

THE HOLY MOUNTAIN

Wild (Part 8) | Exodus 19:8-25

One of the towering intellects of our time is a man named, Michael Walzer. Born to a Jewish family, educated at Harvard, Cambridge, and Brandeis universities, Walzer rose to become one of America's preeminent political theorists and public intellectuals. For many years, he served as a professor at Princeton University's famous *Institute for Advanced Study* – a think tank for geniuses like Albert Einstein and others. When I was a seminary student at Princeton, I used to drive by the Institute, hoping to absorb some of those brain waves. You can probably tell THAT didn't work!

I mention Michael Walzer today because he especially loved the biblical Book of Exodus – the WILD story to which we return together this morning. Walzer says that there are three major life lessons we can ALL learn from the Exodus narrative. FIRST, wherever you live, it is probably EGYPT. You probably live in a place where you will sometimes feel oppressed, under-valued or weighed down... where you'll be asked to do too much with too few resources... where you'll run up against the limits of your body or your time or your character and you'll cry out to heaven: "God, set me FREE from all this!"

And, SECONDLY, says Walzer, there will be periods when you'll dare to believe that there is an answer to that prayer... that there is a better place, a PROMISED LAND, a kingdom or manner of life more beautiful than where you are now and for which your heart yearns. It is important that you set out for that place even if there appears to be no way.

And, THIRDLY, observes Walzer, Exodus teaches us that the way to that land is through the WILDERNESS.¹ Whether your aim is to one day arrive at a fabulous character or a great marriage or a wonderful vocation or a rich relationship with God, getting to those beautiful places of promise almost always involves a difficult journey. Along the way you'll be tested and tempted and tempered in ways that are truly wild.

And I would add a FOURTH truth to Walzer's list. Eventually, you must meet the MOUNTAIN – or more properly, you must truly reckon with the holy God, who reveals himself there.

When we left the story of Exodus last week, the children of Israel had made their way out of Egypt, across the Red Sea, and through the desert of the Arabian Peninsula. They were now encamped at the base of a famous place we call, Mount Sinai. This place wasn't just a brief rest stop on the family road trip. God would keep the Israelites settled in this spot for thirty-eight years. It's like he really wanted them to learn something there before moving them further toward the Promised Land. So what was it?

Well, we learned part of the point last week when Tracey and Mark described the amazing PROPOSAL God makes there to the children of Israel. God says: **7]Now IF you obey me fully and keep my covenant, THEN out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exo 19:5-6).** We've come to call this the Mosaic Covenant. God basically says: Look, the whole earth is mine. There are billions of people I could be talking to right now. But I'm talking to you because I want YOU. Israel, I want you to dance with me. I want a special relationship with you. My plan is to bless you beyond your imagining. I want to set you apart as a very special people. You'll have an outsized spiritual (priestly) influence in history. You'll be an enduring nation like no other. But here's what's needed from your side: Obey me fully. Keep the covenant (the promises) I'm going to ask of you.

The comparison our preachers made last week to this conversation and a Homecoming or Promposal was really helpful because this is a beautifully tender moment. God is going down on one knee. He's offering Israel all the goodness he has to give them. He's saying, in effect, "Will you be mine?" And in saying that he is opening himself up to the possibility of rejection. I remember the day I asked Amy to marry me. I mean I thought she would probably say YES. But when the moment came, I trembled as I made the ask. When God makes the ask, Israel could say "No," or "I'll get back to you in a week," or "How about we negotiate the terms" or "Here's the pre-nup." But God takes that risk, just as in the coming of Jesus, God stoops down in human flesh and takes a knee.

And this illustrates one of the most important ideas in all of Scripture and for you and me: God is loving. I know we say that all the time, so often perhaps that it loses meaning. "Oh, yeah, God is love." We sometimes say that like we are describing God's color or an abstract principle or something God has no choice but to do. But God's outstretched hand of love toward anyone – including you or me – is an act of voluntary vulnerability. It is an act of risky kindness. It's something God does not have to do but chooses to do. We should never take that for granted – as we shouldn't take for granted the loving gestures of the people in our lives. It is awesome whenever anyone truly loves us. But to have GOD love us and want a special relationship with him? Wow.

Maybe that really sunk in for the children of Israel. Perhaps they were just so blown away by the love of God and his desire to bless them that they were willing to surrender any impulse to negotiate the deal or ask more questions. Maybe they were a bit like some of us when we stood at the altar and said "I do," or "Let's make a family," barely understanding what we just signed up for. The Bible simply says that: **The people all responded together, "We will do EVERYTHING the Lord has said."** We are all in! **So Moses brought their answer back to the Lord (Exo 19:8).**

And then what follows is really, well, WILD. God doesn't throw a big party. He doesn't whisk Israel away on a honeymoon trip to celebrate what's just happened. Instead, through Moses, God issues a set of commands to the Israelites that involve purification. **And the Lord said to Moses, "Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. Have them wash their clothes... [and] abstain from sexual relations (Exo 19:10, 15).**

Then God instructs Moses to institute some serious measures of protection. **Put limits for the people around the mountain and tell them, 'Be careful that you do not approach the mountain or touch the foot of it. Whoever touches the mountain is to be put to death (Exo 19:12). Warn the people so they do not force their way through to see the Lord and many of them perish. Even the priests who approach the Lord must consecrate themselves, or the Lord will break out against them (Exo 19:21-22).**

And all of this is to prepare for an encounter with God that include some major pyrotechnics. **On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the Lord descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, and the whole mountain trembled violently (Exo 19:16-18).**

What's this all about? Why this call to purification and protection? Why all these pyrotechnics? Why all this heavy stuff immediately on the heels of the tender proposal that God had just issued to Israel and gotten a YES from? I think it is because God is trying to tell Israel – and by extension each of us – something crucial about himself and the nature of our relationship. God wants us to appreciate that while is truly loving; he is also HOLY.

