

February 26, 2017
Exodus 24:12-18
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“Out of the Ordinary”

Good morning! Today is a special day: it’s Sunday, and we get to be together in worship. This may not seem like a very radical statement: it seems obvious to me, but you might be surprised to learn that no everyone would agree with that statement, or think it’s a good thing. Some of you might remember that in 2009 and 2010 I did a pastoral internship in a church of the Brethren congregation in South Bend. I really liked the pastor I worked with, and we had a lot in common -- even more, now, since my daughter and his son got married a year and half ago -- but we had different opinions about some things, and this was one of them. Early on in our mentoring relationship, we were talking about planning worship. I shared that what is significant for me, what gives me energy and creativity is to think about what is special, unique, exceptional about each Sunday? Where does it fall in the Christian year? What is the theme of biblical text? What new images or ideas does it suggest? What makes this Sunday different from every other Sunday? Is that what you do, too? And he said, Yeah, I don’t pay any attention to that stuff. If you start acting like every Sunday is special, then nothing’s special any more.

I admit I was a bit deflated by this response. I thought maybe he was just tired of planning worship after 30 years in ministry, while I was an idealistic seminary student, focusing on worship arts. But upon further reflection, I realized that maybe how we were approaching things wasn’t all that different, even though we were using different language to describe it. Let me put it this way: if everything is special, than being special is . . . well, ordinary. And if your everyday effort is the best that you can bring, than your ordinary is . . . well, pretty special.

You have probably figured this out already, but it's difficult to preach an extraordinary sermon. I can add certain bells and whistles, throw in a few extra punchlines, but really, my best effort at study and composition and practice and delivery is what you're going to get. However, this continues to come from my conviction that each biblical text, each opportunity to preach is a special occasion, because maybe -- just maybe -- the Holy Spirit will make more out of that occasion than I ever could. I don't expect it every Sunday for every person, but if my preparation can create an opportunity for someone to hear a word from God, then that is a very special thing to be a part of. I know that we all come here -- myself included -- with other things on our minds, other schedules and commitments to keep track of, other concerns and cares which are weighing on our hearts. It is an effort to even make ourselves available to the Spirit, let alone have anything actually *happen*.

This text from Exodus is about an exceptional thing which happened to the most revered leader in the Old Testament, but like any story, it has its own context. We know this context from the biblical material which comes before and afterward, but it's pretty long and involved. I'd encourage you to read Exodus chapters 19 through 32. Our text from chapter 24 is the hinge of that material: the point where the narrative changes from the law and correct behavior toward other people to worship and correct relationship with God.

If you don't remember what's in Exodus chapter 20, add it to your mental filing cards: it's where we find the Ten Commandments. Moses received these laws from God on the top of Mt. Sinai in chapter 20, and then chapters 21 through 23 go on to list a lot more commandments which we're not likely to ever see on a statue outside the courthouse -- rules to follow when you sell your daughter into slavery, for instance, or how to treat resident foreigners. God promises to go before them into the land that God has promised them as long as they continue to follow him, and the people response, "All the words that the Lord has spoken, we will do."

But it gets even better for Moses and a small group of leaders who are invited to a special audience with the Lord Almighty. When they get to the mountain, God tells the others to wait, and takes Moses and his assistant Joshua up the mountain. And then Moses enters a cloud of

fire and smoke, and Moses is there for forty days and forty nights. This scene has all of the special effects the Jewish people associate with the presence of God: in Exodus 19 we got thunder and lightning and the last of a trumpet, and now there's a voice from heaven, and a cloud and fire like the ones which have been guiding the Hebrews in the wilderness for the past forty years. That number 40 again--it's symbolic of the fullness of time: 40 days and nights of rain for Noah, forty years -- a whole generation -- of wandering in the desert, and forty days and nights on the mountain with God.

And Exodus chapters 25-26 are full of elaborate instructions about how to build the ark of the covenant, the beautiful, portable tabernacle which will hold the sacred stone tablets, written by the finger of God, the focus of reverence and the worship of God. God finally gives these tablets to Moses at the end of chapter 31.

And when Moses goes down from this mountaintop experience, he finds that the people are running wild. That's how the Bible says it, "Moses saw that the people were running wild." We might say -- quite correctly -- that all hell had broken loose. It turns out folks can get into a lot of trouble in forty days and nights. The brother-in-law whom Moses had trusted to keep things under control had collected all the jewelry, melted it down into a golden calf, and the people were having one heckuva party. That's not exactly how the Bible says it -- the Bible says they sat down to eat and drink and rose up to revel -- but the reveling was so loud that Joshua thought there was a war going on; until Moses figured out that battles don't usually include music and dancing.

All this is to say that Moses literally descends from this mountaintop experience into a monumental mess caused by poor leadership and people who could follow directions for even forty days. It isn't even like they missed the fine print on the contract. The very first commandment is You shall have no other gods before me. They respond, What the Lord has spoken, we will do. And forty days later they're dancing around a golden calf. Does Moses ever have a mess on his hands. It reminds me of a Zen proverb which says, "After the ecstasy, the laundry." Whatever mountaintop we're on, we're going to have to go back to the mess of the ordinary sooner or later.

It isn't coincidence that the folks who put together the three year cycle of readings we know as the lectionary put this text -- the mountaintop experience of Moses in Exodus and the mountaintop experience of Jesus in the New Testament -- on this Sunday of the year. Today is a special day. We get to be on the mountaintop with Moses. We get to remember how Moses and Jesus were transfigured by the presence of God so that their faces glowed. We get to sing and shout and proclaim Alleluia! Let's just stay up here. But we can't stay. Things are going downhill from here. *Way* downhill. Down into the lonesome valley of isolation and temptation. Down into the valley that is shadowed by death.