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A Mission for the Church 4. Be A Blessing

From Exodus 19 New Revised Standard Version On the third new moon after the Israelites had gone out of the land of Egypt... they came into the wilderness of Sinai. They had journeyed from Rephidim, entered the wilderness of Sinai, and camped in the wilderness... in front of the mountain.... Then the LORD said to Moses, "I am going to come to you in a dense cloud, in order that the people may hear when I speak with you and so trust you ever after.... Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. Have them wash their clothes and prepare for the third day, because on the third day the LORD will come down upon Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people.... On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled. Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God. They took their stand at the foot of the mountain.

When I was in college, one evening during the week before Easter I was watching tv with my parents. This was in the Jurassic pre-cable days and so there weren't many choices. And we found ourselves watching one of those innumerable "life of Jesus" movies that air during that week. But this one was not a good movie. In a genre that is known for sometimes cheesy special effects and stilted dialogue, this one even was cheesier and more stilted than most. It was also really boring. And so about 2/3 of the way through, my mother let out a giant yawn and said *"I'm going to bed; I know how this story ends."*

We also know how the story of the Hebrew people's flight from Egypt ends. We know that the Hebrew people do eventually finish their forty year wanderings and settle in a new land. But imagine, for a few moments, that we **don't** know the end of the story; imagine, if you will, the scene described by our scripture today which picks up the Hebrew people's story three months after they had fled Egypt. Now you need to use your imaginations. For three months the Hebrew people had been fleeing through the

Sinai desert, camping out each night – without benefit of state park campgrounds or RV's or dump stations or convenience stores or even – what I find it hard hardest to imagine – internet access. Just their weary feet, the clothes and the possessions they could carry, and a few flimsy tents. It doesn't take much to realize that such a journey would make them realize just how fragile life could be. Wild animals, brush fires, nasty insects, and that paradox of the desert, either too much or too little water (a place that can kill you from thirst or threaten to drown you in a thunderstorm!)

But now, they have finally stopped for more than one night. They are camped, for two days now, the whole tired, ragged lot of them, at the base of Mt. Sinai. Long enough to probably begin to wonder if perhaps they'd been too quick to leave Egypt, time enough to probably be having some buyer's remorse about following Moses into this terrifying place. Because, you have to remember, that **they**, unlike us, don't know how the story is going to end; they just knew that they were now camped at the base of a mountain which, on that third morning, suddenly begins to spew lightning and smoke and thunder. And their leader tells them to wait there at the bottom of that mountain, while he goes to the top of it to talk with God. And then Moses begins his trek up the mountainside, accompanied by thunder and lightning and smoke and even the sound of trumpets.

What is the lesson to be learned from this scene at the base of Mt. Sinai? Scholars of religion call this sort of scene by a technical term: "*theophany*." The word literally means "*an appearance of God*." And most religious traditions have such stories. But one of the striking differences between, say, the theophany of a typical Greek myth and the theopanies of the Bible is this: In the Christian and Jewish tradition,

God is never *identified or equated* with forces of destruction or hurt, and God is always seeking what is good for humanity. If you remember any of your Greek mythology, you know that the so-called “gods” in many of those stories don’t give a whit about humanity and in fact sometimes enjoy tormenting people. But in the Hebrew and Christian traditions, while God may appear in some pretty dramatic ways, in the end God always cares about humanity. One of the clearest examples of that is found in the story of the prophet Elijah,¹ where he experiences earthquake and a fire and a windstorm and yet after each one the scripture explicitly asserts: But God was not in the wind or the earthquake or the fire – No, God was to be found in “a still, small voice” that came to Elijah after all the drama was done.

Here is the lesson to be learned from all of this: in the Hebrew and Christian traditions, theophanies are always meant to remind us that God is never absent. Even amidst the worst of storms that life can throw our way, even amidst the earthquakes in our lives that from time to time may shake what we thought had been firm ground, even amidst the winds of change that come our way **God is never absent**. And what is God doing? Well, the answer is very simple: God is present in order to offer a blessing. Oh my, how churchy! What does that mean? It means, indeed, more than what you say after someone sneezes. For you see, In the Hebrew and Christian tradition this notion of blessing is always, always bound up with creativity and fertility. God blesses the land with abundance so that it offers up a riotous bounty of color and sustenance. God blesses folks with children (although I have to say that while most of the time this is a

¹ 1 Kings 19:7-12, especially the KJV translation

rich blessing indeed, as the father of four there were occasions that I thought that this was a *mixed* blessing). God is the source of what animates us and gives us life and energy. God's blessing is to give us promise and purpose.

But remember, *the Hebrew people didn't know any of this then*. After hundreds of years of slavery in Egypt, they had forgotten these things about God, and while He had spectacularly and dramatically gotten them out of Egypt, how do they know this God was not setting them up for some spectacular torment?!? Today they found out, for their leader promises that God will have instructions for them. But what will God say? So far it's been a frightening ride and now the very earth itself is shaking and the very air seems possessed. *They didn't know* that God was about to give them the beginnings of the law in the form of the Ten Commandments, designed to show God's care for them and show them how to make for a just and civil and abundant society. *They didn't know* that from that point on down through the ages God's manifestations would always, always be ones of care and mercy for them, always seeking the best, always seeking to offer a blessing to them, always seeking to uphold them and assure them and reach out again and again and again with the promise and the reality of life abundant.