The word "holy" has fallen into disuse in our time. When it is used, it is often employed in a derogatory sense – as in "holy roller" or "holier than thou." For many people, the word suggests a pinched, diminished, or sanctimonious state of being. This is sad, because the biblical concept of holiness actually carries a vastly grander and more inspiring meaning. Properly understood, holiness implies the absence of sin, the abundance of good fruit, all-out dedication (consecration), and awesome power. I wish we had time today to unpack each one of those ideas. If you're interested, I do that in the first chapter of the book, *Leadership Essentials*, and reflect there on how we meet this holiness most fully in Jesus.

Maybe you can see, however, how the call to purification, protection, and pyrotechnics we find in Exodus 19 are all efforts to help primitive Israel start to understand the

nature of God's holiness. I can only imagine how disturbing all this was to them, but God was out to disturb them. As author David Wells observes: *"A God with whom we are on... easy terms and whose reality is little different from our own... who is merely there to satisfy our needs – has no real authority to compel and will soon begin to bore us."*² There is nothing boring about the HOLY God who appears to Israel in this story.

When we don't understand holiness, we settle for too little in God, in others and in ourselves. To illustrate this, author Paul David Tripp describes gazing down on the city of Dubai from atop the Burj Khalifa skyscraper – the world's tallest manmade structure – over half a mile high. *"How small the rest of the buildings looked,"* writes Tripp. *"They looked... unimpressive, [hardly] worthy of attention, let alone awe. Those 'small' buildings were skyscrapers that, in any other city, would have been the buildings you wanted to visit."* But I had caught a glimpse of the greatest, *"which put what had impressed me before into proper perspective."* The Burj Khalifa today, cathedral spires in the Middle Ages, Mount Sinai in ancient times, only hint at the height of God's holiness. As Paul Tripp concludes: *"If you allow yourself to gaze upon his holiness, you feel incredibly small and sinful. [But] it is a good thing spiritually to have the assessments of your own grandeur decimated by divine glory."*³ It reminds us of our desperate need for God's grace and, perhaps, that you and I were made for a more glorious life than the one for which we may have settled.

I think this may be why God left Israel at the foot of that mountain for so many years. He wanted its height and his holiness to work on Israel's heart. The New Testament scholar, D.A. Carson, points out that most of us do not casually drift toward holiness; we need to be met by it, to be confronted with it, to sit with it a long time. Carson writes: *"Apart from grace-driven effort, people do not gravitate toward godliness, prayer, obedience to Scripture, faith, and delight in the Lord. We drift toward compromise and call it tolerance; we drift toward disobedience and call it freedom; we drift toward superstition and call it faith. We cherish the indiscipline of lost self-control and call it relaxation; we slouch toward prayerlessness and delude ourselves into thinking we have escaped legalism; we slide toward godlessness and convince ourselves we have been liberated."*⁴ To pick up the earlier analogies, until we meet the mountain of God – until we encounter true holiness -- we may easily drift toward building chicken coops on foundations made for skyscrapers.

Let me close our time together with a story. In his book, *In the Grip of Grace*, Max Lucado tells the tale of a man who had been a closet slob most of his life. "He just couldn't comprehend the logic of neatness. Why make up a bed if you're going to sleep in it again tonight? Why put the lid on the toothpaste tube if you're going to take it off again in the morning?"

"Then he got married. His wife was patient. She said she didn't mind his habits... if he didn't mind sleeping on the couch! Since he did mind, he began to change. He [joked] that he enrolled in a 12-step program for slobs. A physical therapist helped him

rediscover the muscles used for hanging up shirts and placing toilet paper on the holder. His nose was reintroduced to the smell of Pine Sol. By the time his in-laws arrived for a visit, he was a new man.

“But then came the moment of truth. His wife went out of town for a week. At first, he reverted to the old man. He figured he could be a slob for six days and clean on the seventh. But something strange happened. He could no longer relax with dirty dishes in the sink or towels flung around the bathroom or clothes on the floor or sheets piled up like a mountain on the bed. What happened? Simple. He had been exposed to a higher standard of living” [and loving].⁵ It had altered him from the inside out.

That's what the holiness of God does as we draw near to it. That's what explains the changed character of people who truly walk with Jesus. That's why we come here to the foot of the mountain of God each week. God is holy and we are not; but because he is also loving, he's got grace and truth to help us with this. In fact, I read somewhere that he has a Top Ten List that pictures for us the direction he wants to take us. And we'll discover that when we return next week.

¹ Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (Basic Books, 1986), p. 149.

² David F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams*, p.93.

³ Adapted from Paul David Tripp, *Do You Believe?* (Crossway, 2021), pp. 102-103.

⁴ D. A. Carson, quoted in "Reflections," *Christianity Today* (7-31-00).

⁵ Max Lucado, *In the Grip of Grace* (Word Publishing, 1996), 116-117.