In fact, everyone in our family agreed that we would do what God was asking. We told the elder who brought this news, "Everything that the LORD has spoken we will do." It was the same for all the people camped there before the mountain. We were all ready to do whatever God asked of us that we might be such a nation.

After all the people had heard these words and their response was taken back to Moses, we saw him go up the mountain again. And later he came down the mountain again and brought more good news from God. God had told Moses that God was coming to speak with us, to let us hear God's voice, to hear God's very words for God's people. God was coming to speak to us, so that we would all know and remember that God talked with Moses and what God told Moses we could trust as God's word. Moses told us that we had three days to prepare ourselves for God's visit, and that on the morning of the third day, God would come. We were all excited and

anxious about what it might be like to hear God speak. We were not sure what to do to get ready, but Moses came and consecrated all the people. We stopped the common work that occupied our hands, and we washed our clothes that we might be a people ready to meet God. A few of the younger men were sent to set up a boundary all around the mountain so that no one would get too close to God. The way to God, to the top of Mt Sinai where God would come down to us, was barred, and we were prepared for God's visit and now waited for God to call us to come. Moses had told us to listen for the ram's horn to be blown as a signal that we were to come to God.

I remember trying to go to sleep the night before the third day. I kept looking up at the mountain top to see if God had arrived, but all I could see were the stars that God had shown Abraham when God told him that Israel would be greater in number than the stars in heaven. I don't think I slept much that night, but at some point, I dozed off, as when I opened my eyes, it was the dawn of the third day, the day God was to come and speak. I remember looking around our family that morning and seeing everyone's faces, and from the way they looked, I don't think any of us had slept much that night. Everyone was anxious. We were all thinking, "What will it be like to hear God speak? What will God say?" And if we were honest, deep down in our hearts we wondered, if we were to hear God's voice, would we die?

While it was still too dark to see the mountain, we could see flashes of lightning and hear thunder. And when it was light enough to see the top of the mountain, we could see it was covered in thick darkness and clouds. The flashes of lightning and the thunder continued. We got ourselves ready to go and then waited to hear the blowing of the ram's horn to call us to come and hear God speak. The ram's horn we hear today has many sounds and uses. We hear it calling troops to battle, signaling us to break camp and set out on another stage of our journey with God, and it is used to call us to worship. Those are all familiar sounds of the ram's horn to us. The sound of this ram's horn calling us to meet with God was different from all of those! First, it was loud and long. No one in the camp was going to miss this sound. Even those who seemed to have trouble hearing clearly heard the sound of the blowing of the ram's horn that called us to come to hear God. This sound was terrifying! God was coming to God's people. God was calling a new nation to rise up and come and hear God's words and to take them to all of the nations. All of us began to tremble at the sound of this ram's horn, and we got up from our places and went towards the sound. Moses led the people out of the camp forward to the base of the mountain.

The mountain had boundaries set up on it, but we were too afraid to go any closer than where Moses led us. There would be no need for the arrows and stones that were ready to kill anyone who happened to go too far. We wanted to go no closer. Looking up at the mountain, we could see that it was now wrapped in smoke, and then when the LORD descended, we could see fire on the top of the mountain. The way the smoke went up from the top of the mountain reminded me of the great kilns of Egypt where we once made bricks for Pharaoh. The entire mountain shook at the presence of the LORD and the blowing of the ram's horn just kept getting louder and louder until we could barely stand to hear the sound at all. We could see Moses ahead of us standing closer to God and speaking to God, and we could hear God reply back to Moses. It was like the sound of thunder. At that time, Moses began to walk toward the clouds and smoke covering the mountain and disappeared into the clouds. We stood there in fear listening to the sounds and wondering what was next. Before too long, Moses came back out of the clouds and told us again not to try to go up to the LORD. I don't think there was anyone who was thinking about going one step farther up the mountain that day.

And then God spoke. I was amazed that we could all hear God speak. Everyone I have ever talked with about that day who was present says the same thing: they heard every word. Never has such a great crowd been able to hear so well. There were millions of us gathered there at the base of the mountain, and yet we all heard God's words. I have never forgotten those words, and I hope you will also remember them and keep them. The first words I heard from God were "No other gods before me!" and then "No idols shall you make!" And after we heard those words God told us, "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, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments." This God who loved us and had redeemed us from slavery was a God of steadfast love, a steadfast love that lasts across the generations. The anger of our God was but for a moment, but God's love is everlasting, a love that is extended to those who heard God's words and those like you who hear them from an older generation. Remember, my grandsons, that God is a God of love.

God continued on, saying, "No misuse of the name of the LORD." And God told us that if we did misuse God's name, then there was no acquittal for those who speak His name wrongly.

Next God told us to “remember the Sabbath day.” We had already begun to see the idea of Sabbath rest even in the bread we received from heaven, but now we were told by God to remember the seventh day. The next words from God came with a promise. God said, “Honor your father and your mother,” and if we did so, we would live long in the land of promise. Next came these words in rapid succession. “No Murder, No Adultery, No Stealing, No false witness against your neighbor,” and finally, “No coveting your neighbor’s possessions.”

There seemed then to be a pause as if it was time for us to think about what we had heard. We had seen the thunder and lightning, and heard the piercing sound of the ram’s horn making a sound louder than any man could make. We had seen the smoke rising from the mountain, and we had all heard God speak. We were all terrified and could bear no more. We could not bear to hear another word from God. By this point, there was no issue with us going up on the mountain. We were all trembling in fear and wanted to hear God’s voice no more. We all began to ask Moses to speak to God and listen to God’s word for us. We told Moses, “You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die.” Moses told us, “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.” Moses then let us move away from being so close to God, and we stood and watched as he walked up the mountain away from us to the thick darkness where God was to hear more of God’s words. Moses disappeared into that thick darkness to hear more of God’s word.

We waited. Then when Moses did not come back after some time away, we went back to our tents in the camp. We were all terrified and could not believe that we had heard God speak and were still alive. This God who redeemed us from Egypt, who set us free from slavery with a mighty hand, had spoken to us. We had heard God’s words. I heard God speak and I am alive today. All we had to do now was to keep God’s words and we would be God’s treasure, a holy people, and a priestly nation. God’s words though are not easy to keep. And we struggled to keep them, but that is a story for another day. Now my grandsons, remember these words I have told you for they are great wisdom. God’s love is given to us, but obedience to God’s word is how we walk with God to be God’s people. Seek to live God’s words all the days of your lives. Trust what you are told by those who were there and heard God speak. Trust the words that Moses also has brought from God, after we begged him not to make us hear God speak again, which he has written down in a book. Learn God’s word and speak these words to your children and your children’s children, and remember always that God redeemed us from slavery before we had

God's words. God came for us before we were God's people. God is a God of steadfast love, loving those to the thousandth generation, for all eternity loving those who keep God's commandments. Now go on and get your work done and be sure to tell everyone about the God of steadfast love who came and made a nation out of a redeemed people.

Pray with me: Father, thank you that we have been given your word made flesh, Jesus Christ, to help us better understand what it means to be your treasured people, a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. Jesus, guide us in the power of the Holy Spirit that we might keep your word and be your people. In your name we pray. Amen.