They didn't know all these things. But the question before us this morning is this: ***Do we? Do we?*** For you see, we in this congregation also stand at the foot of our own mountain, the storms on occasion gusting around us, the ground on occasion shaking in our lives, and sometimes wondering ourselves, like those ancient Hebrews, ***what comes next?*** For, as we have seen in this month's sermon series on what it means to be a "missional church," we too have felt the winds of cultural and churchly change at

times that you sometimes did not expect, we too have experienced the seemingly solid shake underneath our feet. And so we too, on this morning, may be tempted to say with the Hebrews “*We don’t know how this ends.*” But that would be a mistake. For we **do** know how it ends. We may not know in every detail what the future holds for the mission and ministry of First Christian Church but we **do** know that God is always a God of mercy and blessing and creativity and abundance. **We do know** – *or we should know!* – that God is always seeking to bring good out of every situation and every circumstance. **We do know** – *or we should know!* – that God is always and only everlastingly good. **We do know** – *or we should know!* – that God has hopes for this congregation and a mission for it that will gloriously continue no matter what the changes in the culture around us, or the forms that we use to worship with, or in the ways that things are so different from even a generation or two ago. **We do know** – *or we should know!* – that God continues to delight in the ways that **we** take delight in finding new ways to reach new people for the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

What does that mean for you and me? It means that God has offered us an invitation this morning. ***And that invitation is to respond to God’s blessing of us.*** God’s blessing of us is to be ever present, offering good, offering creativity, offering promise and purpose and hope and joy. And here’s the thing: blessing is always meant to be shared. And that is what God is inviting you and me to do this day and every day: **be a blessing**. Be an individual, be a family, be a congregation, that takes God’s blessing, God’s creativity, God’s hope, and multiplies it, shares it, shouts it, lives it. Be a blessing. **Be a blessing** through our continuing to take joy in lively worship

which always has as its goal the reaching out to new people who do not know what God can do in their lives. **Be a blessing** in the support of the outreach of this congregation which makes possible ministries far beyond these doorsteps and which proves that the phrase “local church” is always an oxymoron.

I have shared with you more than once a story that the great Disciples preacher Fred Craddock tells. This morning, I want to close this sermon series with another one. It seems that Dr. Craddock had been invited to the University of Winnipeg to give a Friday night and Saturday morning lecture. As he left the lecture hall on Friday night, it was beginning to spit a little snow. He recalls that he was a little surprised, since his host had told him that “It’s too early for the cold weather, but you might want to bring a light jacket.” Well, the next morning when Dr. Craddock awoke, there was three feet of snow pressed against the door. The phone rang, and his host said, *“We’re all surprised by this. In fact, I can’t get there to take you to the breakfast, the lecture this morning has been cancelled, and the airport is closed. But if you can make your way down the block, there is a little café. I’m sorry.”* So, Dr. Craddock says he got his little cap and his light jacket and put them on, but they hardly helped. He then went outside into the cold and snow, and says he slid and shivered his way to that little café . It seemed that every stranded traveler in western Canada was in there, but he finally found a place to sit, and after a lengthy time a man in a greasy apron came over and said, *“What’ll you have?”* Dr. Craddock asked for a menu, but the man said *“What do you want a menu for? We have soup.”* He said, *“What kind of soup do you have?”* The man said, *“Soup soup. You want some or not.”*

He brought the soup, and Dr. Craddock said it was just awful, kind of gray

looking; it was so bad he couldn't eat it, but at least he could put his hands around it for the warmth. About then, the door opened, again with its icy wind, and in came this woman clutching her little jacket. She found a seat and the greasy apron man came and asked, "*What do you want?*" She said, "*A glass of water.*" He brought her a glass of water, and said, "*Now what'll you have?*" She replied, "*Just the water.*" He said, "*You have to order, lady. Look. I have customers that pay – what do you think this is, a church or something? Now what do you want?*" She said, "*Just a glass of water and a little time to get warm.*" The man said, in a very loud voice so that everyone in the restaurant could hear, "*Look, if you're not going to order, you've got to leave!*"

So she got up to leave. And almost as if it had been rehearsed, **everyone** in that café got up and headed to the door. If she was going to have to leave, then they were as well. And the man in the greasy apron saw this happening and blurted out, "*Oh, all right, all right, she can stay.*" Everyone sat back down, and he brought her a bowl of soup. Dr. Craddock said to the person sitting next to him, "*Who is she?*" The man said, "*I've never seen her before.*" The place grew quiet, but Dr. Craddock heard the sipping of that awful soup, and he thought to himself "*I'm going to try that soup again.*" And you know, it was not bad soup, he thought. And now hear in his own words the end of the story: "*Everybody was eating this soup. I have no idea what kind of soup it was. I don't know what was in it, but I do recall when I was eating it, it now tasted a little bit like [communion]....*"² a little bit like blessing.

²Adapted from a story found in Craddock Stories by Fred Craddock(St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001). Cited at <http://stevellindsley.typepad.com/thoughtsandmusings/2010/11/the-soup-isnt-all-that-bad.html>

My friends, camped here at the base of our own mountain, know this: there are hungry travelers at **our** doorsteps. And they need the hope that we know. They need the warmth of grace and the taste of bread and cup. They need the blessing that we can be. That is how our story ends, for that is our mission, that is our hope, that is our opportunity: to be a blessing, to be a blessing indeed.